



Prologue

Repentance is man's return to God. It is a change-of-heart in the nous from the darkness of sin to the light of Christ. The beginning of this journey is "the awareness of our errors, which is a great opportunity for us to attract divine mercy. This is why the Prophet David says to God: *Have mercy upon me,...For I am conscious of my iniquity* (Ps. 50: 1, 3)."¹ We acknowledge that we are responsible for our condition, and we humbly seek God's mercy.

The repentant soul sheds heartfelt tears and offers fervent supplication to the benevolent Christ: *Bow yourself down to the groanings of my heart.*² Subsequently, man experiences the

¹ St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily for the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul* 28, 12.

² Orthros of Holy Wednesday, *Doxastikon of the Aposticha*, trans. by Arch. Ephrem Lash.

magnitude of divine forbearance and, justifiably, wonder and awe arise in his soul: *Who can search out the multitude of my sins and the depths of your judgments, my Saviour, savior of souls?*³

This booklet speaks about repentance, the healing of the wounds of sin, and about holy Confession, the Sacrament through which man's repentance is accomplished. Particular emphasis is placed on preparation for the Sacrament, as well as on the fruits of repentance that accompany it.

It is the writer's humble prayer that the words of the God-bearing Fathers will help us all experience the miracle of repentance so that we may savor, from this day forward, the resurrection of our soul and the new life in Christ.

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³ Orthros of Holy Wednesday, *Doxastikon of the Aposticha*, trans. by Arch. Ephrem Lash.



Repentance is Medicine

Holy Baptism is man's rebirth into Christ. However, since we are wounded by sin after our Baptism, the Lord offers us the medicine of repentance. "Sin is the wound and repentance the medicine. As wounds and medicine are to the body, so sins and repentance are to the soul."⁴ All of us, without exception, need the healing effect of repentance: "The medicine of repentance is beneficial for all. Since nobody is free of sin, it is clear that everyone is in need of repentance."⁵

The medicine of repentance is available to all of us, we only have to ask for it. It cures every spiritual illness, no matter how grave: "Let no one despair, because the medicine of repentance is potent." Because this treatment is effected by the benevolent Lord "there is no sin

⁴ St. John Chrysostom, *On Repentance*, 8, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, *On the Repentance of the Ninevites*, 1.

that does not surrender and retreat in the face of the strength of repentance or, rather, before the power of the power of Jesus.”

The painless treatment applied by Christ is a gift that restores health quickly. The Lord grants medicine for wounds according to the zeal and disposition of the penitent. The soul that is heavily wounded by sin, begs the Lord: *Heal the wound of my soul, Lord!*⁶ And the Lord, seeing its repentance, heals it immediately saying: *Behold, you have become well. Sin no more...*(Jn. 5: 14).



⁶ Service of Preparation for Holy Communion, *Ode. 4*, trans. Arch. Ephrem Lash.



The Beginning of Repentance

When a man lives in sin he is not in his right mind. In order to repent, he must first come to his senses. Consciousness of one's sins is the starting point for the return to the benevolent Father.

In our lives we often see how our loving God, in His prescient wisdom, leads us to consciousness of sin and to repentance. There are countless ways used by God to bring us to this awareness: some misfortune with our health, an accident, an encounter with a man of God, or a book that we happen upon.

One of the dangers we face after becoming aware of our spiritual condition is *despair*, however, our unshakable hope in God's mercy protects us. No matter the number, or the severity, of our sins, they cannot prevail over God's compassion. "Even if someone falls into mortal sin, as long as he turns away from it wholeheartedly, abstains from it, and returns to the Lord in

deed and truth, he may have courage and great hope that he shall not fail to obtain eternal life and salvation.”⁷

The decision to repent follows an awareness of one’s sin. This is the critical point in man’s journey: now he decides if he will remain in the darkness of sin or return to God.

God, through the mouths of the prophets, calls all men to return to His love, not superficially, but with heartfelt repentance: ...*Turn to me with all your heart and with fasting and with weeping and with lamentation: and destroy your hearts* [by the pain of repentance] *and not your garments* which is a merely an outward manifestation of mourning *and turn to the Lord your God: for he is merciful and compassionate, long-suffering* (Joel 2: 12-13).

God desires man’s return and salvation, but not under duress because He respects his freedom.

⁷ St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily on the Sunday of the Forefathers* 57, 11.



How does the Benevolent Father Receive us?

The Parable of the Prodigal Son describes how God's love works to draw all those who have sinned near to Him again.

The prodigal son left the compassionate Father and traveled *to a far country*. The Father's love, however, reaches as "far" as his beloved child had gone: *But while he was still at a distance, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. He ran, and embraced his son, and kissed him.* (Lk. 15: 13, 20) The charitable Father does not wait for the arrival of His child, but while he is still at a distance, He runs to receive him.

The compassionate Father received the prodigal "with open arms...because he was a father and not a judge. Dancing and banquets and feasts were arranged and the whole household was merry and joyful...The elder son

was angered with these things, but the Father cajoled him gently, saying: ‘When you must save the one who is lost, it is not the time for judging, but rather for loving-kindness and pardon...And even if he should have been punished, he was sufficiently punished while living in that foreign country...You are looking at a brother, not a stranger. He has returned to his father, and his father cannot remember anything of the past. Better yet, he remembers only the things that arouse in him sympathy, mercy, affection and fatherly compassion.’ This is why the Father did not allude to what the prodigal had done, but what he had suffered. He did not remember that he had squandered His wealth, but instead that he had fallen victim to countless misfortunes.”⁸ The older brother was thinking in accordance with the laws of human justice, but the benevolent Father was acting according to His compassionate fatherly heart.

The holy Fathers emphasize that “God in His loving goodness receives and loves those

⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Repentance*, 1, 4.

who repent.”⁹ St. Basil the Great says: “The Father stands and waits for your return from delusion. You only have to come back, and while you are yet far off, He will run to you, fall on your neck and embrace and kiss you lovingly, now that your soul is already cleansed by repentance. And He shall clothe the soul, which has stripped off the former man and his acts, with the first robe...He shall place a ring on his hands...and shoes on the feet that have returned from the evil road to the way of the Gospel of peace. He shall announce a day of delight and joy to those who are His own, Angels and men, and will celebrate your salvation in every possible way.”¹⁰

This heavenly joy for the penitent’s return is the dominant element in the parables of the lost sheep, of the lost drachma and of the prodigal son. The good Shepherd *carries it on his shoulders, rejoicing! Coming home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, telling them,*

⁹ St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Ethical Discourses*, 10, 10-11.

¹⁰ St. Basil the Great, *Letter to a Fallen Virgin*, 46, 6.

'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' (Lk. 15:5-6) In all three parables the Lord assures us there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. (Lk. 15:10)

ὁ κληδός ποιμήν

