

Confession and Spiritual Direction: modern questions ancient practice



By: **Archimandrite Job Getcha**

In the Orthodox Church today, one notices great variety in the practice of confession. A colloquium entitled “Confession and Spiritual Direction in the Orthodox Church” that was held on the island of Mykonos in 2004 has shown that even the understanding of confession may vary from one place to another.

The many differences that exist today throughout the Orthodox world in the practice of confession raise a long list of questions:

1. Where does the sacrament of confession take place? In a church, or in a room? In front of an icon, or in front of the cross and the gospel? Does the penitent stand, kneel, or sit? Today, in most Ukrainian parishes, the priest hears confession in the church, and the penitent is often kneeling. In Greece, it is common to confess in an office while the penitent sits.

2. Which “absolution” prayers should be used? We find indeed a large number of prayers in the Byzantine Euchologia. Some use a deprecativ formula (“May God forgive ...”); others use an indicative formula (“I forgive and absolve you”), as for instance in the later Trebnik of St Peter Moghila.

3. Is confession optional or required? Is it necessary to go confession before receiving communion, or should one approach the mystery of confession when one feels the need to confess something? Is confession a normal practice, done regularly, or is it appropriate at moments of crisis only? Is confession a necessity, like a cold bath, or is it an opportunity, a moment when one can experience divine grace? Once, in a parish in Western Europe, a priest obliged an old Greek parishioner to come for confession. The old man was quite furious and said to the priest: “Father, I have been married for more than fifty years, and I have never committed adultery. So, I do not have anything to confess!”

4. How often should it be done? Before each communion, once a month, a few times each year or only once a year? Does any canon speak of its regularity? Should we repent only once for each sin we have committed, or can we confess the same sin several times? On this matter, there is a very famous story which professors of pastoral theology love to tell to their students. Once, an 80-year-old woman was confessing her sin of fornication to a priest. The priest said: “Well, you have already confessed this sin to me and received absolution.” The old woman replied: “I know, but it is such a pleasure to recall it!”

5. How long does confession take? One minute, three minutes, fifteen minutes, half an hour? When should it be done? Before the Divine Liturgy? The night before Liturgy? Independently of the Divine Liturgy? It is obvious that when 30 people are waiting in a line twenty minutes before the Divine Liturgy, confession becomes a formality rather than a mystery.

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6. At what age are children expected to start coming to confession? How are they prepared? How do they perceive it? As an obligation, or as something they do willingly? Once, a priest was visiting a very ancient church during a pilgrimage to Italy with his pupils from Sunday school. As he was showing them the architectural specificity of that church, a young child came up to him and asked him: "Father, do you think you could hear my confession in that side chapel?"

7. Does the penitent expect the priest to ask questions, or does he tell him his sins without prompting? Is it the ministry of the confessor to be an inquisitor, or should he be a listener? A bishop once told me his experience of confessing in a monastery near Paris. It was after a very long vigil service. He was quite tired and hungry, but before going to trapeza and having some rest, he had to confess an old lady. She began to repeat the same confession she had previously made several times. Quite exhausted and wanting to make the confession shorter, the bishop, who was a young priest at that time, told her: "Well, this you have already told me. Do you have anything else to confess?" The old lady replied, quite irritated: "Please, don't interrupt me. Your task is not to speak, but to listen...."

8. What is the place of epitimia (ἐπιτίμια, penance) in confession? Can we literally apply the canons in our time? Does the penitent expect

to receive an epitimiai How is this understood today?

9. Is confession only individual, or could it be corporate? We know, for instance, that St John of Kronstadt (1829-1908), receiving hundreds of people for confession, practiced corporate confession. Should it be private or public? Does it require personal contact, or can it be done through correspondence (mail) or via internet (e-mail)? Is there a risk, in the privacy of confession, that the confessor will be falsely accused of sexual abuse? Indeed, many priests now fear hearing confession in an empty church or in their office.

10. What about the secrecy of confession? In the times of Peter the Great in imperial Russia, priests were expected to reveal to the authorities any conspiracy against the state. Today, is the priest expected to inform the police in case of sexual abuse? Recently, in France, a Roman Catholic bishop was condemned for not having denounced his priest involved in sexual abuse, although he knew about it from confession.

11. Who may hear confession? Any priest, including newly-ordained ones, or only those appointed for this task by their bishop? Up until today in the Greek Church, only a minority of priests are permitted to hear confessions. This authority is not conferred automatically at ordination. Priests begin to hear confession only after having received a special blessing from their bishop. Therefore, two

questions may be asked: what is the training required to hear confessions? Is there any kind of supervision over priests hearing confession?

12. How do we choose a spiritual father? Is he by necessity our parish priest, or can we choose someone else? Are we obliged to confess always to the same person, or can we go to different priests for confession? I recall once, when I was serving as a deacon in a cathedral, seeing people waiting in several lines for confession. One young man told me: "Today, I need a very quick confession. Therefore, I will go to this priest..."

THE THREE PERIODS IN THE HISTORY OF THE MYSTERY OF CONFESSION

In order to help us clarify our understanding of things, we should say a few words about the history of the mystery of confession since, as the late Father Miguel Arranz, S.J. once said, "Byzantine penitential practice, compared to that of all the other Churches, is the one which presents the greatest development." Following Georg Wagner, we can distinguish three periods in the development of the practice of confession. The first period is the classical period closely linked with the canons of the ancient councils and the Church Fathers. Penitential discipline had to deal mostly with major sins: apostasy, murder, and adultery, and therefore confession was a very rare event, since it dealt with major sins.

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It had three moments in its application: exclusion from the Church community (excommunication), a period of penance (ἐπίτιμία), and finally, the reintegration of the penitent into the Church community (reconciliation). The power received by Church from Christ to bind and loose (cf. Matthew 16:19) was interpreted precisely as the power to excommunicate and to reconcile. The time of penance was not regarded as a punishment but as a therapy. It was a period of trial, during which the Christian had to prove his desire and willingness to do what was necessary to be reintegrated back into the community. This period had four progressive stages of reintegration into the community and therefore there were four categories of penitents: 1.) πρόσκλανσις, mourners; 2.) ἀκρόασις, hearers; 3.) ὑπόπτωσις, prostrators; 4.) σύστασις, bystanders. Each of these penitents stood in a different place of the church building and participated in different parts of the divine service: mourners would stand outside the door of the church; hearers—inside the door of the church in the narthex; prostrators would stand within the door of the nave, but attend only the liturgy of catechumens; and finally, bystanders would stand in the nave for the whole service but not receive communion. At the beginning of this period—confession was in fact public, since it implied the relation of the sinner and the Church community.

The second period begins with the Kanonarium attributed to St. John the



Faster, patriarch of Constantinople (582-595). Some scholars think that this document is in fact from the 8th or 9th century. It is a collection of instructions for confessors, helping them to apply the penance (ἐπίτιμία) of the ancient canons in new situations, in a new context: the length of excommunication was therefore considerably reduced and often replaced by acts of piety (prostrations, fasting, etc.). By that time, confession had already become private and personal, and the secrecy of confession was enhanced. This led to the creation of special “ordos” or “rites” of confession in Byzantium. The oldest ones known to us date to the 10th century. We find two types of rites: a presbyteral type, when confession is received by an ordained minister, and a monastic type, when confession is heard by a non-ordained monk. The second type is much influenced by the

Kanonarium, and confession is made according to a very long, very detailed questionnaire. at least partially public.

The third period in the history of the practice of confession corresponds to modern times (starting at least in the 18th century). Characteristic of this period, according to Wagner, is the almost complete absence of any application of penance (ἐπίτιμία). The practice of confession became identified with spiritual direction, and therefore became a very frequent event in the life of the believer, remaining at the same time entirely private.

TWO MODELS FOR CONFESSION

Modern questions regarding the very ancient practice of confession also have to deal with two different models, two different concepts of confession. In fact, depending on where we put the main emphasis in the mystery of confession, the approach can be completely different.

The first model is the model of a law court—it is juridical. Here, Christ appears as the Judge, and sin is regarded as the breaking of the law. In this model, one needs an absolution to be washed from his sense of culpability. This approach refers to the words of Christ to His apostles: “If you forgive sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:23).

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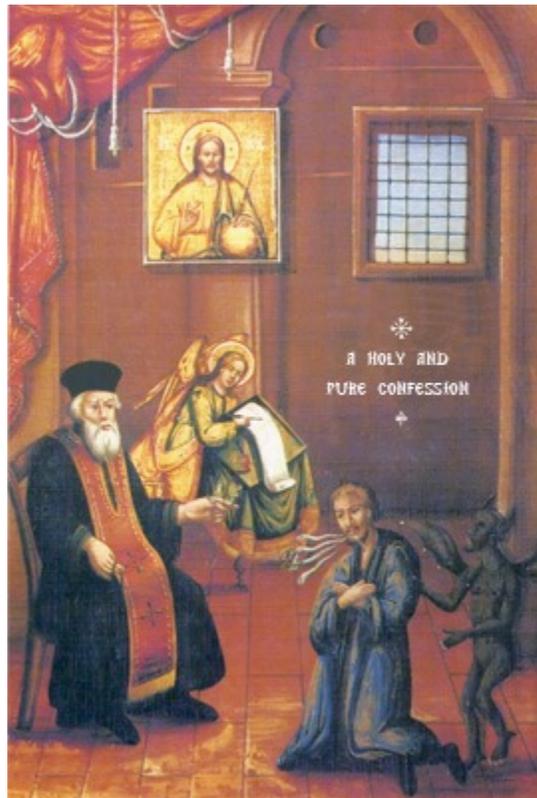
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The second model is the model of the hospital—it is therapeutic. Christ appears as the physician, the healer. Sin is regarded as a spiritual illness. In this model, penance appears as the medicine which brings restoration to wholeness. This approach can be linked with the teaching of the Holy Apostle James who said: "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the presbyters of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14-15).

If the last model corresponds to the ancient patristic approach and to the spirit of the ancient Byzantine tradition, the first model has been inherited from scholasticism. Medieval Latin theology referred itself almost exclusively to the teachings of St. Augustine of Hippo until the 13th century. This great figure of Christianity introduced a vision of the fall which is different from that of the Greek Fathers. For him, after the ancestral sin, after the fall, all humanity became a "massa damnata," a condemned society, and therefore, every human being bears culpability for the ancestral sin. Scholasticism, which appeared in the 11th century as a school and method of theology, inherited much

of Augustine's theological vision. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), considered by many to be the father



of scholasticism, developed a juridical view of redemption known as the "theory of satisfaction." According to this theory, sin was viewed as a transgression of God's law; and sinful humanity was considered as a thief who had to be condemned and punished. Consequently, the salvation brought by Christ was regarded as the ransom paid by the Son of God in order to free humanity from

its damnation. This view of course influenced the understanding of confession in medieval Latin theology.

Sin was considered a transgression and coming to confession was regarded as coming to a law court. The confessor became the judge who had the power to bind and loose sins (Matthew 16:19). Penance was therefore understood as a means of paying a debt or making satisfaction and the prayer of absolution was considered in juridical terms as releasing the sinner from his transgression.

This western view of confession also impacted the Orthodox Church in the 17th century. St Peter Mohyla drew on the Latin Ritual of Pope Paul V for the prayer of absolution that he introduced into his Trebnyk (priest's service book) published in Kiev in 1646. From there, this prayer of absolution was adopted in the 17th century following the correction of liturgical books in Russia undertaken by the Patriarch Nikon. The absolution prayer written by St. Peter Mohyla stated: "May our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, through the grace and bounties of His love toward mankind, forgive you, my child (name) all your transgressions. And I, an unworthy priest, through His power given to me, do forgive and absolve you from all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

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THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN CONFESSION AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

It seems that confusion exists in our day between sacramental confession and spiritual direction (manifestation of thoughts). In fact, many people ignore this distinction. Nevertheless, we think that the two, though closely linked, should be clearly distinguished. The practice of spiritual direction is very ancient and was widespread in the monastic setting of the Christian East. The young disciple was expected to open his heart and tell his geronda (starets, spiritual father) all his thoughts every day, and sometimes several times a day. This practice helped the young novice to acquire the necessary experience for the spiritual warfare he was undertaking. The spiritual father, who was both highly experienced and had the gift of discernment, could help the novice make the right decisions and adopt the right attitude in his spiritual life in order to recover from his spiritual illness.

In this practice of spiritual direction, the spiritual father was not necessarily a priest. We know from history that St Anthony the Great (4th century), often regarded as the prototype of the monastic spiritual father, was not a priest. The spiritual father of St Symeon the New Theologian, St. Symeon the Pious (11th century), was not a priest. St Silouan the Athonite (20th century) was also not a priest. But in order to

give spiritual counseling, the spiritual father had to be a charismatic person, being experienced in spiritual life and having the gift of discernment.

The practice of spiritual direction was not always observed through personal, face-to-face contact, but could be undertaken through correspondence. As a result of this, we have the spiritual correspondence of John and Barsanuphios of Gaza (6th century) in a monastic setting, as well as the letters of Elder John of Valaamo (20th century) in a larger, non-monastic context. Quite to the contrary, sacramental confession necessarily requires an ordained minister, a priest, who is the intercessor and the celebrant of the mystery which is the channel of grace between man and God. Confession requires the presence of the penitent and of the confessor, since a mystery is the manifestation of the divine grace here and now.

There is also another major, essential difference between confession and spiritual direction. Confession consists in revealing sins that we have committed (actions from the past) in the presence of a priest in order to receive forgiveness from God. Spiritual direction consists in revealing our inner state (present thoughts and feelings) in order to receive counseling so as to achieve progress on the way of spiritual healing and salvation. Therefore, even if the two are closely linked, and even though it is always

more profitable if the confessor is at the same time the spiritual father, sometimes – since ordination does not automatically make the priest a charismatic spiritual father – it may be necessary to make a clear distinction between the confessor and the spiritual father, as well as between confession and spiritual direction.

THE THERAPEUTIC ASPECT OF CONFESSION

Confession, like the mystery of Holy Unction, is a sacrament of healing. Therefore, we have to regard the ministry of the confessor and of the spiritual father in medical, therapeutic terms. Canon 102 of the Council in Trullo, dealing with the ministry of the spiritual father, speaks of it precisely in these terms:

“Those who have received from God authority to bind and loose (Mt 16:19) must take into consideration the quality of the sin and the willingness and readiness of the sinner to return, and thus offer a *treatment* suited to the sin in question, lest by employing an immoderate adjustment in one direction or the other, they fail in compassing the salvation of the one *ailing*. For the diseases called sin are not simple affairs, but on the contrary, various and complex, and they produce many offshoots of the *injury*, as a result whereof the evil becomes widely diffused, and it progresses until it is checked by the power of the one *treating* it.

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So that a person who is professing the science of treating ailments as a spiritual physician ought first to examine the disposition of the sinner and ascertain whether he tends to health, or on the contrary, provokes the illness to attack him by his own actions; at the same time bearing in mind that he must provide against any reversion, and considering whether the patient is struggling against the physician, and whether the uker of the soul is being aggravated by the application of the remedy, and accordingly to mete out mercy in due proportion to the merits of the case. For all that matters to God and to the person undertaking pastoral leadership consists in the recovery of the straying sheep, and in healing the one wounded by the serpent (cf. Gen 3:13). Accordingly, he ought not to drive nit patient to the verge of despair, nor give him rein to dissoluteness and contempt of life, but, on the contrary, in at least one way at any rate, either by resorting to extreme and stringent remedies, or to gentler and milder ones, to curb the disease, and to put up a fight to heal the uker for the one tasting the fruits of repentance, and wisely helping him on the way to the splendid rehabilitation to which the man is being invited. We must therefore be versed in both, that is both the requirements of accuracy and the requirements of custom. In the case of those who are obstinately opposed to extremities, we must follow the formula handed down to us, just as sacred Basil teaches us outright."

According to this canon, sin is an illness. The spiritual father is a

physician. He has to find not only the proper medication or penance, but also the proper measure, since the same medication cannot be used in the same proportions for each sick person. Therefore, the confessor has to use discernment and has to apply the holy canons, the sacred rules, with a sense of economy. It is not correct to regard the principle of economy in Byzantine canonical tradition as an exception or as a dispensation. The principle of economy is the pastoral exercise to apply the rules with discernment in a concrete situation for the salvation of the person. Therefore, the confessor has to take as a model the Only Physician of our souls and bodies—Christ our Savior—and to imitate His compassion and condescension.

CONFESSION & PSYCHOTHERAPY

The question of confession as therapy raises the question of its relation to psychotherapy. There is an obvious analogy between psychoanalysis and the revelation of thoughts and confession. The therapeutic aspect of the Church and of confession has been emphasised recently in Greece by the writings of Metropolitan Ierotheos (Vlahos) of Nafpaktos. It has also been discussed by the French Orthodox theologian, Jean-Claude Larchet, who has written many books on the question of mental and spiritual illness. As he explains, there is presently a debate within the Orthodox Church between, on the one hand, those who think that psychotherapies are legitimate branches of medicine, and are therefore completely autonomous with regards to spiritual direction,

and, on the other hand, those who consider the Orthodox ascetic tradition and the practice of spiritual direction in the Orthodox Church as capable of healing all psychic troubles, and therefore reject the possibility of using psychotherapy. Such debates do not appear among Roman Catholics and Protestants, who have introduced psychotherapy since the 1960s, and who do not have such an elaborate tradition of spiritual direction as does the Orthodox Church. It is interesting to note that psychotherapy has broader development in countries of Protestant tradition (Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Great-Britain, the United States) where confession did not exist, than in countries of Roman Catholic tradition.

With regards to the relation of confession and psychotherapy, Larchet makes four very important remarks:

1. Psychic illnesses have to be distinguished from spiritual illnesses. Their nature is different, since there are three different levels in the human being: corporal (body), psychological (psyche) and spiritual (pneuma).
2. Some psychological illnesses are linked and often rooted in spiritual illnesses, in the same way as some psychic illnesses are linked to physical diseases (so-called psycho-somatic illnesses). Therefore, very often, the healing of psychological illnesses depends on the healing of spiritual illnesses.
3. People suffering from psychic illnesses are not necessarily greater sinners than others.

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4. Spiritual therapy has to be distinguished from psychotherapy: the aim of spiritual therapy is to heal spiritual illnesses, while the aim of psychotherapy is to heal psychological illnesses.

With this anthropological approach in mind, considering the three levels of human activity—physiological, psychological and spiritual—it is sometimes necessary to connect spiritual therapy with psychotherapy, as well as with medical treatment, where medication addresses the bodily (physiological) dimension. But here arises the question of the compatibility of psychotherapy with spiritual therapy, since today we find various schools and methods of psychotherapy.

Since the psychological level is closely linked with the spiritual, only a psychotherapy based on Christian anthropology can be beneficial for the healing of the ill person. For instance, there are similarities between Freudian psychoanalysis and the patristic cure of the soul, since both are based on platonic anthropology. But there is also a major difference between them. Christian anthropology is built on the relation between man and God. Freudian anthropology, on the other hand, considers human development apart from, and even in opposition to, God, since Freud considered the relation of man with God as pathological. For Freud, as it is stated in his book entitled *The Future of an Illusion*, God is an “empty concept,” and religion is a narcotic, an illusion, or even a collective neurosis. From this, it is evident that

Freudian anthropology is materialistic and atheistic, and opposed to Christian anthropology. Freudian anthropology ignores that it deals with man who is in a fallen state (paraphysin—against nature) and seeking for the restoration of his initial state (kataphysin—in conformity with nature). It is therefore very important that when a confessor has to refer his spiritual child to a psychotherapist, he should make sure that the psychotherapist is a Christian believer and that his therapy is based on a Christian anthropology.

As Larchet writes, a genuine, experienced spiritual father is capable of healing not only spiritual diseases, but also psychological ones. Nevertheless, charismatic spiritual fathers with the gift of discernment are very rare in our days, and therefore, referring to psychotherapy for the healing of psychological illnesses often appears necessary. However, this psychotherapy must be compatible with Christian anthropology. Psychotherapists have to recognize the implication of spiritual factors in many psychological disorders, and this has to guide their practice. The psychotherapist has to make a clear distinction between the psychological and the spiritual, between his psychotherapy and spiritual therapy, between his role and that of the spiritual father. His therapy has to be in harmony and conformity with the principles of spiritual therapy.

CONCLUSION

Having said all this, how should the ancient mystery of confession be approached in our modern world?

This question, of course, remains open. Nevertheless, it seems to me that there are three very important principles that have to be taken into consideration:

1. Confession deals with sin. It is essential that our practice of confession recall to the mind of modern people the existence of sin, a spiritual reality which is denied or concealed by our modern world. Sin has to be considered not merely from a moralistic perspective dealing with the categories of good or bad, permitted and forbidden, but with an existential approach: our relation with God and our progress on the path towards deification.

2. Having said this, confession should be approached in a therapeutic way. Confession is a Mystery of healing, which leads us to wholeness and restores our relationship with God. As one has to go to the hospital to see a physician when one is ill, so one should approach confession to be healed from all spiritual illness, from sin.

3. The attitude of the confessor should be one of a mediator between the individual and God. He should not be preoccupied with what to say, but apply himself to listening. While listening, the confessor should be praying for the penitent. The confessor should therefore be an intercessor for the penitent before God. This is the only way he can be the channel of divine grace, and the only way he can be inspired to say something appropriate for the spiritual life and spiritual healing of the penitent.

To read more on this subject

Exomologetarion: A Manual of Confession

by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain
Translated by Fr. George Dokos
Uncut Mountain Press, 2006

“Honest to God: Confession and Desire”

by Aristotle Papanickolaou
in *Thinking Through Faith*
SVS Press, 2008

Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness

by Jim Forest
Orbis, 2002

Confession

by Fr. Paul Harrilchak
Holy Trinity Press, 1996