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Confession and Repentance. Some canonical remarks

Constantin Rus

Constantin Rus

“Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad
E-mail: constantin.rus@yahoo.com

Abstract

In this study, I have tried to explain why the question of sacraments and, first of all, the question of lay participation in the eucharistic life, is, in my opinion, the main question facing our Church, a question on which her spiritual future, her real, and not only external, growth truly depends. My conclusions must, therefore, relate to one another with faithfulness to the genuine Tradition of the Church with pastoral care for its “fulfillment” in our own conditions of life, which are so difficult and so radically different from the past.

The question, in my opinion, must be formulated as follows: how can we both encourage a more frequent, more regular participation by the laity in the Eucharistic sacrament, as the “focus of Christian life,” as the sacrament of the Church and her unity, and, at the same time, assure a proper preparation for this sacrament, thus preventing communion from becoming as much a “custom” as was, until now, the practice of “non-communion”?

Keywords

confession, repentance, penance, custom, spiritual father, communion, compassion, judicial authority

I. Meaning, importance and names

Repentance is the God-instituted Sacrament, in which the officiator (Bishop or Priest), in the Name of the Lord, forgives the sins of the faithful that were committed after Holy Baptism and who, with sincere intention, decide to change their sinful ways and follow a virtuous life¹. The importance and necessity of this Holy Sacrament are obvious when one recalls the weakness of human nature and that man easily tends towards evil from his youth. After his Regeneration, man is not immediately raised to the Perfection of Christ but gradually and through constant struggle, abolishes the remaining sinful tendencies and desires. Repentance cleanses the faithful from all stain of sin committed after Baptism. It is the Holy Sacrament that was instituted by God's Kindness and Philanthropia as He does not want the death of a sinner but rather that he repents and lives.

1. Repentance as a Virtue in the Old Testament and as a Holy Sacrament of the New Testament

Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Son of God, instituted the Holy Sacrament of Repentance and Confession, making it a living Virtue that brings forth fruits. Repentance was always considered a necessary obligation by all men before Christ, who realised their need, not only those who worshipped the One and True God but many pagans as well. St. Paul proclaimed

“... as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them)” (Rom. 2, 12-15).

¹ See also: P. Evdokimov, *Orthodoxy*, New City Press, New York, 2011, pp. 388-394; A. Frangopoulos, *Our Christian Faith. (What we believe) – Public Dogmatique*, Athens, 1999, pp. 208-210; John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology. Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, New York, 1987, pp. 195-196.

Not only did the Jews recognize the necessity for Reconciliation with the Divine but so did the Gentiles. All nations worshipping their gods, offered sacrifices to calm their anger in order to secure their favour. The Gentiles too, acknowledged their guilt, which was a form of confession of sins, seeking reconciliation with the Divine. Besides these common practices amongst the pagans, the True Teaching of Repentance by those who were sent by the One and only True God, especially by the Prophets, was heard by them such as:

“I will judge you, O house of Israel, says the Lord, each one according to his way: be converted, and turn from all your ungodliness and it shall not become to you the punishment of iniquity. Cast away from yourselves all your ungodliness wherein you have sinned against Me; and make to yourselves a new heart and a new spirit: for why should you die, O house of Israel? For I desire not the death of him that dies, says the Lord” (Ez. 18, 30-32) and “Thus said the Lord; as I live, I desire not the death of the ungodly, as that the ungodly should turn from his way and live: turn you heartily from your way; for why will you die O house of Israel” (Ez. 33, 11). In the Book of Job we read: “And when they saw him from a distance they did not know him; and they cried with a loud voice, and wept, and rent everyone his garment, and sprinkled dust upon their heads, and they sat down beside him seven days and seven nights, and no one of them spoke; for they saw that his affliction was dreadful and very great” (Job 2, 12-13). King David cried out: “Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin... (Psalm 50/51, 2) ... Do not cast me away from Thy Presence, and do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me” (Psalm 50/51, 11).

Although in the Old Testament repentance was preached by God’s delegates and included all the elements of true Repentance acceptable to God, it did not give the fruits nor did it have the Power and Strength that was received as a Sacrament instituted by Christ and granted to the Church for the use of the faithful after the Sacrifice of the Lord. In the Old Testament the repentant did not become the Regenerated sons of God nor Co-heirs with Christ. They were not freed from the tyranny of death but were released only from the punishments of Divine Wrath, receiving the favour

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and Protection of God. Repentance as the Sacrament that forgives sin and restores the repentant completely in the Rites of Baptism, which ensured Divine Grace upon the newly chosen people of God, did not exist before the Coming of the Messiah, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2. The Establishment of the Holy Sacrament of Repentance by the Lord

When certain Scribes heard our Lord Jesus Christ forgiving the sins of paralytic, they were scandalized and speculated: “Why does this Man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone” (Marc. 2, 7). They were grossly mistaken because they did not recognize the Divine Authority of the Divine Power of Jesus Christ due to then Spiritual blindness and envy. Although their opinion that only God can forgive sins was correct, they did not recognize the Truth despite personally witnessing so much Supernatural evidence proving that our Lord was not merely Man, but God. As Incarnated God, our Saviour proclaimed the Gospel to the world, preaching the forgiveness of sins, clearly explaining that the Son of Man came to “... seek and save that which was lost.. (Luke 10, 10) and rightly claiming the Power “...on earth to forgive sins” (Marc 2, 10). Upon this Authority, He granted forgiveness to the paralytic (Mark 2, 5) and to the sinful woman (Luke 7, 48). According to His Mission, the Messiah proclaimed “...liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind” (Luke 4, 18). He constantly seeks that which was lost among “... tax-collectors and sinner...” (Matt. 11, 19) and therefore He was accused of being “*friend*” to these social outcasts by “... *eating and drinking...*” (Luke 7, 34) with them. To the Pharisees and Scribes who criticized Him and His Disciples for associating “... with tax-collectors and sinners ...” (Luke 5, 30. He responded: “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Luke 5, 32). Quite the opposite are those who approach Christ with faith for they enjoy His Divine Gifts. He grants them the peace of their consciences by telling them with Divine Authority: “Go in peace” (Luke 7, 50). Christ wanting to pass down this Authority to His Church, instructed us to ask the Heavenly Father, in prayer, to forgive our daily sins.

Our Lord responded to the needs of the faithful by instituting Repentance as a Sacrament within the Church² because He knew that for us "... It is impossible to cut off the love toward sinful passions"³. As a result, every Christian continuously experiences Spiritual falls throughout his life even after his Regeneration that occurred at Holy Baptism. Therefore, without Repentance, which is the "... Medicine of offences, Consumer of unlawfulness, Weapon against the devil, Knife that cuts his head, Saving Hope, Refutation of despair..."⁴ all Christians face the direct danger of being completely alienated from the Divined Gifts received at Holy Baptism and Chrismation. Without Repentance we become unworthy of participating in the Divine Eucharist and finally, most tragically, we will be excluded from the Salvation that is offered through Christ. However, even from the beginning, Christ as most Merciful God and foreknowing the hearts of men and their flexibility as well as knowing the wickedness of the devil who ceaselessly attempts to accuse God's servants of sins so that they may fall with him granted a second Repentance, after Holy Baptism to sinners. Thus, "...all those who want to repent ... can receive the Mercy of God... "because "... God's Mercy, Philanthropia and countless richness have the repentant as just and sinless"⁵.

The ease with which mankind so easily falls into sin and the power of the Divine Mercy within the Holy Sacrament of Repentance provoked Saint John Chrysostom to remark:

"If you have sins, do not despair. If you sin daily, then daily repent ... " for we must do as "... we do to the old houses, when they are crumbling... We remove the rotten parts from them and repair them. You have become old today because of sin. Renew yourself through Repentance". Repentance has so much power from the Philanthropia of the Master that "... you would achieve the forgiveness of your sins". However, already "... with repentance are mixed God's Philanthropia, for God's Love for

² A. Frangkopoulos, *Christian Faith. (What we believe – public Dogmatic)*, 12th ed., Athens, 1999, p. 210-212. N. Metsopoulos, *Themata of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Athens, 1983, p. 320-321.

³ Clement of Alexandrian, *Who is the saved rich man*, 40, in *Library of the Greek Fathers*, vol. 8, p. 371.

⁴ John Chrysostom, *About repentance*, Homily 8, 1, in Migne, *P. G.*, 49, 337.

⁵ Clement the Alexandrian, *Stromata*, II, 13, in *Library of the Greek Fathers*, vol. 7, p. 328; and in Migne, *P. G.*, 8, 994-998.

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mankind has no limit, neither can His Kindness be interpreted”. Furthermore, although man’s wickedness “... is limited ... the medicine has no limits...” because “... God’s Philanthropia is indescribable and infinite”.

To make this more understandable, Saint John Chrysostom used the example of a spark: “Think of a spark falling into the ocean. Can it exist or be seen? As a spark is compared to the ocean, thus is evil compared to God’s Philanthropia. Not as such, but even greater. For the ocean, although large, has its limits but God’s Philanthropia is infinite”⁶.

3. The Names of the Holy Sacrament

The names ascribed to the Holy Sacrament of Repentance reveal either the essential part of the Sacrament or the results that it brings. Thus the Holy Sacrament was called: “Repentance” because of the change in the way of feeling, thinking and will of the repentant, “Confession” because the repentant confesses his sins before the officiator, “Second Baptism”, “washing of tears”, “washing”, “absolution”, “purification of sins”, “reconciliation”, “(life-saving) board of Salvation after the wreck”.

II. The Divine Institution of The Holy Sacrament and Its Power

Our Lord and our Saviour Jesus Christ, the Son of God, received the Authority to forgive sins as God and as the Son of Man (Matt. 9, 6; Marc 2, 10; Luke 5, 24; 7, 47-48) because of the hypostasis of His two Natures. He initially promised this Authority to Saint Peter (Matt. 16, 19) and later to all His Holy Apostles (Matt. 18, 18). On the day of His glorious Resurrection, He breathed upon the faces of the Holy Apostles, giving them the Holy Spirit and the Authority to forgive or not to forgive the sins of the people (John 20, 22-23). Thus the Orthodox Church, through the Holy Apostles, received the Divine Authority to forgive not only those sins committed before Baptism but even those committed afterwards and this Authority is practiced through her Bishops and Presbyters. This was the practice of the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and undivided Eastern

⁶ Saint John Chrysostom, *About repentance*, Homily 8, 1, in Migne, *P. G.*, 49, 337.

Orthodox Church as witnessed not only in the New Testament, but in the writings of all ecclesiastic writers and Holy Fathers who proclaimed the Saving Act of the God-instituted Sacrament by means of which all sins of those who truly repent are forgiven. Those who do not repent, prevent the Grace of the Holy Spirit from descending and forgiving their sins, thereby simultaneously committing the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ warned us shall not be forgiven in this world or in the world to come! (Matt. 12, 31-32; Marc 3, 28-29)

1. The Establishment of the Sacrament by our Lord

After the confession of saint Peter that our Lord Jesus is "...the Christ, the Son of the living God ..." (Matt. 16, 16) which was revealed according to Divine Revelation, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Son of God, promised to give him "... the keys of the Kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven" (Matt. 16, 19). With these words, the Lord granted Saint Peter the Authority to permit entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven to the worthy, while preventing the unworthy from entering: "To bring in or to prevent the entrance is the work of the key-holder". Being entrusted with the keeping of the keys confirms Saint Peter as having the undoubted right and authority according to the promise of the Lord that he is not simply a door-keeper of the Kingdom of Heaven but a steward, vested with Despotic Authority of Him Who entrusted and gave him the keys of Heaven. It is a full authority and in a measure infinite, which allows Saint Peter to bring in or to exclude. This Authority was mainly so that "... whatever sin which will not be forgiven on earth... shall not be forgiven in Heaven by God; and whatever will be forgiven here, will be forgiven there"⁷. This Authority is infinite in that it refers to forgiving whatever sin, either big or small, according to the just judgment of the officiator. He who unjustly judges and binds on earth and not according to the Word of God or forgives not according to the Will of God, the gates of Hades prevail. The Gates of Hades are not obliged to prevail over him who wants to bind or loose because he who, with pride, misuses this Authority "... nor knowing the Will of the Scriptures, has fallen in the sin of the devil..." unjustly

⁷ Zigabenos, *To Matthew 16, 19*, in Migne, *P. G.*, 129, 468.

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and not according to the Will of God and judging "... in vain, he binds and looses"⁸.

Whatever the Lord promised in Caesarea to Saint Peter who was first to confess that our Lord Jesus is "... the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16, 16), He also later promised to the other Holy Apostles as representatives at that time of the entire Church. Furthermore, Christ wanted that he who refuses to obey the Church "...let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collection" (Mat. 18, 17). Furthermore, "...what we decide on earth... God seals in Heaven. For those who are not healed (through Repentance) you cut off from the Church and those who repent, you receive later"⁹.

This sacred Promise was fulfilled on the first day of Christ's glorious Resurrection when His Disciples were gathered together and He appeared in the midst of them, greeting them with the words: "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you" (John 20, 21). With words the Lord gave the same Mission to the Apostles and made them His successors, reassuring them that He would send them "... as the Father has sent Me..." simultaneously revealing the rank of authority given to them¹⁰. In other words, as our Lord was sent by the Father to "... seek and save the lost..." (Luke 19, 10) likewise were they sent by the Risen Lord to continue His Work, seeking as had Christ for the lost sheep and co-operating with God for their Salvation. In order for them to achieve this, they had to be vested with the Authority to forgive and bind sins, similar to the Authority which our Lord had. Therefore, immediately as the Lord pronounced these words, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20, 22-23).

To forgive the sins or iniquities means that the sins are "abolished" and they are "erased". It also means that the sins are "covered" completely in such a way that they no longer appear and they are "washed" away so that no trace or spot can be found.

This Authority was given to the Holy Apostles and Disciples, not as a personal Charisma but as a permanent institution that was passed down through them to the Church and remains effective until the end of the ages.

⁸ Origen, *To Matthew*, XII, 14, in Migne, *P. G.*, 13, 1013.

⁹ Zigabenos, *To Matthew 16, 19*, in Migne, *P. G.*, 129, 468.

¹⁰ Cyril of Alexandria, *To Matthew 16, 19*, in Migne, *P. G.*, 72, 434 and 709. See also: Zigabenos, *To Matthew 16, 19*, in Migne, *P. G.*, 129, 1485.

2. The Transmitting of the Authority to Forgive

The transmission of the Authority to forgive the sins to the Church presupposes and suggests The Didache, which addresses the commandment to each faithful:

“In church you shall confess your transgressions, and you shall not approach your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life ...”¹¹,

and urging everyone:

“... on the Lord’s own day (to) gather together and break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure”¹².

Taking into consideration that the life of the Christians at that time was very strict, their confession was done in public and before the officiators of the Church with all the other faithful present.

Similar advice is found in the Epistle of Saint Ignatius of Antioch to the Philadelphians:

“... The Lord, however, forgives all who repent, if in repenting return to the unity of God and the council of the Bishop”¹³; and: “...for all those who belong to God and Jesus Christ are with the Bishop, and all those who repent and enter into the unity of the Church will belong to God, that they may be living in accordance with Jesus Christ”¹⁴.

Saint Clement of Rome recommended that those:

“... who had the foundation of revolt...” submit themselves “... to the Presbyters and accept discipline leading to repentance, bending the knees of their hearts”¹⁵.

Saint Polycarp of Smyrna advised:

“... the Presbyters ... to be compassionate, merciful to all, turning back those who have gone astray, visiting all the sick, nor neglecting a widow, orphan or poor person, but ‘always aiming at what is honourable in the sight of God and of men’ (Proverbs 3, 4; 2 Corinth. 8, 21), avoiding all anger, particularly, unjust

¹¹ *Didache*, IV, 14, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 152.

¹² *Didache*, XIV, 1, Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 157.

¹³ Ignatius, *To Philadelphians*, VIII, 1, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 108.

¹⁴ Ignatius, *To Philadelphians*, III, 1, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 107.

¹⁵ Clement of Rome, *1st Corinthians*, 57, 1, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 60.

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judgement, staying far away from all love of money not quick to believe things spoken against anyone, nor harsh in judgement, knowing that we are all in debt with respect to sin. Therefore if we ask the Lord to forgive us, then we ourselves ought to forgive, for we are in full view of the eyes of the Lord and God, and we must ‘all stand before the Judgement Seat of Christ’ (Rom. 14, 10), and ‘each one must give an account of himself’ (Rom. 14, 12; 2 Corinth. 5, 10)”¹⁶.

The Authority to forgive or to bind the sins by the Bishops or Presbyters was evident during the period of persecutions. Thus Saint Cyprian addressed those who during persecution had renounced their faith and, without repentance and confession, approached Holy Communion. He pointed out to them that others of the faithful were under repentance for minor sins but came to Confession with the laying on of the hands of the Bishop and the clergy, thereby receiving the right to Communion¹⁷. He also praised those who had neither sacrificed to any idol nor were bound by any unholy “libelli” but because they had thought about it and even consented within their hearts, they approached the Priests of God with deep contrition, confessing by revealing the depths of their souls. Saint Cyprian exhorted all to confess their misdoings until they received the forgiveness of the Lord through His Priests¹⁸. In another letter, Saint Cyprian, having received letters of recommendation by Confessors of the Faith regarding the fallen, permitted those who were in danger of death, not to wait for his arrival to forgive them as the Authorized Bishop but to request any Presbyter to do so. In their absence a Deacon could receive death-bed confessions and grant them the forgiveness through the laying on of hands so that they may depart in peace to the Lord¹⁹.

Origen, interpreting the belief of the Alexandrian Church, assured that officiators and Priests of the Church take up the sins of the people and imitating the Teacher, grant forgiveness of sins²⁰. Elsewhere he numbered the ways of forgiveness of sins according to the Gospel²¹. Interpreting the promise given by the Lord to Saint Peter, he believed that:

¹⁶ St. Polycarp, *To the Philippians*, VI, 1-2, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 126.

¹⁷ St. Cyprian, *Epistola* 9, § 2, in Migne, *P. L.*, 4, 257.

¹⁸ St. Cyprian, *De lapsis*, 28, 29, in Migne, *P. L.*, 4, 503.

¹⁹ St. Cyprian, *Epistola* 12, 1, in Migne, *P. L.*, 4, 265.

²⁰ Origen, *To Leviticus*, Homily V, 3, in Migne, *P. G.*, 12, 451.

²¹ Origen, *To Leviticus*, Homily II, 4, in Migne, *P. G.*, 12, 418.

“... those who desire the position of the Bishop need to receive the words of the Lord and the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven as Peter, and they teach that whatever they bind are bound in Heaven and those which are loosened, in other words have received forgiveness, are loosened in Heaven”²².

Saint Athanasius of Alexandria commended that:

“... as a man is Baptised by a Priest and is Enlightened by the Grace of the Holy Spirit, likewise he who confesses with repentance through the Priest receives the forgiveness through the Grace of Christ”²³.

Saint Basil the Great warned us that it is “...necessary to confess the sins to those who were entrusted with *Economia* of the Mysteries of God...”²⁴, in other words to the Presbyters and Bishops. Justifying this instruction, the Holy Father reminded us that:

“... in such manner those who repented practiced. For it is written in the Gospel that they confessed their sins to John the Baptist; and in Acts (19, 18) to the Apostles, by whom all were Baptised”²⁵.

For the Confession of virgins who have been dedicated into Sisterhoods (Nuns), it is not permissible for them to confess to the Abbess but instead they may confess in the presence of an older sister to the Presbyter who is able to give the proper medicine²⁶.

Saint John Chrysostom observed that the Priest as “...Judge is sitting on earth and the Despot follows the servant and whatever he considers, that He confirms from above”²⁷.

Saint Leo the Great, Pope of Rome, in one of his letters, proclaimed that the Mediator of God and men, the Man Jesus Christ, gave the Authority to the Elders of the Church to impose Repentance on those who confess and cleanse themselves through the Saving punishments. Afterwards they

²² Origen, *To Matthew*, XII, 14, in Migne, *P. G.*, 13, 1012-1013.

²³ St. Athanasius of Alexandria, *Monitum in Fragmenta Contra Novatianos*, in Migne, *P. G.*, 26, 1315.

²⁴ St. Basil the Great, *Regulae Brevis Tractatae*, 188, in Migne, *P. G.*, 31, 1284-1285.

²⁵ St. Basil the Great, *Regulae Brevis Tractatae*, 188, in Migne, *P. G.*, 31, 1284-1285.

²⁶ St. Basil the Great, *Regulae Brevis Tractatae*, 113, in Migne, *P. G.*, 31, 1157.

²⁷ St. John Chrysostom, *About priesthood*, III, § 5, in Migne, *P. G.*, 56, 130.

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were to receive them in the Communion of the Mysteries through the door of Reconciliation²⁸.

3. The Relatively Infinity of the Authority

That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Son of God, entrusted the authority to His Church to forgive sins without any sanction is evident from His words: "... whatever you bind..." and "... whatever you loose..." (Matt. 18, 18) as well as "... if you forgive the sins of any..." and "... if you retain the sins of any" (John 20, 23). No matter how many sins are forgiven or bound, those who received the Authority from the Lord, the Apostles and through them the Church, have the right to grant the forgiveness of sins. Besides that, the Lord gave this Mission to the Church: "As the Father has sent Me, even so I send you" (John 20, 21). The Mission includes the absolute and infinite Authority to forgive sins.

Saint John Chrysostom believed that "... all the judgement which the Father has committed to the Son (John 5, 22) ... is committed to all ..." the Apostles and Priests²⁹. The Lord, using this Authority which He committed to His Church, forgave serious sins, as that of the adulteress (John 8, 3-11), that of the sinful woman (Luke 7, 36-50), that of the thief on the Cross (Luke 23, 43) and that of Saint Peter (John 21, 15-19). On the other hand, Saint Paul accepted to forgive the one who had fallen and whom the Church of Corinth would forgive: "Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us for we are not ignorant of his devices" (2 Corinth. 2, 10-11). Also in his 1st Letter to the Corinthians, he wrote: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles – that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are

²⁸ St. Leo the Great, *Epistola* 108, § 2 *ad Theodorum*, in Migne, *P. L.*, 54, 1011.

²⁹ St. John Chrysostom, *About priesthood*, III, § 5, in Migne, *P. G.*, 48, 643.

gathered together, along with my spirit, with the Power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Corinth. 5, 1-5).

Concerning the teachings of the Apostolic Fathers, the Shepherd of Hermas noted that:

“... when I recovered myself and remembered the Glory of God and took heart, I knelt down and once more confessed my sins to the Lord, as I have done before. And she came with six young men, whom I had seen before and she stood by me and listened attentively as I prayed and confessed my sins to the Lord”³⁰.

In Africa some bishops wanted to exclude those who committed adultery and fornication from repentance but because their fellow bishops in the synod prevailed, they also followed their opinion and did not disrupt the unity of the Church³¹.

Saint Clement the Alexandrian spoke of the one repentance after baptism, which he characterized as “second Baptism” and demanded that repentance should be sincere and without returning to the old sinful way of life. He quoted the Epistle to Hebrews:

“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the Heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame” (Heb. 6, 4-6).

The hardening of the heart into which one can fall makes him unreceptive to sincere repentance. However, for those who with all their heart turn back to God with sincere repentance, the doors are open³².

Origen mentioned Christians who had fallen and who the other faithful mourned “... as though they were loose and dead for God...” but who were “... raised from the dead, if they accepted change”. Origen believed that for serious sins there can be only one true repentance, whereas daily sins can be forgiven without the intervention of others³³. When he spoke

³⁰ *Poemen of Hermas*, Vision 3, 5-6, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 200.

³¹ St. Cyprian, *Epistola 52*, 21, in Migne, *P. L.*, 3, 811.

³² Clement of Alexandrian, *Stromata*, II, 13, in Migne, *P. G.*, 8, 994-998. See also, Clement of Alexandrian, *Who is the saved rich man*, 42, 40, 39, in Migne, *P. G.*, 9, 644-652.

³³ Origen, *Against Celsus*, III, 51, in Migne, *P. G.*.. Origen, *To Leviticus XV*, in Migne, *P. G.*, 11, 561.

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of one repentance for serious sins, he meant that if anyone falls more than once, he may be forgiven but under the consideration that he will not fall in the same sins again³⁴.

The Apostolic Orders repeatedly address the admonition that the bishop should act with compassion to those who have sinned and not consider them detestable.

“The one who has fallen once and twice in the same mistake... the Lord did not give up, but ate with the publicans and sinners”. If one of the sinners “... returns and shows fruits of repentance...” “then the bishop is obliged to receive him “... as the lost son the prodigal, who consumed the fatherly fortune with sinful women, who became shepherd of swine and ate with them”³⁵.

Parallel to the 52nd Canon of the Apostles that demands that:

“If any bishop or presbyter refuses to receive anyone who has repented, he shall be deposed from his position because he has saddened Christ Who said that there is joy in Heaven when a sinner turns with repentance”³⁶.

Saint John Chrysostom believed that:

“Repentance has much power on him who is baptized to make himself greater, if he wishes. Repentance is able to take away the heaviness of sins and to secure the one who is in danger, even if he has come down to the bottom of sin”³⁷.

Elsewhere, encouraging the repentant, he advised that:

“...whenever you fall in the market, so many times you must stand. Thus as many times as you sin, repent for your sin; do not despair; even if you sin twice, twice repent... Even if you are in old age and you have sinned, enter; repent for here is a hospital, which offers forgiveness of sins”³⁸.

Saint Cyril of Alexandria believed that “... there is no sin which God cannot forgive for those who sincerely repent”³⁹.

³⁴ Origen, *To Leviticus* XI, 2, in Migne, *P. G.*, 12, 533.

³⁵ *Constitutions apostoliques* II, 40, 1, and 41, 1, in *Sources Chrétiennes*, t. 320, p. 268-275.

³⁶ 52nd Canon of the Apostles, in P. P. Joannou, *Fonti, Fascicolo IX, Discipline générale antique*, (IVe – IXe siècles), t. I, 2. *Les canons des Synodes Particuliers*, Tipografia Italo-Orientale « S. Nilo », Grottaferrata, Roma, 1962, p. 36.

³⁷ St. Chrysostom, *To Hebrews*, Homily 9, § 4, in Migne, *P. G.*, 63, 80.

³⁸ St. Chrysostom, *About repentance*, III, § 4, in Migne, *P. G.*, 49, 297.

³⁹ St. Cyril of Alexandria, *To Matthew*, in Migne, *P. G.*, 72, 409.

Saint Athanasius of Alexandria proclaimed that "... the remarkable repentance looses all sins"⁴⁰.

Jeremias observed that when the Lord promised Saint Peter "...the keys of heaven ... Peter asked how many times he should forgive the sinners. Seven times? (By this Peter believed that he was achieving a great thing) (until) the Lord responded, not seven, but seventy times seven"⁴¹.

If some of the ecclesiastic writers and Holy Fathers of the early Orthodox Church hesitated to forgive moral sins, this was because they were very concerned that if one repeatedly returned to these sins, he would become used to them and would face the danger of becoming insensitive and developing a condition that could not receive Repentance. This condition is that which our Lord referred to as the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which forever remains unforgivable. It is called the callousness and hardening of the heart because he who reaches this stage reveals a stubborn resistance to the influence of the Holy Spirit Who urges him towards repentance and the change of the way of life. This resistance is due to the free will of the sinner⁴². "He who willingly falls into sin and knowingly blasphemes God will not be forgiven"⁴³ said Zigabenos. These sins, which were characterized as blasphemies against the Holy Spirit, are inexcusable not because of God or the Church but because of the sinner's unrepentance and stubbornness⁴⁴. The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is inexcusable, unforgivable and eternal because it falsifies the nature of man and creates a permanent and unchangeable condition. The Eternal Punishment is the result of sin, which hardens the heart of the unrepentant sinner due to his own free will and which has become irreparable and incurable⁴⁵.

III. Components of Repentance

The power and effectiveness of repentance is manifested when it is true and sincere. It is absolutely necessary that sincere Godly sorrow and repentance are expressed before the absolution of sins is granted by the Bishop

⁴⁰ St. Athanasius of Alexandria, *Fragment to Matthew*, in Migne, *P. G.*, 27, 1388.

⁴¹ Jeremias, A^s, in J. Karmiris, *The Dogmatics*, vol. I, p. 391 and 396.

⁴² Clement the Alexandrian, *Stromata*, II, 13, in Migne, *P. G.*,

⁴³ Zigabenos, *To Matthew*, 12, 32, Migne, *P. G.*, 129, 381.

⁴⁴ Androustos, *Dogmatique*, p. 379.

⁴⁵ Trempelas, *Dogmatique*, vol. III, p. 258.

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or Priest. The repentant must be steadfast in his decision not to return to his sinful way of life and to bear fruits worthy of his repentance. The seal of this internal change of thoughts and decisions must follow the recognition and confession of the committed sins, not only in the repentant prayers but with humility revealing before the confessor bishop or priest his sins as one who reveals his illness to a doctor in order to receive the medicine for the healing of his spiritual wounds. After Confession the absolution follows which consists of the remission of sins and the re-establishment in the condition of grace.

1. Self-condemnation and Contrition as Pre-requirement Terms

Since repentance requires the renouncement and the turning away from sin beforehand as well as the change of the way of thinking and making decisions, it is obvious that the first step of repentance is to "... know the sins and to acknowledge the iniquities and to condemn oneself"⁴⁶. Without this acknowledgement and self-condemnation, repentance is completely inconceivable. Justification of any sin or the passing of the responsibility to others dulls the centre of repentance and prevents the development of the humble and broken heart.

Saint Basil the Great observed that: "Repentance calls someone to live with the recognition of his guilt, followed by a contrite heart"⁴⁷. It is not enough that he simply admits "I have sinned" but that he acknowledges his own sins through his sincere self-examination. "The medicine of repentance is prepared at first from the knowing of our own sins"⁴⁸.

Without the knowing and complete acknowledgement of one's guilt for committed sins, it is impossible to create a sincere contrite heart and the "Godly sorrow", which comprise the first necessary and essential elements of true repentance. Saint Paul taught that "... Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to Salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2nd Corinthians 7, 10).

Saint Justin the philosopher and martyr, using King David as an example of repentance, observed that "... he was forgiven... when he cried and

⁴⁶ St. John Chrysostom, *To 1st Corinthians*, Homily 28, 2, in Migne, *P. G.*, 61, 234.

⁴⁷ St. Basil the Great, *To Isaiah*, ch. 15, 297, and ch. 1, 34, in Migne, *P. G.*, 30, 640 and 185.

⁴⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *To Hebrews*, Homily 9, 4, in Migne, *P. G.*, 63, 80.

mourned”. Consequently, “... if this great King, anointed one and Prophet, received the forgiveness, how can it be possible for the unclean to be forgiven unless they cry and mourn”⁴⁹.

Saint John Chrysostom accentuated the example of the Ninevites who “...put on their wounds...” and “... vested themselves with sackcloths and ashes and cried” (Jonah 3, 5-9). In another example King David “...cried about his sin with a broken heart, devoutness of soul, and remembered it continuously”. Saint Peter repented and his “...tears cleansed his sin”⁵⁰.

Hence right from the beginning the great importance of the contrite heart was proclaimed by Holy Tradition. This contrite heart makes the repentance sincere and effective. The Shepherd of Hermas proclaimed:

“Listen, he said. Your sins are numerous, but not so numerous that you should be handed over to this Angel. But your family has committed great sins and iniquities, and the glorious Angel was incensed by their deeds, and for this reason he ordered that you should be afflicted for a while, in order that they too might repent and cleanse themselves from every desire of this world. So when they repent and are cleansed, then the Angel of punishment will leave”⁵¹.

“So, do you think that the sins of those who repent are forgiven immediately? Certainly not! But the one who repents must torment his own soul and be extremely humble in everything he does and be afflicted with a variety of afflictions; and if he endures the afflictions that come upon him, then assuredly the One Who created all things and endowed them with power will be moved with compassion and will give some healing”⁵².

Tertulian considered the humble heart as the primary element of repentance⁵³.

Origen presented the one who committed a mortal sin as:

“... not being able to inhabit with the corps, but being tortured within his heart, not being able to drink or eat because of the pain of repentance, all day scowling and wearing out, yelling

⁴⁹ Justin, *Dialogus cum Tryphone iudaeo*, 141, in Migne, *P. G.*, 6, 797-800.

⁵⁰ St. John Chrysostom, *To 1st Corinthians*, Homily 4, 5-6, in Migne, *P. G.*, 61, 425-426.

⁵¹ *Poemen of Hermas*, Parable 7, 2, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 251.

⁵² *Poemen of Hermas*, Parable 7, 4, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 252.

⁵³ Tertulian, *De poenitentia*, IX, in Migne, *P. L.*, 1, 1354.

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with groans from his heart, seeing his sin before him always accusing him, not for one day nor for one night, but for a long time being punished”⁵⁴.

Saint John Chrysostom presented the tears of contrition as “... uniting the repentant with God...” and as making the sinful woman “... more modest than the virgins”. He used the example of the rain, when after the storm peaceful weather follows. Likewise the tears bring inner peace and abolishes the darkness caused by sins. He also emphasized that these tears should not be shed because of vainglory but for devoutness, without being watched by anyone and in our secret places, shed only for God.

“You must groan, when you have sinned... not because... you will be punished, for this is nothing, but because you have clashed with your Master Who loved you and gave His Son for you”⁵⁵.

According to the above, the primary and main element of true and sincere repentance is the awareness of one’s mistakes, recognizing without justifying his sins before God with absolute humility, contrite heart and Godly sorrow. The reason and cause of this humility and Godly sorrow must be due to not only having disobeyed the Law of God and having fallen into the various offences but due to the fact that we have proved to be unworthy and ungrateful of God’s love and numerous benefits.

2. The Double Confession as Term of Repentance

Confession follows the contrite heart. When we speak of confession we must remember that it has a double meaning:

1. Confession with a contrite heart, tears with prayers and petitions to God, and
2. Confession before the Spiritual father (Bishop or Priest).

Simultaneously, it is important to emphasise that confession before God expressed in our personal and private prayers does not replace or make the Confession before the Spiritual father (Bishop or Priest) unnecessary. The Holy Sacrament of Confession seals and perfects our confessions particularly those concerning mortal sins. Only through the Holy

⁵⁴ Origen, *To Jeremiah*, Homily XIX, 9, in Migne, *P. G.*, 13, 521.

⁵⁵ St. John Chrysostom, *To Matthew*, Homily 6, 5, in Migne, *P. G.*, 57, 68-69; St. John Chrysostom, *To 2nd Corinthians*, Homily, 4, 6, in Migne, *P. G.*, 61, 426.

Sacrament of Confession can these sins be forgiven and through the pedagogic measures one achieves his healing and restoration.

It is natural that he who recognizes his sins with a humble heart turns to God confessing his iniquities, asking for God's mercy and forgiveness. Confession without humility before God becomes completely typical and useless.

Saint John Chrysostom, numbering the components of the medicine of repentance, initially placed awareness and confession of one's own sins before the Lord. Elsewhere, he stressed that Confession of sins wipes out iniquities. Accentuating the necessity of Confession, he observed that God seeks sinners' confessions so that we, learning the magnitude of His forgiveness of our debts, will offer constant thanksgiving and, by our striving to resist temptation, will become virtuous⁵⁶.

The Confession continues:

1. As a natural reaction against the attacks of sinful thoughts, imagination and deeds;
2. The renouncement and forgiveness of sins;
3. The remaining of one's memories concerning his falls; and
4. A recognition and admission of our own weakness and the necessity of calling upon the Divine Mercy and healing grace of God.

Saint Basil the Great reassured us that "God ... wants to show mercy..." to the repentant sinner whose heart has become humbled and contrite through the sincere Confession of his secret sins, which were made unashamedly known in public. As the result of this God grants His abundant mercy. After the public Confession it is characteristic for Bishop or Priest to call upon the faithful to assist the repentant sinner with their prayers for the complete healing of his wounds⁵⁷.

As the crowning necessity for receiving the forgiveness of sins by means of the Holy Sacrament of Confession to God, the recognition and admission of sins must be combined with Confession to the Spiritual Father (Bishop or Priest) who uses the authority of binding or loosing of sins. He then administers the necessary medicine for the healing of the repen-

⁵⁶ St. John Chrysostom, *To Hebrews*, Homily 9, 4, in Migne, *P. G.*, 63, 80; St. John Chrysostom, *To Genesis*, Homily 20, 3, in Migne, *P. G.*, 53, 170; St. John Chrysostom, *To Lazarus*, Homily 4, 4, in Migne, *P. G.*, 48, 1012.

⁵⁷ St. Basil the Great, *In Psalmos*, 32, 3, in Migne, *P. G.*, 29, 332; St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, I, 13, 5, in Migne, *P. G.*, 7, 588.

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tant sinner. It must be noted that during the early years of the Church, when sins of the faithful did not cause scandals, they were confessed in public and in the presence of the officiators.

Origen advised that one should find an experienced doctor who, amongst other things, will guide and heal the sinner⁵⁸.

3. Absolution by the Bishop or Priest

After the Confession of our sins, the absolution or forgiveness of the confessed sins by the officiator of the Holy Sacrament follows. The Bishop or Priest has the authority, should he find it necessary, to postpone the forgiveness for a certain period. The officiator offers absolution or forgiveness of the confessed sins through prayer. These forgiven sins are completely erased and abolished by the Divine Grace of the Holy Spirit through tears of repentance and no longer exist as an obstacle to return to the condition of Grace from which he had temporarily strayed because of sin.

Forgiveness is offered “*ex opere operato*” according to the authority which was given by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to His Orthodox Church. And above all other Holy Mysteries the imploring prayer of the Priest is justified. This imploring type of prayer in the Orthodox Church is: “... may the same God forgive you through me a sinner all in this life and in the Life to come”.

The imploring type of forgiveness in the Sacrament of Repentance is justified not only because the real Officiator within the Holy Sacrament is actually the High Priest Jesus Christ. This is due to the fact that forgiveness depends not only on the absolution offered by the Bishop or Priest but on the sincere repentance of the one who has confessed.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the only One Who is able to search the very depths of man’s heart and soul. Men (Bishops and Priests) make mistakes in their judgement and those confess their sins hide certain iniquities from the Confessor. Furthermore because of partiality or interest, the repentant sinner may mislead the officiator of the Holy Sacrament into a wrong assessment that God does not confirm. However that does not decrease the “*ex opere operato*” power of the Sacrament, neither does the repentant sinner’s sanctification or condemnation depend on the degree of his sincerity. Therefore, the Holy Sacrament of repentance acts “*ex opera*

⁵⁸ Origen, *To Psalm XXXVII*, Homily II, 6, in Migne, *P. G.*, 12, 1386.

operato” only when the repentant sinner approaches with sincere repentance and a humble, contrite heart, confessing his sins to the best of his ability.

IV. The Absolution as an act of Judgement and the Nature of Penance

It is obvious that the use of the authority to bind or to loose and the forgiveness or the postponement of the forgiveness of confessed sins is an act of judgement. The Bishop or Priest looses or not the bonds of sins of the repentant one and imposes pedagogic penances on him depending on the circumstances, with the authority of Judgement, which “...the Father has given to the Son...” (John 5, 22), and which the Son has given to His Orthodox Church.

One must never forget that the Bishop or Priest as judge, essentially differs from any other worldly judge, since his attribute as a Spiritual Father, Shepherd and Doctor overshadows that of Judge. For this reason, all his actions relating to the authority which he uses, must consider not only the Spiritual punishment of evil but rather the correction and reestablishment of the repentant sinner by means of paternal, compassionate care as well as the skill Enlightenment of a Spiritual Doctor.

The Spiritual Medicine and measurement of the paternal love used by the Spiritual Fathers are known as penances, which are obviously not punishments that satisfy the Divine justice of God but which are the means and ways of correction, used according to their judgement. They may decide to increase or decrease the penances or even possibly lift them completely from the repentant sinner depending on relevant circumstances.

1. The Spiritual Father

The Spiritual Father officiating in the Holy Sacrament of repentance acts as a judge and this is understandable when we consider that all judgement has three prerequisites:

1. Judicial authority;
2. That which is judge is according to the pre-existing law; and

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3. The expressed decision.

It is evident that the Spiritual father is vested with judicial authority from the words of institution of the Divine Sacrament when our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Son of God, gave the authority to bind or loose the sins through His Holy Apostles to His Holy Church, as well as from the verification that "...the Father gave all the authority to the Son" (John 5, 22). This means that the Father gave authority to the Son to judge by judging men "...not only as God Who knows their nature, but as Man Who has experienced (human nature)". Dependent upon and derived from the authority that Christ received from His Father and according to which, as the Son of Man, He will come again in all His Glory to Judge the living and the dead, is that same authority that was transferred to Christ's Orthodox Church by His Holy Apostles. Upon this authority that Christ received from His Father and according to which, as the Son of Man, He will come again in all His glory to Judge the living and the dead, depends and derives that which was transferred by the Holy Apostles to Christ's Orthodox Church⁵⁹.

Hence in the Apostolic Orders addressed to the Bishops are admonitions such as:

"Judge, O Bishop, with authority as God... and ...sit in the Church teaching the Word as with authority to judge those who have sinned, because to you, the Bishops, is said: Whatever you will bind on earth will be bound in Heaven and whatever you will loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven..."⁶⁰.

"You have the authority, O Bishop, to return and to send those who are crushed with forgiveness. For through you the Saviour said to him who came with sins: Your sins are forgiven, your faith has saved you, go in peace"⁶¹.

Saint John Chrysostom observed that:

"...Heaven begins its judgement from the earth. Because the judge sits on earth, the Master follows the servant and whatever he judges below, the same He confirms Above"⁶².

⁵⁹ E. Zigabenos, *To John*, in Migne, *P. G.*, 129, 1220.

⁶⁰ *Apostolic Orders*, II, 11, 12, in Diac. Ioan I. Ica Jr. (ed.), *Canonul Ortodoxiei*. Vol. I: *Canonul apostolic al primelor secole*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu., pp. 610-611.

⁶¹ *Apostolic Orders*, II, 20, in *Canonul Ortodoxiei*. Vol. I: *Canonul apostolic al primelor secole*, pp. 618-620.

⁶² St. John Chrysostom, *To Isaiah*, Homily 5, 1, in Migne, *P. G.*, 56, 131.

Tertulian characterized the judgement of the Bishop or Priest on the sinner as supreme pre-judgement of the future Judgement⁶³.

In accordance to this authority with which the Bishop or his representative is vested, he judges the confessed sin and expresses a just decision based upon the justice and law of God. Because the Lord, by proclaiming that the father gave "... all authority... to Him it... does not exclude the Father from the authority of judging, but the Son judges with the consent of the Father, co-operating with the Holy Spirit... so that... all the Judgement of the Son is not deprived of the paternal will"⁶⁴. Consequently, the officiator of the Sacrament of Confession judges the sin of the repentant with judicial authority and either positively grants forgiveness or negatively does not forgive.

More characteristically, the Apostolic Orders describe the practice of the Judicial authority of the Bishop or the Presbyter who replaces him, as a judge who sees:

"...the sinner and commanding him to be thrown out. Brought out by the deacons... who with sadness hold him... outside of the Church and entering... they ask the Bishop about him. Then the Bishop commands them to bring him in and judging him, if he has repented and if he is worthy to be delivered completely to the Church... he gives him the appropriate penance, addressing... him, whatsoever is proper to him who has sinned, rebuking, teaching and advising... him before releasing him"⁶⁵.

This Spiritual authority differs in its nature and prerequisites. The essential and primary difference that separates one from the other is that the judgement is a Judgement of Grace, mercy and compassion, whereas the worldly judicial is a judgement of justice and intolerant retaliation. Furthermore the aims of each have different goals. The Judicial authority of the state aims primarily to punish the guilty according to the unbending law and to protect other citizens and the community in general from criminals. In some cases, if required by law, it does not hesitate to execute the condemned criminal whereas, on the contrary, the only vital goal of the authority of the Spiritual Father is to forgive the sinner, to raise him up

⁶³ Tertulian, *Apology* 39, in Migne, *P. L.*, 1, 532.

⁶⁴ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *That there are no three gods*, 8, in Migne, *P. G.*, 45, 128.

⁶⁵ *Apostolic Orders*, II, 16, in *Canonul Ortodoxiei*. Vol. I: *Canonul apostolic al primelor secole*, p. 615.

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and to restore him to good spiritual health in the midst of his Brethren in Christ. In addition, the Bishop or Priest does not condemn the sinner but may simply refuse to grant forgiveness and absolution. The only reason for the Bishop to excommunicate the ill person from the main body of the Church would be in the case of heresy or major moral sin that scandalized the public. Finally, it is essential that the judgement of mercy and compassion of the court of Repentance be freely accepted by the repentant whereas the decisions of the worldly court are compulsory⁶⁶.

The attribute of a compassionate and caring father is the primary role of the Spiritual Father. He must be "... as a compassionate doctor towards all sinners..." in order to cure "... not only by cutting and burning, but by binding and putting on sweet medicine which will heal the wounds and with proper words water them...and not to...demand the responsibility as in court... changing the seat of Confession but... as an inn granting the forgiveness of sins". Hence, the Spiritual Father receives the repentant sinner with much compassion "...with mercy and pity judging..." them, encouraging them "...to have hope for Salvation and to turn with tears to God". Furthermore the repentant sinner receives "... the remission of sin as from the Good Father (God)". Under no circumstances it is allowed for the officiator of the Holy Sacrament of Repentance to deal with the sinner as though he were an abomination by preventing him from Confession or attending the teachings, since our Lord Himself had not "... resigned from eating and drinking with the tax collectors and sinners"⁶⁷.

2. The Nature of Penance

Penances that are imposed upon the repentant sinner by the Spiritual Father, under no circumstances must be regarded as punishments to satisfy Divine Justice. They are pedagogic measures that are imposed by the Spiritual Father either before the absolution of sins or after the forgiveness of sins.

⁶⁶ Cf. St. John Chrysostom, *To Genesis*, Homily 20, 3-4, in Migne, *P. G.*, 53, 171; St. John Chrysostom, *About Priesthood*, II, 3, in Migne, *P. G.*, 48; St. John Chrysostom, *To 2nd Corinthians*, Homily 6, 3, in Migne, *P. G.*, 61, 438.

⁶⁷ *Apostolic Orders*, II, 12, 16, 40 and 41, in *Canonul Ortodoxiei*. Vol. I: *Canonul apostolic al primelor secole*, pp. 611, 615, 635, 636.

No man can offer anything in order to satisfy Divine Justice. This is clearly evident from the fact that the Son and Word of God had to become Man in order to save mankind. The God-Man had to shed His Precious Blood on the Cross so as to reconcile sinful man to God the Father. And through the shedding of His Blood, we have been washed clean from all our sins and iniquities.

Penance has a pedagogic nature and is not a necessary component of Repentance without which forgiveness would not be granted. It can be increased, decreased or even be completely removed according to the good intention of the repentant sinner⁶⁸. Penance is considered healing medicine that is offered for the cure of the ill person, the sinner, who with humility seeks the forgiveness of his sins. Therefore, the Bishop does not easily excommunicate anyone but rather, with patience, love and compassion struggle for the sinner's correction. Nevertheless, it is also necessary for the sinner to produce fruits of repentance⁶⁹.

Conclusion

It remains now to draw some practical conclusions from what has been said. I have tried to explain why the question of sacraments and, first of all, the question of lay participation in the eucharistic life, is, in my opinion, the main question facing our Church, a question on which her spiritual future, her real, and not only external, growth truly depends. My conclusions must, therefore, relate to one another with faithfulness to the genuine Tradition of the Church with pastoral care for its "fulfillment" in our own conditions of life, which are so difficult and so radically different from the past.

The question, in my opinion, must be formulated as follows: how can we both encourage a more frequent, more regular participation by the laity in the Eucharistic sacrament, as the "focus of Christian life," as the sacra-

⁶⁸ St. Basil the Great, *Homilia in illud, Attende tibi ipsi*, 4, in Migne, *P. G.*, 31, 205; St. Basil the Great, *Epistle 217*, 74, in Migne, *P. G.*, 32, 804, 808; St. John Chrysostom, *To 2nd Corinthians*, Homily 4, 4, in Migne, *P. G.*, 61, 512.

⁶⁹ St. Basil the Great, *The principal of morality*, in Migne, *P. G.*, 31, 701; St. Basil the Great, *To Isaiah 20*, 9, 230, in Migne, *P. G.*, 30, 521.

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ment of the Church and her unity, and, at the same time, assure a proper preparation for this sacrament, thus preventing communion from becoming as much a “custom” as was, until now, the practice of “non-communion”? The answer to this question can be reduced to three fundamental principles:

1. First of all, if the desire for and the practice of a more frequent and, ultimately, regular communion is to be encouraged, it is nevertheless obvious that it would be spiritually wrong and very harmful to impose it in any way. This practice cannot and must not become either a “fad” or the result of any kind of pressure. Therefore, for those who receive communion seldom (even once a month) – and such will no doubt remain for a long time the majority – one must keep in all its strictness the obligation for confession before Communion.

2. For communion more often than once a month, one needs the permission of the rector of the parish. This permission will be given only to those persons who are well-known to the rector and after a thorough pastoral examination of the seriousness and rectitude of such person’s attitude towards the Church and towards Christian life. In such a case, the relationship between the rhythm of confession and that of communion must be left to the decision of the priest, confession remaining regular, however, and heard not less than once a month.

3. For a deeper understanding of the sacrament of communion as well as that of penance and for a more fruitful spiritual connection between them, the practice of general confession would be permitted. Inasmuch as this practice raises misunderstandings and questions today, I will conclude this report with a few words of explanation about its nature and form.

General Confession

What is general confession and why should it be recognized as proper and useful in the present conditions of our Church life?

To answer this question, one must acknowledge first of all that today an overwhelming majority of the Church’s members do not know either what is confession or how to approach it. It is reduced, and this at best, to a purely formal and general enumeration of usually secondary “defects,”

to laconic answers to questions, or to a conversation about “problems.” We have here the results, on the one hand, of a multi-secular, Western, formal and juridical understanding of confession, and, on the other hand, the “psychologism” proper to our time, which dissolves almost completely the awareness, not of “difficulties,” “problems” and “questions”, but of sin. Thus, in a large parish where I confessed a few dozens of people, each one began by presenting to me a receipt from the parish treasurer certifying that the man had paid his “dues”. Then he silently waited for absolution. In other parishes there exists the practice of simply reading, from a book, a short formula of confession translated from Latin. Finally, I witnessed on many occasions a simple denial by the penitents of any sin, and this because by “sin” they meant “crimes” which indeed they have not committed. The opposite extreme is the concentration in confession on some particular “difficulty”, from which it becomes evident, that the responsibility lies with conditions of life of which the penitent is but an innocent victim. In all of these types of confession what one does not find is precisely repentance, the “sadness for God”, the despair from being separated from Him, the desire to change one’s life, to be renewed and regenerated.

How then, in our present condition, is confession itself to be redeemed and restored? How can it be made again an act of genuine repentance and reconciliation with God? To achieve this with our present two-or-three minute confession, with a long line waiting behind the back of the exhausted priest, is simply impossible.

Therefore, the general confession is, first of all, a certain school of repentance, the revealing of the very essence of confession. To be spiritually profitable it must consist of the following:

1. As a rule, general confession is to be held in the evening after the evening service. Anyone who desires to receive Holy Communion must come to church at least the evening before. Today’s practice of confession taking place a few minutes before Liturgy, in a hurry, is simply harmful and can be justified only in exceptions. It has, unfortunately, become a norm.

2. General confession begins with the priest reading aloud the prayers before confession. These prayers are, in today’s practice, simply omitted, yet they are an integral part of the sacrament.

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3. After the prayers, the priest calls the penitents to repentance, to pray that God would grant the Spirit on confession, the gift “to see one’s own sins”, without which a formal enumeration will produce no spiritual fruit.

4. Following this is the confession proper, i.e. the enumeration by the priest of all acts, thoughts and desires with which we offend the holiness of God, the sanctity of our neighbor, and the sanctity of our own soul. And inasmuch as the priest himself as any man standing before God knows all these sins and all that sinfulness to be also in himself, this enumeration will not be a formal one, but sincere, and will be done in a “broken and humble” heart, will be done on behalf of us, rather than aimed at you, and in this enumeration each one will acknowledge himself and truly repent. The more deeply the pastor examines his own conscience, the fuller the general confession, and the spirit of repentance generated by it, will be.

5. In conclusion, the priest will call the penitents to direct their inner vision from their unworthiness to the Lord’s table awaiting them, to God’s mercy and love; he will call them to desire with their whole being that communion of which we are never worthy which, however is always a gift to us.

6. Then the priest will ask all those who feel the need to add something, because of a special burden on their conscience, to move aside and to wait. The others will approach him, one by one, and the priest will read the prayer of absolution, covering their heads with the epitrahilion and giving them the Cross to kiss.

7. Finally, while all those who have been reconciled listen to the prayers before Communion, the priest will confess individually those who have to complete the general confession and absolve them.

Experience shows, that those who take part in such a general confession begin to have a much better individual confession. For the whole point here is precisely that the general confession is under no circumstances meant simply to replace individual confession, is not and must not be a substitute. It is only for those and those alone who, receiving communion often and regularly confessing their sins, realize the self-evident need for purifying their conscience, for repentance, for that spiritual concentration and attention, which is so difficult to achieve in our modern life. I can testify to the fact that where such general confession is practiced, the personal confession not only has not faded away, but has become deeper, has

been filled with meaning and reality. Meanwhile this general confession will give the priest the time necessary for a more attentive confession of those who really need personal confession, and will thus become a way to a common growth in the spirit of repentance.

Humbly submitting this report to the judgment of my Hierarchs, I wish to confess once more, that all that I write in it has been dictated by an extremely acute awareness of the need for a renewal of the eucharistic life, for here and only here is the source of her growth in Christ.