

11. Not Three Times a Year

“Wounds displayed in public will not grow worse, but will be healed” (St. John of Sinai).¹⁸

To the extent, then, my brother and fellow-sinner, that the Grace of the All-Compassionate God has helped you to perceive your sinfulness, to repent and make the great decision to confess, I give you one further piece of advice: *do not postpone it even for a minute!* You should be reconciled immediately with your Creator, Whom you have so greatly grieved and scorned. When a man happens to be with you and is troubled and scandalized, and does not speak to you, but has an aversion to you, you immediately run to him to reconcile with him. You get others to act as go-betweens, and many times you send some gift in order to restore the love and peace between you. You cannot sleep from the disquiet. If, then, it happens thus with people, how can you rest nonchalantly the moment you have so grieved our Heavenly Father and God?¹⁹ If, again, you suffer from a serious illness and they inform you that there is a chance that you may die, do you remain carefree? Certainly not! You run to doctors, you spend money, you leave aside your tasks, however pressing they may be, and you ask in agony: “What will become of me? Am I at risk? Am I seriously ill?” etc.

But there is also something very important that you should know. If you succeed in confessing and being washed of the uncleanness of your sins with the Grace of the Holy Spirit, do not think that they are all now at an end, that “this is as far as they went.” No, do not ever believe this! It is precisely now that the great journey, the great struggle, begins. With your confession you made an agreement with God in some way and promised that you would now belong to His army, to His followers, to His faithful children. And this army is in a continuous war and consequently you will be at war non-stop, albeit a spiritual war. Be sure you

¹⁸ *The Ladder*, Step 4.10, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁹ *The Ladder*, Step 1.15, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

understand this. When a villager sits quietly and humbly and works on his land, and looks after his animals and does not bother anyone, then no one is afraid of him, no one disturbs him. But if this villager becomes rebellious and gathers other men together, and they take up weapons and head for the hills, terrorizing the world and threatening the state and the government, then what happens? The authorities are aroused and the army comes to reinforce them, and a continuous war is brought about, until the rebels are annihilated. So it is with repentance and spiritual warfare. As long as man is a slave of the Devil with his sin and unbelief, the evil one does not disturb him. But when he rebels, that is, repents (for *repentance in essence is a spiritual uprising to separate oneself from the slavery of sin*), then the Devil disturbs him and is afraid of losing his slave, and for this reason “turns every stone” in order to stave off the redemption of mankind by devising temptations and unbearable difficulties.²⁰ In this way, then, does the good and spiritual army of God—His Church Militant, as She is typically called—fight as a whole and resist the Devil and his minions.

However, as you know, war is not always without bloodshed. Many are killed, and more are wounded. So also, after confession, you can be wounded and injured. This is why you must always run again immediately to the spiritual surgery, to find the Priest, to show him your wound, and to tell him how you were wounded, and he, with the enlightenment of God, will wash your wound and put the appropriate remedies on it, and give you the spiritual prescription that you must apply in order to get well.

Every time, that is, when you fall out of the envy of the Devil, and out of your infirmity and inexperience, do not despair. Run quickly! Do not postpone it! Do not let the wound putrefy and create other wounds, which will gradually bring on your death. Do not go to confession only on the Great Feasts, as the majority of people are accustomed—quite wrongly—to doing. On Pascha, Nativity and during the Dormition Fast one sees them running (and particularly at the last minute, after they have prepared everything in the house) in great haste, without awareness

²⁰ *The Ladder*, Step 4. 113, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

and true repentance, to tell the confessor some of those sins which in their opinion should be mentioned. They say with a clear conscience, "That's over with," and return to their homes, without any change in their lives or their ideas, since the life-giving Grace of the Holy Spirit did not fill their hearts and did not give them spiritual power. They remain as they were before: *dead*.

But I ask you: When your head is hurting, do you not take an aspirin to get rid of it? Can it be that you wait three times a year to take it? Is it not irrational that while we look after the body, and quite excessively at that (the body which will be buried in the earth in a few years and eaten by worms), on the other hand we leave our soul vacant and unprotected against the onslaughts of the Devil, who makes it his slave and after death takes it with him to Hell forever?

We should confess, therefore, on a very regular basis. Let us ask forgiveness of God, through the confessor, even for the smallest sins, which, however small they may appear, gradually become entire mountains that close our path to the Kingdom of Heaven. When a certain wayfarer was asked where his stride was most impeded, he replied that he was hindered to an unimaginable degree in the wilderness, because his shoes gradually filled with sand and he could not walk. Let us not forget, furthermore, that however large a ship may be, not much is needed for it to sink: a hole that is small, but will not be closed in a timely manner, is enough to become the problem. And a sheet that is completely white does not need much dirt on it for you to call it filthy; a single smudge is sufficient for it to become dirty.

St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite, in examining the subject of small (forgivable) and great (deadly) sins, reaches the following conclusions:

(1) "...Many small sins make a big one..., *when a man despises the small as small.*"

(2) "...*All sins are condemned equally*, because the Lord said: 'whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin' (St. John 8:34)."

(3) "...Both the small sin and the great are *equally a transgression of the law*, according to St. John: 'sin is the

transgression of the law' (I John 3:4) and disobedience to the Son: 'he that believeth not the Son shall not see life' (St. John 3:36)."

(4) "...*And the small sin becomes great when it dominates the one who commits it: 'for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage' (II Peter 2:19).*"

(5) "...The beam and the mote, that is, the great sin and the small, differ insofar as they do not receive the same punishment, *but they do not differ* insofar as they cast those who commit them out of the Kingdom of Heaven."²¹

So then, my brother, do not confess three times a year, even for form's sake. Do not let so much time pass, for who knows when death will find you before you have relieved your soul of the weight of your sins? Death is something about which no one knows when it will come. It could be now, it could be after a short while, it could be tomorrow. Will you be given time, I wonder, before you die to say what burdens you, or will you go with your sins to Hell forever?

Do not leave sin inside you, my brother, lest it "takes root" and becomes a tree, which is subsequently uprooted only with difficulty. While your sins are still a small plant, extract them immediately, for that is easy. Do not put it off. Cast out at once whatever evil the Devil sows in you, and destroy it lest it lingers. In this case the Demon will take fright and fall into despair, and he will leave you in peace, because he knows that you will uproot with confession everything he is going to plant, and so what reason does he have for bothering?

St. Nicodemos writes very charmingly: "Storks have a custom of not returning to the place where they have destroyed their nests. So it is with the demons: they withdraw from one who confesses frequently, because by frequent confession he destroys their nests and nets, as the demons themselves said to a virtuous man, how they have

²¹ *Exomologitarion*, *op. cit.*, p. 17, with slight adaptation and completion. (2), (3) and (4) are the teaching of St. Basil the Great, which is found in *Short Rules*, question 293 (PG 31:1288C-1289A). (5) is the teaching of St. John Chrysostomos, which is found in *On Compunction* ("To the Monk Demetrios"), Discourse 1.2 (PG 47:396) and *Homilies on I Corinthians* 16 (PG 61:135; NPNF I.12.93).

no power over one who confesses frequently, nor any place in him.”²²

When you are accustomed to confessing regularly, then you will learn also to pay more attention to your soul. You will learn to look after it and cleanse it so that the Triune God may be united with it. Your heart will always be pure and you will see God noetically and taste Paradise even from earth, because the Lord said: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (St. Matthew 5:8).

I tell you again, my brother, do not be like those unfortunate Christians who, when the Great Feasts arrive (Pascha, Nativity, etc.), see to it that for many days they prepare the house and pastries, procure different foods, new clothes, etc., and who run on the final day, for form’s sake, to find a confessor, become impatient when they cannot accomplish this quickly, and get agitated, only to end up telling some of their sins in a hasty and impromptu manner, without repentance, and leave with their conscience supposedly clear that “it’s over and done with.” If confession were like that, then alas and woe for us! Where is the concentration? Where is the repentance? Where is the shocking realization that we have grieved our Creator and Father by our sins? Where is the contrition and compunction? Where is the self-examination? There cannot be a worse blasphemy against the Holy Spirit!

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 204, § 3.