

Holy Repentance

Holy Repentance (Penance Confession).

The Sacrament of Repentance developed early in the Church's history in the time of the persecutions of the 3rd and 4th Centuries, when many people, giving in to the threats of the persecutors, apostasized and fell away from the Church. Apostasy was considered to be a very serious sin; many held the extreme position that such could not be received back into the Church in their lifetime, while others held that those who had lapsed should be re-baptized that is, their sins should be washed away by a second baptism. Moderation, in the course of time, prevailed and a penitential discipline the Sacrament of Repentance developed, taking on the meaning of Second Baptism; for this reason it was eventually numbered among the Sacraments of the Church.

After the end of the persecutions, the Sacrament of Repentance remained, so that in the event of sins committed after Baptism, forgiveness could be obtained and the sinner reconciled to the Church. This Sacrament acts also as a cure for the healing of a soul, since the Priest also confers spiritual advice to the Penitent.

Since all sin is not only against God, but also against one's neighbor, confession and the penitential discipline in the early Church were a community affair and took place publicly before the whole local Christian community. In time, however, Confession has developed into a private action between the Priest and the Penitent, and the Priest is forbidden to reveal to any third party what he has learned in Confession.

In ancient times, before the beginning of Confession, it was appointed to read an entire series of Psalms from which Psalm 51 has been preserved in the present rite, being known as the Penitential Psalm. Then the Priest reads certain prayers, the first of which recalls King David who repented before Nathan the Prophet when he had caused the death of Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba whom David loved. After being rebuked by Nathan, David confessed, I have sinned against the Lord! Upon hearing David's repentance, Nathan proclaimed God's forgiveness, The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die (2 Sam. 12:13).

After this, begins the second part of the Sacrament the Confession itself before which the Priest speaks of himself as being only a witness, Christ standing invisibly before the Penitent. The Confession itself consists of questions put by the Priest to the Penitent regarding his sins, his attitude towards the Faith, fleshly temptations, thoughts and words. Thoughts are considered to be the beginning of sin, according to the words of the Savior, for in speaking of adultery, for example, He says, I say to you, that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his

heart (Matt. 5:28). The Sacrament of Confession here aids in revealing these thoughts and the struggle against them that follows.

After the Confession, the Priest may, if he deems necessary, impose a penance, but this is not an essential part of the Sacrament and is often omitted. After this, the Priest lays his Epitrachelion (stole) on the Penitent's head and says the Prayer of Absolution, which differs in the Russian and Greek practices. In the Greek practice, the Priest says: Whatever you have said to my humble person, and whatever you have failed to say, whether through ignorance or forgetfulness, whatever it may be, may God forgive you in this world and the next.... Have no further anxiety; go in peace. The Slavonic formula of absolution, introduced by Peter Moghila, Metropolitan of Kiev and adopted by the Russian Church in the 18th Century, is as follows: May Our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, through the grace and bounties of His love towards mankind, forgive you, my Child [Name] all your transgressions. And I, an unworthy Priest, through the power given me by Him, forgive and absolve you from all yours sins.

In the ancient Church, not all Priests had the right to hear Confessions; special Confessors, often experienced Monks, were entrusted with this responsibility. From the 16th Century, however, it was accepted that every Priest could be a Confessor once he had reached a mature age. In many monasteries an experienced Monk who was not even a Priest was often the Confessor (such is the practice in many places on Mt. Athos), but the Penitent was always sent to a Priest for the Sacramental Absolution. In modern times it is also the custom for a baptized person to begin receiving this Sacrament when he or she reaches the age of moral discernment, usually around the age of six or seven.

Repentance the Road to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Man is weak, and thus sins and falls often, again and again falling into the same pits, driving the soul to utter despair. The urge here is to give in to one's sinful nature and to cease resisting the powerful forces of sin. There is, however, an answer to this. A disciple came to a certain Elder, one day, and said, Father, I have fallen! The Elder answered, Get up! Again and again he came to the Elder and said, I have fallen! and the Elder invariably answered, Get up! Until when must I continue getting up? the disciple asked, and the Elder answered, Until the day when you give up your soul to God! Thus, every time when we feel that we have fallen, the Sacrament of Repentance tells us to get up.

When one wishes to partake of the Sacrament of Repentance, it is good to consider the meaning of sin and repentance, for sin is what separates us from God. Sin plunges the soul into darkness and we often lose peace, joy, and the courage to address ourselves to the Lord God. According to St. John the Evangelist, If we say we have no

sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8), for every man sins and falls short before the glory of God.

God, Who reads the heart of man, knows not only our everyday affairs, but also our thoughts and intentions. Everything is open to Him. In response to sin, Our Lord Jesus Christ says, Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand (Matt. 3:2). Thus He expects from us true, heartfelt faith and true, heartfelt repentance. But what does repentance mean and what kind of repentance is agreeable to God and serves for our salvation?

To repent means to be fully aware of our sins and our iniquities and of their consequences of all that is pernicious to man, all that insults God and excludes us from His love, of all that creates discord in family life, in society, and of all that disturbs the soul's peace and tranquility. When we become aware of our sinful state, and consider ourselves at fault before God, then our heart sorrows and is full of contrition. This heartfelt contrition is, according to St. Paul, that godly grief [which] produces a repentance that leads to salvation (2 Cor. 7:10), that is, true repentance. Tears of contrition are the only means of purifying the soul, so that it may rise up, become cleansed, luminous, joyful, capable of good deeds and of attaining perfection.

St. John says that if we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). It is not easy, however, to confess, not easy to mourn over one's iniquities; for each of us has a sense of pride and, sometimes, also a coarse and stony heart that interferes with the sincerity of our repentance before God. Prayer, fasting, and mutual forgiveness, however, soften our hardened hearts and dispose our soul to true repentance. Then, in the Sacrament of Repentance we can, without shame or fear, confess our sins with faith to our Father Confessor, so that nothing vile or unclean should remain in us that could interfere with our lifelong striving to attain with all the Saints to the longed-for Kingdom of Heaven.

The following confession (originally printed in the Athos Paper of 1907, and translated from the Russian) is especially appropriate for all of us to consider before receiving the Sacrament:

A Lament for Sin.

St. Basil the Great says, Weep over your sin: it is a spiritual ailment; it is death to your immortal soul; it deserves ceaseless, unending weeping and crying; let all tears flow for it, and sighing come forth without ceasing from the depths of your heart.

In profound humility I weep for all my sins, voluntary and involuntary, conscious and unconscious, covert and overt, great and little, committed by word and deed, in thought and intention, day and night, at every hour and minute of my life.

I weep over my pride and my ambition, my self-love and my boastfulness;

I weep over my fits of anger, irritation, excessive shouting, swearing, quarreling and cursing;

I weep for having criticized, censured, gossiped, slandered, and defamed, for my wrath, enmity, hatred, envy, jealousy, vengeance and rancor;

I weep over my indulgences in lust, impure thoughts and evil inclinations; covetousness, gluttony, drunkenness, and sloth;

I weep for having talked idly, used foul language, blasphemed, derided, joked, ridiculed, mocked, enjoyed empty gaiety, singing, dancing and every pleasure to excess;

I weep over my self-indulgence, cupidity, love of money and miserliness, unmercifulness and cruelty;

I weep over my laziness, indolence, negligence, love of comfort, weakness, idleness, absent-mindedness, irresponsibility, inattention, love of sleep, for hours spent in idle pursuits, and for my lack of concentration in prayer and in Church, for not observing fasts and not doing charitable works.

I weep over my lack of faith, my doubting, my perplexity, my coldness, my indifference, my weakness and unfeelingness in what concerns the Holy Orthodox Faith, and over all my foul, cunning and reviling thoughts;

I weep over my exaggerated sorrow and grief, depression and despair, and over sins committed willingly.

I weep, but what tears can I find for a worthy and fitting way to weep for all the actions of my ill-fated life; for my immeasurable and profound worthlessness? How can I reveal and expose in all its nakedness each one of my sins, great and small, voluntary and involuntary, conscious and unconscious, overt and covert, every hour and minute of sin? When and where shall I begin my penitential lament that will bear fitting fruit? Perhaps soon I may have to face the last hour of my life; my soul will be painfully sundered from my sinful and vile body; I shall have to stand before terrible demons and radiant angels, who will reveal and torment me with my sins; and I, in fear and trembling, will be unprepared and unable to give them an answer; the sight and sound of wailing demons, their violent and bold desire to drag me into the bottomless pit of Hell will fill my soul with confusion and terror. And then the angels of God will lead my poor soul to stand before God's fearful seat of judgment. How will I answer the Immortal King, or how will I dare, sinner that I am, to look upon My Judge? Woe is me!

I have no good answer to make, for I have spent all my life in indolence and sin, all my hours and minutes in vain thoughts, desires and yearnings!

And how many times have I taken the Name of God in vain!

How often, lightly and freely, at times even boldly, insolently and shamelessly have I slandered others in anger; offended, irritated, mocked them!

How often have I been proud and vainglorious and boasted of good qualities that I do not possess and of deeds that I have not done!

How many times have I lied, deceived, been cunning or flattered, or been insincere and deceptive; how often have I been angry, intolerant and mean!

How many times have I ridiculed the sins of my brother, caused him grief overtly and covertly, mocked or gloated over his misdeeds, his faults or his misfortunes; how many times have I been hostile to him, in anger, hatred or envy!

How often have I laughed stupidly, mocked and derided, spoke without weighing my words, ignorantly and senselessly, and uttered a numberless quantity of cutting, poisonous, insolent, frivolous, vulgar, coarse, brazen words!

How often, affected by beauty, have I fed my mind, my imagination and my heart with voluptuous sensations, and unnaturally satisfied the lusts of the flesh in fantasy! How often has my tongue uttered shameful, vulgar and blasphemous things about the desires of the flesh!

How often have I yearned for power and been gluttonous, satiating myself on delicacies, on tasty, varied and diverse foods and wines; because of intemperance and lack of self-control how often have I been filled past the point of satiety, lacked sobriety and been drunken, intemperate in food and drink, and broken the Holy Fasts!

How often, through selfishness, pride or false modesty, have I refused help and attention to those in need, been uncharitable, miserly, unsympathetic, mercenary and grasped at attention!

How often have I entered the House of God without fear and trembling, stood there in prayer, frivolous and absent-minded, and left it in the same spirit and disposition! And in prayer at home I have been just as cold and indifferent, praying little, lazily, and indolently, inattentively and impiously, and even completely omitting the appointed prayers!

And in general, how slothful I have been, weakened by indolence and inaction; how many hours of each day have I spent in sleep, how often have I enjoyed voluptuous

thoughts in bed and defiled my flesh! How many hours have I spent in empty and futile pastimes and pleasures, in frivolous talk and speech, jokes and laughter, games and fun, and how much time have I wasted conclusively in chatter, and gossip, in criticizing others and reproaching them; how many hours have I spent in time-wasting and emptiness! What shall I answer to the Lord God for every hour and every minute of lost time? In truth, I have wasted my entire life in laziness.

How many times have I lost heart and despaired of my salvation and of God's mercy or through stupid habit, insensitivity, ignorance, insolence, carelessness, and hardness sinned deliberately, willingly, in my right mind, in full awareness, in all goodwill, in both thought and intention, and in deed, and in this fashion trampled the Blood of God's covenant and crucified anew within myself the Son of God and cursed Him!

O how terrible the punishment that I have drawn upon myself!

How is it that my eyes are not streaming with constant tears? ...If only my tears flowed from the cradle to the grave, at every hour and every minute of my tortured life! Who will now cool my head with water and fill the well of my tears and help me weep over my soul that I have cast into perdition?

My God, my God! Why hast Thou forsaken me? Be it unto me according to Thy will, O Lord! If Thou wouldst grant me light, be Thou blessed; if Thou wouldst grant me darkness, be Thou equally blessed. If Thou wouldst destroy me together with my lawlessness, glory to Thy righteous judgment; and if Thou wouldst not destroy me together with my lawlessness, glory to Thy boundless mercy!

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