



Repentance and Confession: An Orthodox Perspective

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Abstract

The Sacrament of Repentance is an act of reconciliation with the church body. It is the possibility, granted by the church to those who have alienated themselves from the body because of sin, so as to be able to return to it. Repentance is then a complete about turn or a change of life. It is a sacrament of regeneration as it establishes for us a share in the death and resurrection of Christ. That is why it is a sacrament through which our baptism is renewed. The sacrament of Penance or Confession is then a new baptism and is referred to as the mystery of the Second Baptism because it involves the forgiveness of all sins committed after baptism. However not every sin needs the necessity of sacramental forgiveness since no human is ever completely without sin. There are two distinct types of confession in the Orthodox faith, namely, private confession and then sacramental confession. The church maintains that divine forgiveness may be received either by private prayer or by the sacrament.

Keywords: remission, atonement, repentance, confession, apostolic tradition

Introduction

When viewed from a theological or liturgical point of view, the sacrament of repentance is understood to be an act of reconciliation with the church body. It is the possibility granted by the church to those who have alienated themselves from it due to sin to return to it. In general terms, repentance and confession were the new experience of man with the love and Grace of God the Father. He who repents and confesses offers the church gatherings his personal failure, as well as his sins, and asks for and receives in return the possibility of eternal life.

That is why there is no place for feelings of pity or even the legal remission of sins. It is thus the sacrament of grace and a gift of the transformation of an estranged person into the image of the Son of God (Yannaras, 1984). The sacrament of repentance and confession is a repeatable sacrament in the life of the church since it is the continual therapy of the spiritual illness which the members of the church body can incur. It revolves around the issue of the constant remembrance of God and for mourning due to the loss of God in one's life and ultimately the rediscovering of the love of God. The sacrament is one of the most healing and most active as far as healing the 'suffering body' is concerned. It is also the sacrament upon which ascetic and monastic life is based (Matsoukas, 1964).

Father Alexander Schmemmann states the following concerning the Sacrament of Repentance:

"However, for us who ceaselessly depart from Christ and excommunicate ourselves from his life, it is necessary that we return to him and receive again and again the gift which he gave us once and for all. Remission is the sign that this return has been realised and completed. And, as the Eucharist is not simply a single repetition, but our elevation and reception to the



same eternal feast, so the sacrament of repentance is not a repetition of our Baptism, but a return to the newness of life which God offered us once and for all” (Schmemmann, 1963).

The Sacrament has its origins in the ancient church. Public confession was the norm at that time and it constituted a part of the Holy Eucharist. The confession of sins was an imperative aspect before the Holy Eucharist. The aim of this ancient ecclesiastical practice was the return of the sinful person to the body of the church and naturally has an essentially liturgical character. It was in a sense a readmission to the liturgy and life of the Eucharist gathering.

This sacramental practice of the church is founded on the Apostolic words “...therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous man has great power in its effects” (James 5:16). In the Apostolic Decrees which are texts dating back to the 4th Century, we read that the Bishop would read prayers for those who repented during Matins, Vespers and the Divine Liturgy. The completion of the repentance process would be the receiving of Holy Communion. The notion of confessing sins to a spiritual father is also evident during the 4th Century that we are however uncertain of what form this confession took precisely. The first texts which demonstrate a specific form known as the Service of Confession emanate from the 10th Century and are credited to Saint John the Faster who was the Patriarch of Constantinople (Ouspensky, 1978).

For various reasons the sacrament lost its public form of the and also it’s special place in the Holy Eucharist. Private confession was established and prevailed and with the passing of time it attained the nature of a specific service and this change was realized in ascetic and monastic practices. Nonetheless, no matter what the developments, the Sacramental presence of repentance is essential in the liturgical life of the church and in the spiritual life of the faithful. The devil continues to threaten the existence of mankind and so man’s ultimate objective which is to become the temple of god and to make his entire life a genuine liturgy is threatened. The spiritual struggle is undoubtedly strengthened by humanities participation in the sacraments and more particularly the holy Eucharist and Holy Communion. Thus repentance is another aid which the church offers the spiritually infirmed in their fight and stand against the devil so that they can more easily distance themselves from their sins. This is why it people come to church asking not only for God’s forgiveness but also for guidance from their spiritual father. The church forgives them ‘seventy times seven’ and accepts their repentance and in love accepts them as sinners in need of atonement with the Father who is magnanimous and full of Grace.

The meaning of the Greek word, ‘*metanoia*’ for ‘repentance’ means, making amends (for guilt, including changing our attitudes) and effecting positive change. We are called to consider the moral implications of sin in our life, which includes a reformation of our ways. This is what it means to be truly repentant. Our heartfelt and mindful awareness is in accordance with God’s will, and will result in salvation. When we have come to this place of unhappiness due to our actions, and reflect upon what we have done, we repent of our sin, and we should then confess our sin to God.

We need to acknowledge the sacrament of repentance in the dimension of one’s free admission of one’s failures when it comes to accepting fully the love and Grace of God. We essentially participate in the death and resurrection of the Lord and it becomes one of our personal struggles to be transformed into the image of God. It is only then that we can truly experience the sacrament which is far removed from the western notion which uses it as a simple implementation of legal justification and it becomes a place of judicial demands and is not the sacrament of a return to the Kingdom of God. The orthodox perspective of the sacrament emphasises that the love of God is necessary and that our approach to this should be therapeutic, as we request the ‘medication of healing’ and not merely seek to obtain impressive penalties or punishments.



Repentance and our Actions

The renowned Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov states that: “the spiritual father is essentially one that himself has been born of the Holy Spirit, has the gift of fervent prayer, and knowledge of the heart and of distinction of spirits and thoughts, insists as a discriminating doctor on the correct direction of human abilities, is essentially a healer who will heal sinners, a healer for God” (Evdokimov, 1998).

Reprimands should be viewed as the medication and not as a penalty which the sinner has to face. Evdokimov stresses that repentance means spiritual healing and that reprimands are not a chastisement but rather an exercise of repentance from which the legal element of satisfaction is totally absent. In order to understand all this we need to again approach Christ who forgave the robber on the cross or come again to embrace the attitude of the merciful father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Christ desires us to return to Him and that is why the sacrament can be nothing other than the sacrament of ineffable attrition as well as a great joy as we return to the embrace of God the Father. Repentance must be experienced as a mystery in which divine grace and human freedom operate with one another. The sinner's intention or admission of guilt is simply not enough. Sacramental remission is required, by Grace, which destroys evil and brings forth purity, which removes guilt and offers healing (Kardamakis, 1993). The Sacrament of Repentance is important as it is sin plunges the soul into the abyss and into darkness. St. John the Evangelist, tells us that if we have no sin, we mislead ourselves, and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8), for everyone sins and falls short before the glory of God. Our Lord Jesus Christ says, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matthew. 3:2). He expects from us a sincere earnest faith and true repentance. Our heartfelt remorse is, according to St. Paul, a godly grief that produces a repentance that leads to our final salvation (2 Corinthians 7:10). Prayer and fasting, and especially agape soften our hardened hearts and dispose our soul to true repentance. When we repent we can, without shame or fear, confess our sins with faith to our Father God.

Repentance and Holy Eucharist

The Sacrament of Repentance in today's world is in crisis and in doubt because it has lost its true and great significance within the liturgical and spiritual life of believers. It is often the case that there is no trust in the spiritual fathers who have been appointed by a local Bishop. There are two primary reasons which have led to the crisis faced by the sacrament. Each of these reasons has brought the genuine nature and objective of the sacrament, which is the spiritual feeding of life, the reconciliation with the love of God and the readmission into the body of the church, into a state of neglect.

The first reason is the consideration of the Sacrament as a precondition for participating in Holy Communion and the second reason is that it is regarded as a right of authority and is viewed a legal remission of daily sin, and thus once again it is seen as a prerequisite for Holy Communion. However none of these things belong to the faith and experience of the true Orthodox church. It is of course true that the church gave special significance to the sacrament concerning those whose mortal sins separated them from the body of the church and therefore the sacrament constitutes their connection to the body of the church. When those who are baptised do not fall into any of the mortal sins this does not mean they are precluded from receiving Holy Communion (Cabasilas, 1960).

The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom has included in its petitions and prayers the critically important dimension of repentance and confession. Thus, if we the faithful listen to these prayers attentively and with respect, the truth can be verified for us. We require the dual



verification of the Holy Eucharist and Holy Communion for the remission of sins and to have hope for eternal life. It also needs to be stressed here that a very deep change has been created due to the incorrect verification of the sacrament and this is totally unjustifiable as it segregates the members of the church. Amongst the lay people for whom repentance and confession are a prerequisite for Holy Communion and the clergy, who do not only partake of Holy Communion with the Sacrament of Repentance and Confession, but also give a guarantee and right through the remission of sins in order that lay people may partake of Holy Communion. We need to understand that the priest or the spiritual father is not in authority over the people. His 'authority' as such, is communicated because God is operating in the sacraments and the priest is the witness to Christ's presence and leader of the flock.

In practical terms this essentially means that lay people who have been Baptised and Chrismated cannot be members of the church without confession. This idea was unthinkable in the ancient tradition of the Orthodox church and in the 'true faith'. The consequences of these distortions of the sacrament were destructive for the sacrament itself in the end it became the practice of a simple guarantee and permission to participate in Holy Communion. It ceases to be the sacrament of our deepest internal transformation from sin and for our conciliation with God the Father. In reality, when we now approach it, it is not because we have decided to radically change ourselves but rather to redeem ourselves from the daily sins we commit and which we have committed for the time of our previous confession and so we strive to ensure the possibility of participating in Holy Communion.

Is there a place for the sacrament?

It's all this is true is the real your place for the sacrament in a contemporary liturgical life? The answer is a definite 'yes'. This answer is drawn from the experience and practice of the church itself and which is manifested in the presence of a spiritual father and this is a practice which began in the monasteries. In the monasteries, the spiritual father was not always a priest but nonetheless practiced a very important task, namely, the spiritual guidance of others which was a continual communication with the spiritually downtrodden and a constant confession of the thoughts of the spiritual, drawn to the wise and spiritually gone too far. This was an essential practice in monastic life which was based on obedience and self-abnegation and was bound for the better realisation of the monastic lives. However this terror duty can guide in practice for the way due to certain circumstances over a period of time. Unfortunately it became part of the sacrament of repentance.

Spiritual guidance thus became illegal remission of sins and slowly came to be a prerequisite for Holy Communion. That is why we now comprehended a few minutes of our personal time with a spiritual father to whom we confess our sins, awaiting some brief words of advice and permission to have Holy Communion, coming to complete contrast with experience of our church. This kind of confession example, not the only for ourselves, but it also harms the preparation which is necessary for our participation in holy communion as implement all the preparation to this singular act namely confession.

A participation in Holy Communion which is the culmination of every church event, the revelation of the sacrament itself, cannot be consumed by penalties. Holy Communion should be seen as the right permitted the spiritual father is based on certain rules and principles. It needs to once again become a duty and responsibility of all the faithful because it is only through this that the church is constituted and revealed to all.

Orthodox believers require a living, personal and prayerful participation in what it means to be a believer and this will be a key that leads to the unity with our Lord and His saving Grace. Formally accepting the Orthodox faith is not enough because it also requires us to be committed. Each and every lay person whether they know it or not, has pastoral



responsibilities to the other members of a parish. The Orthodox believe in his first and foremost responsible for nurturing the members of his or her own family and this is a religious obligation since all Christians are called minister to others. Consequently, regular participation in worship and common prayer and especially in confession and in taking Holy Communion are non-negotiable. Believers should participate actively in the sacramental life of the church as often as they can. Only then can their relationship with their fellow human beings be characterised by a peace and true love. Only then can we strive for *theosis* and become God-like. We need to be in a constant relationship with Christ are committed to Him in all that we do.

Repentance implies a positive changing of the mind, of our thoughts and attitudes, and also our feelings. It is recognition of the accountability and the guilt for committed sins, but also of our essentially sinful nature. Our recognition of necessity requires us to be willing to change our ways, yet even this is not sufficient. Our atoning attitude needs to be accompanied by a continual will and effort not to remain in a state of sin, but to continue to live in His Grace and to ascend the spiritual ladder towards His Kingdom. Repentance is thus a progressive state of existence and it is required for our sins to be expiated, cleansed, purified, justified and also sanctified. We should bear in mind that repentance and confession are not a trial or a courtroom process. It is a refuge for sinners, a hospital for the spiritually infirmed. The one who confesses is not judged or convicted. They are offered care, assisted, and treated by the physician, tutored, and pardoned.

True repentance and confession leads to the remission of sins. We need to humble ourselves as pride is the endpoint of all our actions and the worst expression of them. The proto-sins were pride and insolence towards God. Indeed our faith teaches us that pride is due to ignorance and creates within us a confused mentality. This ignorance comprises of a lack of awareness that God is gracious and a lack of knowledge of the weakness and distortion of our human lives and so pride is the absence of divine human knowledge. When we partake in Holy Communion we cannot be arrogant and prideful. We cannot be participants in *kenodoxia* (vainglory) and seek to embellish our reputations as priority for daily living. Neither can we be *alazoneis* (boastful).

The starting point of a spiritual life is to understand that we are involved in a spiritual struggle and so we need to develop spiritual mastery and control over our bodies and their drives and movements and thus need discipline and control. As we often stray and take the wrong path and therefore need constant an unceasing repentance. We are called upon to revitalise our spirits and re-orientate our hearts and values and draw near to God. It thus follows that repentance is not only a practice to be undertaken at certain times but rather involves a constant state of mind as we continually seek to set our life's compass on *theosis*. We need to fight against our passions and learning to grow within ourselves in a positive spiritual sense. In a nutshell, we need to be attentive to our spiritual life and should be sober and watch over our life and free ourselves from evil thinking and deeds.

As Orthodox believers who must seek to live in communion with god and with one another as the struggle to overcome the morality of the world in which we live. We cannot afford to be self-righteous but rather accept a share in repentance and forgiveness with our fellow believers in the true spirit of divine communion.

Conclusion

Repentance and confession is indeed necessary today and needs to once find it's true content. It needs to cease being viewed as a simple remission of sins and a prerequisite for Holy Communion, and once again assume an important role in one's constant struggle for internal transformation, spiritual rebirth and of course, reconciliation with God. It is also an essential aspect for a return to the church. Repentance and confession need to becomes a participation



for us in the Cross, the Death and the Resurrection of Our Lord. This fact is not the only one for contrition for our fall and our many failures, but rather the prayers and triumph for a true reconciliation with the risen Christ.

Repentance and confession to our spiritual father can and should once again find its true Orthodox form and content. It needs to be a period of guidance and spiritual education of the believer and to be viewed as a therapeutic way of life by which the believer who falls into sin can once again meet with the Grace and love of God the Father without the demand for judicial forms of justice. Our guide to this correction of the Sacrament should be the words of Saint John Chrysostom who states: "I do not compel you to come into the church and to stand among many witnesses, to tell me only your sins personally, so that I am able to heal your wound and take away your pain" (Chrysostom, 26).

When it comes to issues of grave sins, one should consult with the parish priest and indeed, sacramental confession before a priest even for lesser sins is a highly-recommended practice and should be undertaken at least once a year. Whether a confession is private or sacramental it should be followed by the receiving of Holy Communion because this is the sacrament through which our sins are forgiven and washed in the Blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

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