

Confession: An Incorrect and Correct Approach



I wonder if we ever truly repent? Do we really comprehend the magnitude of our sin? Do we ever truly realize our imperfection? Have we demolished the idol of the ‘self’? Do we actually confess our sin? Why, in the final analysis, do we confess?

Father Aimilianos of Simonopetra says, “Man rarely develops a full understanding of his wretched condition. And, if at some time we shed a small tear and say, ‘I am a sinner, my Christ, forgive me,’ even then we are lying. There lies within us a self-centeredness, an emotional impediment perhaps; a craving, an idea, a certain goal, a failure, a success, a certain disappointment; for that reason we claim we are sinners or begin to cry, not because we actually thought about God.”

The above mentioned elements are often seen during confession. Most people come because something in their life “went wrong.” They don’t actually see their sin, but remain in grief due to the problem that has arisen. For example, a young girl comes and sobs about a relationship she had, and the betrayal she suffered at the hands of her boyfriend. She doesn’t confess her carnal sins. Rather, she comes in order to be consoled. And if while confessing she saw her boyfriend outside the window beckoning to her, she would abandon the confessional and run back into his arms. In other words, she didn’t come to confession because she sinned. She weeps because she yearns for her friend. This, truly, is a wretched condition. Devoid of any sign of repentance, or regret.

When the confessor attempts to point out this kind of erroneous reasoning, people rebel, they become disgruntled, and feel insulted. They don’t want to hear about their faults, their sin. The only thing they seek is consolation that feeds their ego. And this is frightening, that people even approach the great Mystery of Confession, the Mystery of Humility and Repentance as an act of self-justification.

We can talk about a confession lasting one or two hours about a certain problem, and at the end the penitent might say, “father, I do the familiar things [sins], the everyday ones...” Such a person fails to conscientiously realize that those “everyday and familiar” sins are the source of all his problems, at the root of the entire situation he is experiencing; for that reason he refers to them as secondary, and not as something central and primary.

The problems in our life, our problematical relations, are the outcome of our sins, the results of our apostasy from God.

We want a solution to our problems, but not God. We want peace in our life, without war (i.e., askesis and spiritual struggle), we want (so we say) Christ without prayer, without fasting, without hard work, without a cross.

“I want to take communion,” says one, but he never attends church. He will go to church only if his confessor allows him to commune. But how can his confessor allow him to commune, when he continuously devalues the liturgical life of the church without an acceptable reason, setting himself essentially outside the church? However, he refuses to understand this.

We come, on the one hand, to the spiritual father (something that is good and hopeful), but on the other we fail to enter into the process of self-denial, internalizing the vanity of this world. We go to the confessor not because we thirst for eternal life with Christ, but—unfortunately—because we have become trapped in this life and we’re searching for solutions to our worldly problems. For this reason, allow me to stress yet once more that, in confession we come to confess our sins and restore our relationship with God, and not to find solutions to problems that come our way, which exist and will always exist in one form or another. Having no problems in life is not what is at stake; what is at stake is becoming Christ-like! If we don’t understand this...we will make no attempt to “put on Christ.”

The great cross borne by confessors, is coming into contact with people who don’t want God, but simply to receive a blessing to continue living a life consonant with their own will and passions. The great cross borne by confessors is to wear the epitrachelion and have in their presence people who are not repentant.

Of course, there are those Christians who through their repentance and humility become a source of inspiration to the confessor himself, because he sees how they agonize over their sins and truly thirst for Christ, in spite of their falls and weaknesses.

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