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# The relationship between Confession and Psychological counselling in the perspective of communication and spiritual communion

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## Abstract

In our agitated world the human being need inner peacemore than ever. The modern man can find his existential purpose in Church, where God established special persons in order to guide people to communion with Him.

When the inner conflictsbecome increasingly stronger, some persons appeals to the help of psychologists.

In this article I will try to emphasize the relationship between Confession and Psychological counselling, but also the report between the Confessor and Psychologist, analyzing thetypes of confessors (characteristics and qualities) and also strengths and weaknesses of confessors and psychologists.

## Keywords

Theology, Psychology, Confession, Psychological counselling, Psychotherapy, Confessor, Psychologist

## 1. The relationship between Confession, Psychological counselling and Psychotherapy

Nowadays, in a disoriented society, understanding the purpose of life is starting to get more complicated. Values are neglected and that is why so many can't distinguish between what is useful and what is useless, between temporary and eternal.

Although every one of us is seeking inner peace, fulfillment and perfection, however few live peacefully, in the silence of prayer, in communication and in communion with God and peers.

In an agitated world, where stress affects more people, quiet is needed; rediscovery and confirmation of the true *me*, as the image of God. In order to get where we "belong", we need guidance, counselling, advising from responsible persons in a suitable environment. In Church, in a spiritually filled environment or in a psychological consulting room (where at least an icon exist most of the time), the modern man can relax.

In Church, the believer finds its most wanted spiritual peace: no matter what troubles, temptations or problems he would have, all of them disappear miraculously, for where God is, "sickness and sorrow are no more, neither sighing".

During every believers' existential itinerary, the confessor has a fundamental meaning. When confessing, the believer kneels under the confessors' "guarding" epitrachelion, and the sins are forgiven; the follower, humbled, acquires God's blessing, reconciliation with Him and the happiness of spiritual peace. Thus, the confessor is the spiritual doctor, given by God with the power to heal, in order to advise the disoriented one towards his target and supreme purpose: salvation.

The Mystery of Confession has a double role: one *soteriological* and other *educative*. That is why the priest must be well prepared, he must be a good educator in order to be "apt to teach" (I Tim. 3, 2).<sup>1</sup>

He who confesses comes thinking of God and waits a response from Him for his problems, which are neither less nor easy. That is why the confessor must be permanently "connected" in dialogue with God through prayer, to give the proper answer for the concretely needs of the one who confesses. Confession is the Mystery of reconciliation with God, with the

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<sup>1</sup> Protosyngellos Nicodim Belea, „Funcția soteriologică și educativă a Tainei Spovedaniei”, în *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, no. 5-6, 1982, p. 480.

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peers and with his inner self, that is why it is also called the Mystery of peace. Repentance, for a life devoid of true meaning, takes to personal displeasure, in the meaning of regret for the time lost with non-edyfing spiritual works, and this displeasure must take to a true confession of which gains are personal recovery, spiritual fulfillment, forgiveness happiness, thanksgiving and gratitude towards God. A true confession assumes “giving up bad deeds and returning to God; heart crushing, a heart pain for the sins, pain that is not only sighing and tears but man’s will to hate sin and decision to not go back to it, even if he could die”.<sup>2</sup>

Participation to spiritual service requires awareness of the importance of authentic spiritual life, of permanent repentance. The follower that is living the Holy Liturgy is going to feel the need to make his life a Liturgy, a permanent gratitude for all the benefits and a personal sacrifice for his peers.

In the Liturgy after the Holy Communion, the following prayer says: “Cleanse me, wash me and recover me”;

“the biggest problem that is preoccupying the man is recovery. The man must be well-balanced so that he could handle all situations in life. He must gain spiritual health so that he would react wisely in all life problems. There is a huge need of balance because due to the fall, sinning life and sins we became unbalanced. Instead centering our lives in God and base it on the holy law, we are basing it on our own logic that in many cases it is absurd. The man became the center of our lives and not God, the law or reasoning instead of God’s law, sinning instead of the work of the Holy Spirit. Downward harmonization relies on the fact that our mind lost the connection, orientation and momentum towards God. Saint Andrew of Crete describes this state in the Great Canon saying: «the mind was traumatized, the body was weakened, the spirit is sick». That is why the Holy Fathers made great efforts to balance their minds and leave it freely so that it soars to God”.<sup>3</sup>

The anachorites discovered a human psychology that is based on humbleness, obedience, repentance and love.

<sup>2</sup> *Îndreptar de Spovedanie*, Editura Credința Strămoșească, București, 1998, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Metrop. Hierotheos Vlachos, *Psihoterapia Ortodoxă - continuare și dezbateri*, Translation by prof. Ion Diaconescu and prof. Nicolae Ionescu, Editura Sofia, București, 2001, p. 42.

“They encompass all aspects of human mind transformation through which enlightenment is reached. Humbleness means denying the false ego through a willful movement to find the inner lost self. One can reach self consciousness through self-denial. The death of ego yet implies life of the superior ego, life in Christ”.<sup>4</sup>

Through repentance, the Christian needs a change, a personal renewal through a dynamic and continuous state.

“If he sins he must recover and if he accomplished much in his life, he must intensify his efforts. Orthodoxy is both a therapeutic method and a therapeutic education. In Church people are not divided between moral and immoral, good and evil, through exterior ethical criteria, but they are divided into three great categories: people that aren’t spiritually cured, those who are fighting to be cured and those who were actually cured: saints”.<sup>5</sup>

Through Confession, the Christian receives cleansing of sins, he gains spiritual healthiness, in one word, he comes back to normal.

Nowdays there are some Christians that choose psychological counselling over the Holy Mystery of Confession.

From an etymological point of view, the term “counselling” means advice, guidance (in English *counsel* = advice; *counselor* = adviser). But psychological counselling doesn’t cover advising but awareness of personal problems in order to find out personal solutions without any suggestions or advice from the psychologist. More suitable for the true meaning of the word “counselling” is the Latin word *consilium*, which means conference, deliberation, consultation.<sup>6</sup>

Psychological counselling is focused especially on the mans’ personal and existential problems: existential crisis, dilemmas, indecisions, self-knowing and personal development, social and even vocational. Much worse problems: psychotic manifestations and behavior, delirium, hallucinations are extremely complex and delicate. The confessor must be capable to distinguish between true religious experiences and personality disorders or even mental issues, and he must not hesitate to collaborate with

<sup>4</sup> Archb. Hrisostom de Etna, *Elemente de Psihologie pastorală Ortodoxă*, Traducerea de Daniela Constantin, Editura Bunavestire, Galați, 2003, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> H. Vlachos, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

<sup>6</sup> Eugen Jurca, *Spovedanie și psihoterapie – interferențe și diferențe*, Editura Rotonda, Pitești, 2008, p. 7.

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the psychologists and psychiatrists to help those in need. The difference between psychological counselling and psychotherapy is that in the case of *psychological counselling* an *educative model* of human development is adopted, centered on the present (here and now), the counselor assisting the client in finding solutions; while during *psychotherapy* a *medical model* of human development is adopted, where the present is seen as an expression of history of life; the focus is on intervention, treatment, reconstruction; the psychotherapist, proposing profound changes at a structural level (personality reorganization).<sup>7</sup>

In this context, a necessary and actual discipline is pastoral psychology, which proposes an honest, interdisciplinary dialogue between pastoral theology and psychology, addressing subjects related to psychological issues (psychological immaturity, guilt, scrupulousness, possessiveness, anxiety, neuroticism), apparently met in religious manifestations. Given these facts, it is imperative to discern between the sentiment of sin and neurotic/psychotic guilt, between the physical illness and demonization.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, Theology and Psychology are two complementary and compatible areas which aim to support and advise the people, in a personal relationship, that targets on one side the confessor and psychologist and on the other side those who fully trust turning to them.

In the Orthodox Church,

“it is preaching that physical and mental health are in balance with spiritual health. The Orthodox science of spirituality (according to which, through repentance, the believer becomes a new being with a new physiology), the physical science of medicine and mental science of psychology aren’t incompatible, but they work in parallel”.<sup>9</sup>

## **2. The report between the Confessor and Psychologist:**

### **The Confessor – orthodox “Psychotherapist”**

The confessor is endowed by God with the greatest charisma of healing souls, of spiritual and fatherly guidance.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Hrisostom de Etna, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

“If for the healing of physical diseases, medics’ health is not important, for the healing of spiritual ones it is necessary. In the orthodox Tradition, healing particularly means that the man should reach deification. The therapist should have personal experience, because it’s not simple human level counseling, but it’s more like a path towards salvation”.<sup>10</sup>

The physical disease causes suffering to the body but also the spiritual ones or sins affect the spiritual powers of the man. “If successful medicine requires the existence of good medics, true professionals, this also applies in the case of spiritual therapy. Well prepared doctors are really needed and these can only be the bishops or priests”.<sup>11</sup> Priesthood is the continuation of Christ’s work, “the Doctor of spirits and bodies, who cured mankind of the disease of sin through His therapeutic work”.<sup>12</sup>

The perfect cure must be found for every disease, that is why the confessor

“must be self-possessed in the present; in the future capable of predicting and in the same time to compete with the athletes and support the infirmities of the weak, to make and say everything so that his brethren would reach perfection”.<sup>13</sup>

The role of the confessor is essential but this doesn’t exclude the responsibility of every follower to assume his existential dimension of repentance.

“The spiritual father must not take upon himself the burden of the past so that the apprentice would be free of any repentance. Salvation brought by Christ himself, that cleansed world’s sins, leaving everyone the need to assume it through theological virtues deeds and through ascesis required by them to exist and grow. The rule of any spiritual guidance is to give importance to other people’s needs instead of ours”.<sup>14</sup>

The relation between the spiritual father and spiritual son is fundamented on the sentiment of mutual love. So “love and discernment are

<sup>10</sup> H. Vlăch, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

<sup>11</sup> Fr. Emil Cioară, *Duhovnicul și Taina Spovedaniei în Biserica Ortodoxă*, Teză de doctorat, Editura Universității din Oradea, Oradea, 2007, p. 69.

<sup>12</sup> H. Vlăch, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

<sup>13</sup> Irénée Hausherr, *Paternitatea și îndrumarea duhovnicească în Răsăritul creștin*, Traducere de Mihai Vladimirescu, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1999, p. 88.

<sup>14</sup> I. Hausherr, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

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qualities by excellency of the confessor. Love will be demonstrated through patience, kindness or beneficent severity”.<sup>15</sup>

Also, mutual trust is essential. “In order to give the other the power to trust himself so much that he would open his soul, the confessor must be a saint, but also he must recognize himself as a sinner, for as much as the man comes closer to God he starts to see himself more sinful, because Isaiah the prophet by seeing God, he felt more like a villain and unclean”.<sup>16</sup>

The confessors’ work is considered by the Holy Fathers an act of spiritual healing:

“the confessors’ work doesn’t consist in destroying human liberty but in helping him see the truth through himself; not suppression of personality, but help to discover himself, to discover his own vocation, for growth until full maturity and becoming what everyone truly is”.<sup>17</sup>

St. John Climacus says in this regard: “for he knows that everyone watches him as you view an exemplary icon and they count his every words and acts as straight edge and law”.<sup>18</sup>

The spiritual treatment assumes permanent and active cooperation of the sick one for personal awareness and for encouraging the exam of consciousness.

“Forgiveness of sins is mind illumination, its liberation from the domination of reason and passions. When the human mind is darkening passions appear and the man falls in different sins. Thus, forgiveness of sins is on one hand mind illumination, meaning liberation of mind from the dominion of reason and passions, and on the other hand changing passions. It is required to receive the godly grace that comes through the mystery of Confession, but also a correct orthodox guidance so that human mind is freed and illuminated”.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>17</sup> Kallistos Ware, *Împărăția lăuntrică*, Traducere de sora Eugenia Vlad, Editura Christiana, București, 1996, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> St. John Climacus, Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș”, în *Filocalia*, vol. 9, Translation, introduction and notes by Fr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1980, p. 438.

<sup>19</sup> H. Vlachos, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

A physician, in order to be recognized as a professional he must know the following aspects: to correctly diagnose the disease,

“to know well what health is and have good knowledge of proper therapeutic methods that will heal the patient. It is the same thing for the spiritual doctor. He must always know how the passion works and have the possibility to be aware of the «darkness of the mind». Then he must know from his experience how to guide the man towards seeing God, to lighten his darkened mind and take him to deification”.<sup>20</sup>

A good confessor will know how to free the spiritual son of the spiritual burden and how to reintroduce him in God’s communion.

“There are confessors that know the orthodox healing method and how to cure the man, to make him aware and illuminate his darkened mind. There are also priests that Confess in a judicial way, meaning they feel God’s anger for others sins and they want the atonement of divine justice, morally guiding having no idea about the minds’ darkness that drives the man to sins and especially about illumination of mind that takes to deification. The biggest sin is the darkness of the mind and her enslaving... The consequence of this darkness and mind enslaving is the violation of God’s commandments. Forgiveness of sins involves human healing that consists in freeing and mind reviving and communion with God”.<sup>21</sup>

The therapeutic role of the confessor is that he is helping the believer to pass the state of “image” of God to the state of “similarity” with God. By leading him towards deification he actually leads him to healing – for deification is healing.<sup>22</sup>

### **Types of confessors, characteristics and qualities**

As a person consecrated by the sacrament of ordination any priest is invested and empowered to exercise his threefold mission: preaching (didactic), sacramental (charismatic, liturgical) and pastoral (guiding). But there is a difference between priest ordination (which is one of the 7

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 308.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

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Mysteries) and confessor ordination (which is a faculty through which the priest is given the rights to hear confessions).

For confessing, much skill, ability, real life experience, maturity and responsibility is required because it is a delicate and difficult work.<sup>23</sup>

A confessor must be given the “spiritual paternity charisma”<sup>24</sup>, with an improved life, pastoral experience (and psychological), a spiritual guide with whom the believer must keep an authentic and long lasting relationship, in which continuity and effectiveness must exist from one confession to another. The confessor doesn’t impose his own ideas and personal virtues, but it helps the apprentice to exclusively find his own vocation.

According to other priests’ attitude during confession we can observe and analyze a few types of confessors.

The “rough” (dictatorial) is often met in monasteries but also in some parish churches. In his opinion, “authority is given by coercion and inflexibility; he grounds his *authority* on others’ authority: the Holy Fathers, canons and church teachings”. His favorite subject is unconditional obedience (“the order is executed not discussed”): he is doctrinal, enclosed, opaque to changing and dialogue, rigid, incomprehensible, moralist, gives canons as by to those who wrote them (for those ages), he bans Communion for years. Many believers leave disappointed and discouraged (if not lost) after such sad experience. But also those who come to them follow the same psychological pattern (scrupulous) instead of seeking healing, they seek justification.<sup>25</sup>

The permissive confessor is situated on the other side: too “forgiving”, this kind of confessor seeks to be liked by any means, being too “lenient” with the sin, even indifferent with sins and disinterested by the parishioners’ spiritual or moral state. There are other confessors which faster or not, they limit themselves to “listening confessions” (sadly many times silence says more than enough, but it must not reach the point of shallowness or formality).<sup>26</sup>

The “partner” confessor (this term is better than “ideal”) has the following qualities: “clear face, openness, calm, inner peace, spiritual life,

<sup>23</sup> Fr. Prof. Nicolae Necula, *Tradiție și înnoire în slujirea liturgică*, vol. 3, Editura Episcopiei Dunării de Jos, Galați, 1996, p. 181.

<sup>24</sup> K. Ware, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> E. Jurcă, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

steadiness, patience, understanding, leniency, tact, wisdom, optimism, humor, decisional autonomy, responsibility, authenticity, courage, psychological and spiritual maturity”.<sup>27</sup>

A real spiritual relationship assumes a personal relationship and spiritual communion. Such relation “can only be achieved in time with patience through dialogue, skill, common interest, perseverance, dynamism and continuous spiritual growth. This claims a real communication, permanent, openness, perseverance and above all, a will for change/transformation and salvation... A man who is spiritually advanced is one who advanced in «similarity» with God, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, in love, happiness, tolerance, kindness, freedom”.<sup>28</sup>

A “true” confessor forms “real” men, sincere, powerful, pious, people of character and attitude, but also understanding, happy, bright, lenient with others weaknesses, ready to help both the sinners and those in need.<sup>29</sup>

There is no such thing as a standard confessor. Even in the same confessor alternate and contraries can be found:

“authority with leniency, freedom with obedience, kindness with firmness, love with rebuke. The believer has the total freedom to choose the type of confessor that suits him, with whom he is compatible and feels listened, understood, valued and loved as a person, giving him the chance to be as is and to grow spiritually”.<sup>30</sup>

### **Strengths and weaknesses of confessors and psychologists**

Among the professional requirements and fundamental objectives of therapy or confession, psycho-affective/spiritual maturity is very important that it implies a good level of maturity of the persons’ dimensions and functions. Intellectually, a good sense of reality and conscience is implied, an adequate self-knowledge, of the others and God. Psychologically, the force of will, the ability of personal decision and firmness are essential; and morally, orientation to authentic values is mandatory. Autonomy in decisions, the ability to remain faithful to certain tasks, understanding and

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

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self-acceptance, self-control ability, coherence and steadiness in behavior must be defining elements of confessors' and psychologists' personality.<sup>31</sup>

From the multitude of human qualities needed by the confessor and psychologist we can enumerate: ability to communicate (he must express to be understood, open to dialogue), empathy (therapist capacity to feel what the "client"/penitent feel avoiding excessive identification or distancing), ability to listen, therapeutic/moral-soteriologic responsibility, patience, balance, emotional stability, discreteness, trustful (credibility, correctness, impartiality), flexibility, understanding, leniency, compassion, optimism<sup>32</sup>, capacity to understand more but talk less (through examples), finesse, formation and spiritual life. The confessor must take into account the individual nature of everyone and be convinced that he works in the name of God and in the Spirit of Christ,<sup>33</sup> and the penitent must be entrusted that the confessor receives him with Christ's love and joy participating in his life feeling sorry for him and understanding his suffering.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the mystery of the person is discovered for it is common to the person to communicate his life to another. Thus, relationships between the priest and followers must be as father and sons; the christian community being like a family in which its members are in a pure love relationship.<sup>35</sup>

As for the shortcomings that the confessor and psychologist must avoid, it must be specified that it is not recommended to give examples, advice or personal solutions, but instead use custom inducements adapted for every follower so that he could find his own solutions. Forcing to take decisions, ignorance, arrogance, self-sufficiency, frequent interruption of dialogue, rigidity, inflexibility, intolerance, insults, bustle, hurry, precipitation, impulsivity, superficiality, indifference, boredom, laxity, inflicting violence on personal privacy, interrogation and violation of personal space must be avoided.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93-100.

<sup>33</sup> Fr. Prof. Petre Vintilescu, „Spovedania, prilej de pastorație individuală”, în *Studii Teologice*, nr. 9-10, 1949, p. 699.

<sup>34</sup> Arhim. Lect. Dr. Vasile Miron, „Taina Sfintei Spovedanii, mijloc de pastorație individuală și piatră de hotar în îndreptarea sufletească a credinciosului”, în *Studii Teologice*, nr. 3-4, 2004, p. 71.

<sup>35</sup> Diac. Prof. O. Bucevschi, „Despre duhovnicie”, în *Mitropolia Olteniei*, nr. 5-6, 1957, p. 314.

<sup>36</sup> E. Jurca, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

To sum up, confession assumes delicacy, discreteness and responsibility. Confession is not an opportunity of curiosities, nor a civil court, but a way to help the believer easily overcome spiritual worries.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, Theology and Psychology are complementary, they are compatible and aim to support and guide the people, but in the case of Theology... it also aims their salvation.

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<sup>37</sup> *Idem*, „Taina Mărturisirii”, în *Studii Teologice*, nr. 5, 1986, p. 106.