

CHAPTER 5

On Repentance or the Mystery of Confession

Inquirer: What is the Mystery of Confession or Repentance?

ELDER CLEOPA: Repentance, or Confession, is a Mystery in which God, through the spiritual father, forgives the sins of those Christians who sincerely repent and confess before a priest who is a confessor.

Repentance, according to St. John Damascene, is the return from the unnatural to the natural, and from the devil to God, through ascesis and spiritual struggle. He says that repentance is the way of return for the good-intentioned from a state of passion to a state of purity. Repentance has four steps: (1) remorse, (2) confession of one's sins to the spiritual father, (3) the completion of the canon appointed by him, and (4) the loosing of sins. No spiritual father can loose the sins of a person who does not take it upon himself to complete the canon that has been assigned him.

The Mystery of Repentance as a Mystery was instituted by the Saviour, who gave to all His apostles the authority to perform it when He said: "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and

whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18). Likewise, He also established it after His Resurrection, as the fruit of His Resurrection, when, after showing Himself to His apostles, He said to them: “Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them: and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained” (John 20:22-25).

According to the Law of Moses, there was no repentance nor patience nor forbearance against sin; death was repaid by death, and the murderer had to take shelter in the Altar so as not to be killed. “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe...” (Ex. 21:12-25). Whoever carried a load on the Sabbath or did any kind of work, even if he repented and promised not to do it again, was not forgiven, but had to die. Whoever lit a fire in his house on the Sabbath was not forgiven, but had to die (Ex. 31:13-15 and Num. 15:32-36). Whoever committed a sinful lecherous deed most definitely had to die (Lev. 20:10-20), and there were other commandments of this kind.

With such commandments was the Law given to the Hebrews. But under the new law of Christ, the Gospel or the Law of Faith, do such things occur? Definitely not. For God sent St. John the Forerunner to cry out: “Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.... Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance” (Matt. 3:1-8). “He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath food, let him do likewise” (Luke 3:11). He told the tax-collectors not to ask for more than what was due them (Luke 3:13). To the soldiers who also asked him what they should do to be forgiven, he said: “Do no violence to any

man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages" (Luke 3:11-14). When the Lord came into the world, he taught thus: "Repent ye and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). "The law and the prophets were until John; since that time the kingdom of God is preached and every man presseth into it" (Luke 16:16). "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). The Apostle Paul tells us: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth" (Rom. 10:4), and that whoever believes in Jesus Christ will be "justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the Law of Moses" (Acts 13:39).

Repentance was proclaimed by the prophets, as it is written: "As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways..." (Ezek. 33:11, Isa. 1:16). The Holy Spirit also proclaimed repentance, with the following words: "O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord your God: speak to him, that ye may not receive [the reward of] unrighteousness, but that ye may receive good things: and we will render in return the fruit of our lips" (Hos. 14:2-3). In the psalms, as well, much is said about the remission of sins through repentance.

Repentance aspires to a return towards Jesus Christ and the teaching of His Gospel, to a return to the Church from the path of evil. Repentance consists in departing from the evil road of pleasure and walking down the narrow and winding road (Matt. 7:13). Repentance means deciding not to repeat the evil works you have done (2 Pet. 2:20). It also

means confessing your sins to the spiritual father (1 John 1:9, Luke 17:11, John 20:19, and other verses). The forgiveness of sins through a priest was demonstrated by our Lord by the forgiveness of the paralytic (Matt. 9:1-8) and the sinful woman (Luke 7:36-50), the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), and the exoneration of the woman caught in sin (John 8:1-11). In other words, our Lord Jesus Christ, as He Himself revealed, "...came to save those who were lost," to save sinners who would repent (Matt. 18:11-14), because those who are healthy have no need of a doctor, but rather those who are sick (Matt. 9:12, Luke 19:1-10).

The idea of [repentance in] the Christian faith is to sin no longer, as John the Evangelist says: "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:1-2).

Inq.: Perhaps confession should be made, not before the priest, but before other lay Christians? Maybe, that is, it shouldn't be secret, but rather public? For this is what I understand by the words of Scripture, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed" (James 5:16).

EC: It is not bad for us to confess our sins, as St. James says, but only those who have the grace of the priesthood can impart the forgiveness of sins, which comes from the Lord. Only the apostles, and their successors, who were given the grace of priesthood, were granted by the Lord the power to bind and loose the sins of the faithful (Matt.

16:19, 18:18). The expression of St. James, "Confess your faults one to another," refers to the priest who accepts the repentance on the one hand, and the believer who repents and asks for the forgiveness of his sins on the other. When the Apostle Paul was preaching the Gospel of Christ at Ephesus, many of those who believed came and confessed all of their deeds (Acts. 19:18). To whom did they come but to Paul, to receive forgiveness of their sins? The Apostle excommunicated someone who had committed a grave sin in Corinth, yet welcomed him back into the Church after the man had repented (1 Cor. 5, 2 Cor. 2:5-11). This same Apostle delivered Hymenaeus and Alexander to satan so that the others would also learn not to blaspheme (1 Tim. 1:20). So we see that Jesus Christ granted the power of "loosing and binding" only to His disciples and apostles, and not to every Christian, as some imagine. In the Final Judgment of Christ to come, it will become apparent who had been granted by Him this power on earth, to loose and forgive the sins of men; but then it will be too late for some.

Inq.: Some say that confession must be made directly to God: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy great mercy; and according to the multitude of Thy compassions blot out my transgression. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (Psalm 50:1-3). This psalm tells us to direct our prayers straight to God: "For I know my iniquity, and my sin is ever before me." And in the thirty-first psalm it is written: "Mine iniquity have I acknowledged, and my sin have I not hid. I said: I will confess my iniquities before the Lord against myself, and thou forgavest the ungodliness of my heart" (v. 5).

EC: Earlier, I revealed to you that the loosing of sins originates from the sacrifice of the Saviour. He gave this power to the clergy.

In the Old Testament, confession was made directly to God because it could not be done in any other way. But this confession was only a repentance, not the Mystery of Repentance, since in the Old Law the priesthood was not a Mystery in which the priests had received from God the authority to “loose and bind” the sins of men. This Mystery was instituted only in the New Testament, in particular, after the Lord’s Resurrection and after He had sent to the world the Holy Spirit, bearing the wealth of His gifts.

Despite all this, even in the Old Testament we find instances in which confession was not made directly to God. An example of this is David the psalmist, who confessed to the prophet Nathan (2 Kings 12:13), while Aaron confessed with repentance to Moses rather than directly to God (Num. 3:11-22). We see here, then, how in the Old Testament there was also indirectly the possibility of confession in repentance.

Inq.: It is also said that forgiveness of sins comes directly from God, without the intervention of priests, because this is how the Saviour taught us to ask forgiveness: “And forgive us our debts” (Matt. 6:12). The paralysed man in Capernaum (Mark 2:5, Luke 7:18), the sinful woman in the house of Simon (Luke 7:48), and the thief on the cross (Luke 23:43), among others, received forgiveness directly from God. None of these had need of priests to receive absolution.

EC: The above instances and the verses you cited have

nothing to do with the [question of the] Mystery of Repentance and the confession of sins before a priest, for the events they record occurred before the Lord had established Repentance as a Mystery, and established the priesthood, possessed of the authority given by Him to His apostles to “loose and bind” sins . At that time, Jesus was still present [on the earth], and consequently, as true God, He ‘loosed’ the sins of men Himself. We know that He granted this authority to His apostles after His Resurrection from the dead, when He showed Himself and said: “Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained” (John 20:21-23). You see then, that the Saviour gave both the grace of the All-holy Spirit and the power to “loose and bind” to His disciples after His Resurrection.

As regards the prayer “Our Father,” or, rather, the part of the “Our Father” with which we address God directly for the forgiveness of our sins, this does not brush aside the priest’s intercession for the loosing of our sins through Confession, for these words are unrelated to the Mystery. We can ask for the forgiveness of our sins outside of the Mystery of Repentance. We can ask for it directly in whatever condition of repentance we are found, and with any prayer whatsoever, and especially when we promise to do good works, as when we continue the prayer, “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” We can also receive the forgiveness of certain sins, with the prayers of the priests, outside the Mystery of Repentance. For example, by means

of prayer, the consciousness of our guilt, the search for divine mercy, good works, and so on.

The Mystery of Repentance, however, is a means that is very sure and very practical. Through it the forgiveness of our sins is thorough and complete, in accordance with the fullness of the Mystery, without considering those works contemptible which attract the grace of God for forgiveness, such as prayer, fasting, piety, love, and the rest. In addition, through this Mystery, we receive absolution through the same authority the Saviour Himself gave to His disciples, and they to their successors.

Inq.: But do priests have the power to forgive sins? Isn't it written, "Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" (Luke 5:21)?

EC: Truly, only God can forgive sins, but in the Mystery of Repentance it is not the priest who forgives sins, but God alone, by means of the priest. God is the source and the master of the grace which forgives sins; the priest is only a servant of this grace. Therefore, during confession we do not receive forgiveness from the priest, but from God, by His grace, which is conveyed by the priest. The grace is not his grace, but God's (2 Cor. 4:7), and [therefore], even when the priest is sinful, he receives and keeps this grace. The Apostle Peter was a sinner, because he denied his Lord and Teacher, and yet he received this grace after repenting. In the same way, the Apostle John received this grace, though he himself says that there is no man on earth without sin (1 John 1:8). And the Apostle Paul considered himself to be the chief among sinners (1 Tim. 1:15).

The priest is in the same condition, since, [though he is

a sinner,] having received grace from the Mystery of Priesthood, he is able to loose and bind the sins of men (Matt. 18:18, John 20:21-23).

Inq.: How must we confess before the priest?

EC: Confession before the priest must be made in the following way:

1. It must be complete; that is, all the sins that have been committed since the last confession must be confessed, and nothing must be deliberately concealed.

2. Confession must be made sincerely and in good faith.

3. It must be secret; that is, it must not be made in front of others.

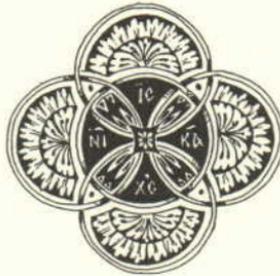
4. It must be made in humility and with contrition of heart, with disgust and abhorrence for the sins committed, and with a sincere desire by the confessing believer not to repeat them. The mere enumerating of sins, without contrition of heart and consciousness of guilt, will not bring forgiveness, because the Lord says, "...except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5).¹⁷

The most important and essential thing is for the Christian to try as hard as he can to correct his life from one confession to the next, and to steadily arrive at the virtues.

17. Saint John Chrysostom says that "repentance is the medicine which expunges our offences. Repentance, however, is not that which is proclaimed with words, but that which is confirmed by the reality of things, by our very life. Repentance is that which washes away the filth of sin from our heart." See: *The Works of Saint John Chrysostom in the series Hellenes Pateres tis Ekklisias* (Greek Fathers of the Church), in Greek (Thessaloniki, 1978), 30: 252-4. -ed.

Inq.: And how often must the Christian confess?

EC: Confession is not bound by dates and time-frames. We can run to our spiritual father as often as we feel the need to unburden our souls from the weight of our sins, or to receive the comfort of grace and the hope of forgiveness. The more often we confess, the better it is for us. Today, it is common for confession to be connected to the great fasts of the year, those before Pascha, Christmas, and the feast of the Dormition; and the Apostles' Fast. The more devout are able to confess once a month or more, while others [should confess] no less than once a year.





The priest, after hearing the confession, places his stole over the head of the penitent and says the following prayer:

"Lord Jesus Christ our God, Who because of their tears granted forgiveness to Peter and the harlot, and justified the Publican when he acknowledged his faults, accept the confession of Thy servant (name), and if he has committed any sin, in word or in deed or in thought, knowingly or unknowingly, voluntarily or involuntarily, forgive him, for Thou alone hath the power to forgive sins. For Thou art a merciful, compassionate and man-befriending God, and unto Thee we ascribe glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, unto the ages of ages. Amen."