

THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION¹ – THE SACRAMENT OF RENEWAL AND REBORN

THE SACRAMENT OF TEARS

Confession; Repentance and Forgiveness in the Old Testament:

- **The Lord said:** *“If a person sins or touches any unclean thing ... or if a person swears ... he shall confess that he has sinned in that thing, and he shall bring his trespass offering to the Lord for his sin which he has sinned ..., so the priest shall make atonement for him concerning his sin”* (Leviticus 5:1-6).
- **Joshua and Achan the son of Carmi** who angered the Lord by stealing (garments and silver and hid them): *“My son I beg you, give glory to the Lord God of Israel, and make confession to Him, and tell me now what you have done, do not hide it from me.’ And Achan answered Joshua and said, ‘Indeed I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel”* (Joshua 7: 19, 20). Then *“the Lord turned from the fierceness”* of His anger. (26)
- *“I have sinned against the Lord’, so Nathan the prophet said to David, ‘The Lord also has put away your sin, you shall not die”* (2 Samuel 12).

Confession; Repentance and Forgiveness in the New Testament:

- *“Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand ... then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.”* (Matthew 3:1-6).
- **The Lord’s Prayer**
- **The Lord Jesus Christ gave the authority to the Apostles and their successors by saying,** *“Assuredly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”* (Matthew 18:18), **and after His resurrection,** *“He breathed on them and said to them, ‘As the Father sent me, I also send you. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”* (John 20:21, 22).
- **The prodigal son:** *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight”* (Luke 15:21).
- **Book of Acts:** *“And many who had believed came, confessing and telling their deeds”* (Acts 19:18).

¹ I am in total debt for *The Inner Kingdom, Vol. I of the Collected Works*, Bishop Kallistos Ware, SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 2004 and some other works and readings, especially http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/3_repentance_confession.html

- **St. John tells us:** “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Confession; Repentance and Forgiveness in the Sayings of the Holy Fathers:

- **St. Athanasius:** “As the Baptized is enlightened by the grace of the Holy Spirit, by means of the priest, the repentant is granted forgiveness of his sins by the grace of Christ, also through the priest.”
- **Abba Sisoies** while lying on his deathbed: “the angels have come to take me and I am asking for a little more time – more time to repent.”
- **Abba Milesios:** “I came here to weep for my sins.”
- **St. Mark the Ascetic:** “We are not condemned for the multitude of our sins, but for our refusal to confess.”
- **St. Peter of Damaskos:** “Repentance can lead us back to our former beauty.” “But if repentance is too much for you, and you sin out of habit even when you do not want to, show humility like the publican. This is enough to ensure your salvation.”
- **St. Makarios of Egypt:** “being bountiful and full of love, God awaits with great patience the repentance of every sinner, and He celebrates the return of the sinner with celestial rejoicing.”
- **St. Theognostos:** “when you fall from a higher state, do not come panic-stricken, but through remorse..., through copious tears in a contrite spirit, correct yourself and return quickly to your former condition.”
- **St. Isaac the Syrian:** “During every moment of the four and twenty hours of the day we stand in need of repentance.”

Understanding Confession; Repentance and Forgiveness:

- The Early Church considered itself a group of elite people; the people of God who live in this word, but not from this word. They were always battling and suffering for their faith in both aspects: spiritually and politically; they have to be pure to become the temples of the Holy Spirit. The Church is the place of those who are baptized and will be continuously purifying themselves and do what is pleasing in the eyes of God.
- The sinner was considered as he had sinned against God and the Church. He should, therefore, presents himself in front of the whole congregation and confess publicly. But throughout the time, this public confession was not demanded and became a private confession.

- The proclamation of the Baptist “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” redirect our attention to our high calling, to the purpose and the necessity of our life; the Kingdom of Heaven, salvation, being with God and in the Orthodox term “deified, *theosis*.” This proclamation by the Baptist rings the bells of our life and wakes us up to make sure that nothing should separate us from God; nothing is more important in this earthly life more than the purpose and the necessity of our life, the Kingdom.
- This gives us a new perception of life; “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Luke 12: 34).”
- The Greek term for confession is “*Metanoia*,” μετά (*metá*) (meaning "beyond" or "after") and νόος (*noeō*) (meaning "perception" or "understanding" or "mind")² which literally means beyond understanding. The Fathers and theologians explain it as a “change of mind,” a change of direction. What is actually happening in the Sacrament of confession is beyond understanding and perception. It is a mystery of healing – cleansing – the person who is confessing in repentance. It is the invisible mystery of grace descended from God on both the penitent and the priest. An unexplainable mystery that will be discovered only by those who experienced it.
- It is a fundamental transformation. The sinner has missed the mark (sin = missing the mark = lawlessness), his direction and loyalty towards God. Therefore, he has to open a new page by the change of his mind and his direction; to start anew. Therefore, it is his transition from darkness towards the Light. It is a vision of Beauty, a renewal of our vision to the Creator and the creation. The Arabic word for repentance *Tawbah* from the verb *Aba* explains it literally and significantly, which means a return; a cease of going the intended way (the wrong direction) and a return to the original place.
- So confession is a great understanding, and actually, it is the actualization of our true reality as children of God, children of light (you are the light of the world, Mat: 5: 14). Bishop Kalistos Ware explains: confession is “not just to regret the past, but a fundamental transformation of our outlook, a new way of looking at ourselves, at others and at God.” It is a tool of hope in the love of God.
- In the Sacrament of Confession, we affirm our shortcomings and we open a new page in our life looking forward to our potentials and capabilities. By going to the confession seat, we overcome our egoistic wall that separates us from God to indulge in the ocean of His mercy and love in order to become merciful. It is sorrowful, but yet rejoicing. It is very humbling, but yet exalting (Publican and the Pharisee). Indeed, the personal confession, repentance, in the intimacy of the relationship of God and the person is required and beneficial. But the grace of “depart in peace” is not actualized and heard. In the personal confession we do not recognize the fullness, and yet

² From Wikipedia.

dispute, the truth of the words of Jesus Christ that His Disciples, priests, can bind and loose things on earth through the Holy Spirit.

- Thus, opening a new page is the inauguration of a new life in peace and without the trembling images of sins. It is a second baptism made by the immersion of tears (sorrowfulness of our wrongdoings) and it is, at the same time, a decisive moment to found, once again, our life on Christ.
- The gift of a new life received at the stand of confession, forgiveness, the power of healing, may lead us to repent more often, which will guide us to grow deeply in our relationship with God. When once the 20th century St. Silouan the Athonite experienced the grace of Repentance, he was looking, often, forward to this beauty that he could not describe.
- The more we draw near the Light with confession, we see ourselves in need for more purification and repentance. We will be attracted by the Light Who pulls us towards Him as a magnet.
- As such, the Sacrament of Confession is God's grace of His compassionate love and His mercy towards His children. It is His powerful providence seeking His people by giving them the necessary tools that are needed for their sanctification.

The Meaning of the Sacrament of Confession throughout the Orthodox Rubrics:

- The Sacrament of Confession consists of five parts:³
 - a. A verbal confession of all the sins, concealing nothing, by the repentant to God asking for forgiveness throughout the priest or the Father Confessor.
 - b. A conversation with the priest or the Father Confessor who will hear attentively the words of the repentant. He may, therefore, asks some questions and gives advice.
 - c. A prayer by the priest in which he asks the Lord God to pardon and not to condemn the penitent.
 - d. The prayer of Absolution by the priest in which the grace of healing power of Jesus Christ is bestowed allowing the repentant to depart in peace.
 - e. The blessing of the priest.

³ As used in the rubrics of the Service Book of the Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church according to the use of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, Twelfth Edition 2006.

- Through this sacrament, Jesus Christ, the Physician and the Healer of soul and body, is revealing Himself (talking), operating, to both the penitent and the priest who is ushering in both directions; lifting up the words of the sinner and conveying advice and the prayer of Absolution to the sinner. The priest is the tool of communication and the physical vehicle of receiving and erasing the debts of the repentant as a disciple of Christ who is ordained through the sacramental ministry of the laying on of hands (Priesthood).
 - Throughout this sacrament two confessions are actually happening. It is a two ways confession; the penitent is confessing his loyalty and trust in God (acclaiming and repenting his wrongdoings and shortcomings and asking for forgiveness) and God is confessing His covenant and fulfilling His promise (absolving the penitent from his sins).
- a) The first step, after the repentant had prepared himself for confession, is to say a prayer that shows:
- (1) This confession is uplifted to the Trinitarian Lord and God, to the blessed Theotokos, to all the saints, and to the Spiritual Father (either the priest or his Spiritual Father). This beginning explicit, first of all, that this is a confession of faith in the beliefs of the Orthodox Church's teachings, and secondly, a proof that it is not a confession to the priest alone, but to the Holy Trinity and the saints through the physical hearing and the presence of the Spiritual Father.
 - (2) Then he recites his sins that he committed, not concealing any.
 - (3) He is sorry for committing these sins and the sins that he could not remember because he had offended God and angered Him.
 - (4) He, therefore, sincerely repents (returning back) promising, with the help of God, to better his way of life while asking from his Spiritual Father the saving penance and absolution.
- b) The second step is that the Spiritual Father may ask questions to get to the roots of the sins and gives advice to the penitent in order to help him to better his way of life and fulfills his promise to God. This is a very fruitful conversation for both the penitent and the Father Confessor.⁴ Here, the penitent has to go to a priest if he is confessing to a Spiritual Father who is not ordained to the Holy Priesthood to get the following prayer and absolution.⁵

⁴ This speaking loud to someone else is suggested in our contemporary time to those who are seeking help for their problems.

⁵ It is always suggested that the Priest Pastor of the Church is the Spiritual Father Confessor. Some may see some difficulties with this, but always consider that the Sacrament of Confession does not depend on the worthiness of the priest, but on the work of the Holy Trinity.

c) The third step is that of the priest putting his stole⁶ covering the head of the penitent while saying a prayer that delivers the following messages:

(1) The Lord God is the Salvation of every repentant and desires not the death (spiritual death) of His servants. He is the Person in action at this moment, not the priest.

(2) He is the One who will show mercy upon His servant⁷ by granting him “an image of repentance, forgiveness of sins and deliverance, pardoning his every transgression, whether voluntary or involuntary.” This is what the repentant has asked and prayed for. God is Who is answering the request of the repentant and giving him all the tools to restart anew.

(3) He, therefore, reconciling him unto the Holy Church. Once again, the repentant will become a clean and effective member of the Body of Christ.

d) The presence of the priest makes the repentant hears the prayer of absolution, which is made while the priest makes the sign of the Cross with his right hand above the stole covering the head of the penitent. The prayer of absolution⁸ is about:

(1) To remind us with the healing (forgiveness) ministry of God throughout the Scriptures (Old and New) that was received by those who repented.

(2) The priest asks that the same God forgives and heals the person who confessed his sins and is kneeling, right now, in front of him both in this world and that which is to come.⁹

(3) Therefore, after this prayer, the penitent can go to his normal daily life in peace without worrying about his past. His new way towards God, and in God, is been set forth.

⁶ The stole (epitrichelion επιτραχήλιον, "around the neck") is the piece of vestment worn by priests and bishops as the symbol of their priesthood. This liturgical vestment is worn around the neck with the two adjacent sides sewn or buttoned together, leaving enough space through which to place the head. The prayer that the priest says when he puts his stole indicates the meaning of covering the head of the penitent. “Blessed is God, who poureth out his grace upon His Priests, as ointment upon the head, which runneth down upon the head, the beard of Aaron, which runneth down to the hem of his garment.” As such, the priest is covering the head of the penitent with God’s grace, the ointment, of healing. He is conveying God’s grace of ointment to the penitent who is kneeling repenting for his sins.

⁷ Here, the priest says the name of the repentant. This action makes the confession personal.

⁸ There are 2 versions of the prayer of Absolution; Greek and Russian. The Russian version differs from the Greek’s by the wording which indicates that the priest is giving the absolution. This is a change was made under the influence of the Catholic Church in the 17th century. But, anyway, the priest is giving the absolution because he has received its power from Jesus Christ Himself as is stated above in the text.

⁹ “Assuredly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (**Matthew 18:18**),

- e) Finally, the priest gives the penitent Christ's blessing announcing the end of the sacrament of Confession.

Preparation for the Sacrament of Confession:

- **"A** spiritual leaflet from Mount Athos gives the following directive: "Intending to confess, before going to the priest, seclude yourself, beloved brother, even if for an hour. Put aside all secular matters, collect your thoughts and thoroughly examine your conscience: How did you sin in thought, word or deed? In what did you offend God and your neighbor? Try to remember all the sinful events and their details. After this pray, grieve and wash your conscience with tears of repentance. Feeling relief in your heart, make a firm resolve to fight your bad habits and to become a better Christian. After preparing yourself in this way, go to the priest-confessor believing that God will forgive you for He has never rejected a contrite and humble heart. When you come to the priest, confess without shame, do not hide anything, do not try to 'save face.' For many of us have become accustomed to putting up a front for others, and try to appear better than we really are. Being used to hypocrisy, we are often ashamed to honestly admit our faults, omitting some and leaving others incomplete. Remember, my brother, that the Holy Spirit says in the Scripture: 'Whoever hides his sin receives no benefit.' So speak openly without self-justification and without blaming others. If someone offended you, make peace with him and forgive him with all your heart, according to the words of the Lord: 'If you forgive others then God the Father in heaven will forgive you. But if you do not forgive those who sin against you, then the Father will not forgive you your sins.' Amen."¹⁰

- As such, therefore, prior to the Sacrament of Confession, the repentant should prepare himself with introspection, prayer and making peace:
 - (1) Introspection is the soul's search machine that will force the repentant to admit his separation from God when, and how many times, he had missed the mark of being a child of God. This introspection should be done on a daily basis. As such, the conscious of the person will stay vigilant and alert. This daily conscience checking list will hold the person from going afar to a strange land as the younger prodigal son and will let him be aware of the treasures that are graced upon him avoiding him to become like the elder prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-32).

 - (2) Prayers allow the words of God to become the guideline and the ruler by which the repentant will measure his deeds. They are the seeds that will be thrown on the soul (soil) of the repentant in order to bear the fruits of the Sacrament of Confession. They will humble the repentant in order to recognize the magnitude of his deeds and, as

¹⁰ <http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/penance.htm>

such, he becomes like the Publican asking for mercy (Luke 18: 9-14). The prayers will help the repentant to take the necessary actions towards the others and himself; a decision to forgive and a resolution to better his way of life by overcoming and mastering over his sins; not repeating the same sins and not to hurt God and His Church through new sins.

- (3) Then, the repentant should take a step forward by making peace with those he had offended prior to receiving the Peace from above in order to depart in peace.

Prepared, with God's Grace, to the West Island Bible Study Group by Father Jean El-Murr.