



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States Monthly Message for the Monastic

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Confession Renewing and a Healing Sacrament

“If a man is ill and he recognizes his ailment, his healing will be easy. If he confesses his pain, he draws nigh its cure.”¹ “The Sacrament of Confession has many blessings and is of great importance in building the spiritual life. Our blessed Church has been performing it faithfully since the Apostolic Age. (Acts 19:18) It is also mentioned in the writings of the early fathers like Deyonasios (St. Paul’s Disciple), Erianaos, Athanasius, Basil and St. John Chrysostom. “If the church was performing the Sacrament of Confession in its early stages when faith” “was at its peak and life was simple and free of all complications, how much more can the need be in this day and age where life is so complex!”² Our good God has granted us the great Mystery of Holy Confession as a sacred fountain for baptismal renewal, wherein a person washes his soul, becomes whiter than snow, and is transformed into a new man in Christ. “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). Confession is a heavenly grace. Confession is a gate way to salvation, a treasury of divine beauty and joy although it is perhaps the mystery of the church least treasured by those who partake of it. Confession is always seen as an obligation, a duty to be fulfilled, a responsibility. It is approached with fear, trepidation, and trembling. It is perhaps one of the greatest mysteries of our Christian life. There is this hesitancy amongst us going to confession who are afraid perhaps being put in a position where we have to reveal the deep secrets of our hearts and behind this, we are more afraid of having to confront what is really present there in our hearts.

The chief obstacles preventing us from proceeding to confession are our pride and our egotism. “How will I reveal my sins?” Man is overcome by shame.

¹ Saint Isaac the Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies (Holy Transfiguration Monastery), Homily 2, P. 120

² Bishop Youannes, Paradise of the Spirit, Vol 1.

However, we should be ashamed when we are about to sin. At that moment, shame will prevent us from sinning. Conversely, when we need to proceed to this great sacrament of salvation, we must hurry without delay. If we were diagnosed with cancer and learned that there is a preeminent oncologist at the North Pole, we would immediately make every possible effort to obtain the required funds and go to receive treatment for our physical illness. We would not take into account the difficulties, trouble, expense, or anything else. We would drop everything and run. We would humble ourselves without reservation, as long as we became well. When, however, we have the cancer of sin threatening us with death of the soul, shouldn't we disregard everything (our job, our pay, the distance) and run toward the confession room to kneel, to reveal our wounds, to receive medicine, to become well, and thus escape from the dreadful death of the soul?

Another obstacle that the devil throws in the way of confession, he throws people into despair. These Christians believe that they are so sinful it is impossible for them to be forgiven. However, the remission of our sins received through holy confession is not predicted on their severity or number, but rather on the Lord's mercy, which is infinite.

Listen to St. John Chrysostom presenting a conversation between himself and a sinner: "I have spent my whole life in sin; Will I be saved if I repent?" "certainly," replies to Saint. "how do you know this?" Asks the sinner. "from the love of your Lord," reply is the saint, and he goes on: "if we were talking about repentance only then quite rightly you should be afraid. However, since repentance is mixed with the Lord is love, have courage as there is no limit to God's love.... Your wickedness has a limit, but the medicine has no limit.... Think of a spark that falls into the ocean. Is there any chance it could remain there or be noticed? As the spark is to the ocean, so too is your wickedness in comparison with God's loving kindness."³ Shouldn't we take courage in confessing our sins and not fall into despair. St. John continues saying non-should despair about his salvation.... Are you a tax collector? You can become an Evangelist. Are you blasphemous? You can become an apostle. Are you a thief? You can plunder Paradise..... There is no sin that cannot expunged by repentance and confession.... You have a physician who is superior to the illness... you have a doctor who is able and wants to cure you. It is this physician, the savior Christ, in whom we seek refuge, and from whom we seek the cure of our souls.

When despair have been overcome, the devil employs a more powerful weapon: shame. "How can I go," they say, "to a spiritual father and confess all those horrible sins that I have committed?... What will he think of me? Those who think in this way ought to listen to the venerable Chrysostom: "You should

³ On Repentance

feel shame when you sin not when you repent... Listen to me carefully: shame follows sin, while courage follows repentance.... Knowing that sin carries shame with it, which to a great degree can dissuade a man from sin, whereas repentance has courage, something which is able to attract the Penitent. Satan reversed this order and attached shame to repentance and courage to sin.

If man overcomes these difficulties and decides to confess, the devil will then make the suggestion of postponement, that's why the apostle Paul tells us "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts": "I will go to confession", many say, "but I still have time." These people Forget that we only have today. Tomorrow belongs to God. The enemy prompts us to commit sin today and labor for a virtue tomorrow. He does not openly advise us to move away from God, but "he steals today from us, and leaves our hopes for tomorrow. Then, when the next day comes, the devil appears again to claim the day for himself, leaving tomorrow for God. Thus, endlessly, by using the bait of pleasure to secure the present and leaving our hopes for tomorrow, without us realizing it he takes us away from life." The life he keeps us away from is holy confession, which resurrects us from the death of sin.

Amongst the obstacles the devil puts in our path to prevent our journey of return are certain seemingly logical pretexts. Let us consider two of them:

1. The first such obstacle relates to the person of the spiritual father. Many say, "why should I go to a priest and tell him my sins? How can I trust a man who is a sinner like me? I tell my sins to the icon and God listens to them." People who make such excuses in order to avoid holy confession need to be reminded the purpose of the sacrament is the absolution of sin and the cure of the soul. Obviously, the absolution of sins cannot be granted by an icon, but by a priest, who possesses the grace of the priesthood, with the prayer of forgiveness. The cure of the soul requires the grace of the Holy Spirit (which the sacrament offers us) and the enlightened guidance of spiritual father. Have we forgotten what happened when God shined His light from heaven and spoke to Saul of Tarsus near Damascus? Although the Almighty God could have personally heard Saul's confession at that instant or even forgiven all of his past transgressions with the utterance of His pure mouth, as He did the thief on the Cross, He did not do that. Instead, God told Saul to arise and go into the city where he would eventually meet Ananias, the Lord's disciple. From there, Ananias took over and ministered to Paul as the Lord instructed him. Christ instructed his disciples to celebrate Holy confession saying: "*Receive the Holy Spirit! If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven*" (Jn 20: 22-23). Through these words, the holy apostles, and by apostolic succession the priests "received Authority which God did not even bestow upon the angels." Christ did this so that all sinners could find

sympathy and understanding in their struggles, for a priest, as a fellow human being, understands the difficulties of spiritual warfare. However, we must not forget that “whatever actions are done by priests on earth, God validates in heaven.” There are some Christians who believe that the validity of the sacrament depends upon the virtue of the spiritual father. However, it is Christ whom we meet in the person of the spiritual father when we go for confession. We have the certainty that we are confessing our sins to Christ since it is He who works through the spiritual father. Concerning this, St. John Chrysostom says: “Everything works according to your faith. If you are not faithful, a righteous priest will not benefit you, nor will an unrighteous priest harm you in anything if you are faithful.... Those gifts which God grants are not of that type – they are not of that type that are affected by the priest’s virtue. Everything is due to the grace of God.” As one of the fathers says, “Do not judge your judges, you who need healing.”

2. Another common excuse is the constant repetition of sin. Some people say: “Since I will certainly sin again, why confess? I have tried many times but was unable to overcome the passion which torments me. Isn't it as if I am deceiving God when I confess?” To those who think in this way, we would say: if you had an incurable illness and were suffering severe pain, wouldn't you take some sort of medication? If you waited to feel better before taking medicine, you would have just suffered even more. The illnesses of the soul are curable, and confession is their effective medicine. And even if it does not cure a chronic affliction immediately, it helps greatly in remedying it because it strengthens us with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the struggle against the passions becomes easier. It was told about St. Moses that he went to his elder in one night eleven times revealing his thoughts that were warring against him. If we are beset by some sin which has become a habit, then precisely for that reason we should go to our spiritual father more often, because he will employ the sword of the spirit (Eph 6:17) to cut at the root of the sin until it is completely severed. The excuse “I am not going to confess because I will sin again” seems like irrational statement similar to “I am not going to bathe because I will get dirty again.” However, when it comes to bodily filth, we do not say such things, why remaining indifferent to the filth of the soul. Listen to St. John Klimakos: “It is the characteristic of angels not to fall into sin... it is the characteristic of men to fall, but also to rise again after falling.” For mankind, falling and arising applies. This means that “man must avoid sin with all his strength and protect himself against falling into it. However, if he falls on account of human weakness, he should not despair, but rise up immediately and without wasting anytime, confess and repent.”

In the language of the church, we say that when someone knows how to open himself to God through the confessor, he can avoid many illnesses of the soul. An effective method of getting rid of thoughts is to confess them to your spiritual father. St. John Cassian says, “Just as a snake which is brought from its dark hole into the light makes every effort to escape and hide itself, so the malicious thoughts that someone brings out into the open by sincere confession seek to depart from him.” Nothing so harms a monk and brings such joy to the demons as hiding his thoughts from his spiritual father. In this way his whole spiritual life is twisted, and he becomes a plaything in the hands of the devil, who can do what he likes with him. Therefore, St. John Cassian teaches that nothing leads so surely to salvation as confessing or private thoughts, he who conceals his thoughts remains unhealed. “*He who covers his sins will not prosper. But whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy*”. (Proverbs 28:13) Therefore we must confess the persistent thought, bring it to our spiritual father who has the responsibility for our salvation. “Any thought tarries in you and engages you in warfare, reveal to your Abba, and he, with God’s help, will heal you.” God uses the priest for the forgiveness of His creature. It is plainly stated in the absolution blessing (In the Eastern Orthodox Church): “May God forgive you—through me the sinner—everything, in both the present and future age, and may He render you blameless before His awesome Seat of Judgment. Having no longer any worry for the crimes that have been confessed, may you go forth in peace.” Sins that have not been confessed will continue to burden a person, even in the life to come.

Many and various things can be said, but in the end, only one thing is significant and important: our salvation, to which we are not attending. Salvation is only attained through sincere repentance and pure confession. Repentance not only opens the heavenly Paradise, but also the earthly one, with the foretaste—albeit incomplete—of the ineffable joy of the endless heavenly reign, and the reign of wonderful peace in the present time. Those who continually practice confession are potentially truly and genuinely happy people; peace-loving and peace-bearing; heralds of repentance, of resurrection, transformation, freedom, grace, with the blessing of God in their souls and lives. “God’s bounteous Grace turns the wolf into a lamb,” says Saint John Chrysostom. No sin can surpass God’s love. There is not a single sinner who cannot become a saint, if he so desires. This has been proven by innumerable names recorded in the Lives of the Saints. The sacrament of confession is true freedom in Christ, let us rush with full zeal eagerness and seriousness to confession often and with full devotion and joy. Saying with David the prophet: “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, “*I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,*” And You forgave the iniquity of my sin.” (Psalms 32:5) and we will surely hear that voice saying to us: “*Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*” (Psalms 32:1-2)