

# Penance in the Orthodox Church

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I first experienced the Eastern Orthodox Church's Sacrament of Confession about eight years ago. Shortly after my own personal religious "renaissance," I was attending a Greek Orthodox Archdiocesan Young Adult League conference in Chicago, IL. Like many Greeks, I was never raised with the concept of going to confession and only "discovered" it at this late time in my life. It was about 10:30 p.m. and the hotel conference room where confessions were being heard was directly across the hotel ballroom where the big Saturday evening dance was going on. About all I remember is the fact that toward the end of my confession the song "You Shook Me All Night Long" by AC/DC was blasting from the dance across the hall - not a very holy setting. I then received absolution from the priest who proceeded to tell me, "The next time you come to confession, be more prepared." Apparently, I confessed for too long to the bored and tired priest.

At that point in time, I recognized my own ignorance as to the importance of the sacrament in the life of an Orthodox Christian. Throughout history, the rite of penance was not "private" but an "ecclesial" (Church) event. Absent from my early experience was the link between confession/penance and the Eucharist - the central focus of all Orthodox Christian life. In these few short pages, I shall attempt to demonstrate the ecclesial understanding of confession/penance and demonstrate how this is now realized in the sacramental life.

In early church history, the rite of Baptism marked one's repentance and entry into the Church with full participation in the eucharistic life of the Church.<sup>1</sup> There was little concern with the private confession of the "everyday sins" of the members of the community. In The Didache,

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<sup>1</sup>James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance*, (NY: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1974) pg. 17.

there is mention of public confession of sins in the context of the Church's eucharistic worship. This is not to be understood as the public confession of one's individual sins before the congregation, nor was it the simple recitation of the Lord's prayer before communion. The confession of sins was most likely a community prayer followed by the kiss of peace to signify the reconciliation of the assembly to each other and to God.<sup>2</sup>

For grave post-baptismal sins such as adultery, murder and apostasy - sins that were known by the entire community - there was the lengthy and severe process of public penance.<sup>3</sup> This developed late in the second century as Christianity spread throughout the Roman empire.<sup>4</sup> Penitents were excommunicated from the church for periods of up to several years. In the Didascalia Apostolorum, penance (for sins such as apostasy) involved weeks of fasting, the eventual laying on of hands by the bishop, and then communion. In 270 A.D., Gregory the Wonderworker described 5 grades of penance for sinners - mourner, hearer, faller, bystander, and participant -with numbers of years prescribed for each stage depending on the severity of the sin. The latter stage being those who finally were restored to full eucharistic communion.

Besides the length and severity of penances at this time, the emphasis of penance was the Eucharist and the restoration of the sinner to the Church. Penance was seen as a gradual healing process that had its endpoint with the return to eucharistic communion.<sup>5</sup> The weakness of this system though is also evident. This includes the danger of penance falling into rigorism and legalism and also its failure to deal with the "everyday" sins of Christians like anger, etc.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Dallen, pg. 21.

<sup>3</sup>John H. Erickson, *The Challenge of Our Past* (Crestwood, NY: SVS, 1991) pg. 25.

<sup>4</sup>Dallen, pg. 29.

<sup>5</sup>Erickson, pg. 26-27.

<sup>6</sup>Erickson, pg. 28-29.

In the Byzantine empire, the influence of monasticism on penance grew quite large.<sup>7</sup> This turning point came about during the iconoclast controversies. At this time, the use of monks as confessors for the laity came to full usage and people began to attach themselves to a spiritual elder.<sup>8</sup> One shared his/her entire life with their confessor and revealed all his/her sins to that particular monk. The monk would then prescribe penance and give absolution. With the modification of the practice came also the modification of the penances themselves. Penance took on a medicinal form that could be lessened depending on if the penitent would fast, or would fast and give up wine, or in some cases, even become a monastic! In addition, monks began to obtain hierarchal letters of commission granting them permission to hear confessions and "prescribe" the proper remedy.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of the development of this practice, the ecclesial nature of penance was lost. In addition, so was the centrality of restoration to eucharistic communion. The monks became "spiritual gurus" who had the proper medications for whatever "disease", or rather passion, was afflicting one's soul and body. This could include fasting, prostrations or recitation of psalms. It even began to include taking communion as one of the "medications!" Confession and penance now became part of one's individual program of spiritual development.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of the Byzantine period and even into modern times, confession completely lost its ecclesial nature and has aberrantly grown into a sacramental obligation. It is either a once a year phenomenon for maintaining one's membership in good standing on the church's roll book, or it is a legalistic requirement necessary to make one "worthy" to take communion. The latter being the most common understanding in our Orthodox church today here in America. This author has

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<sup>7</sup>Erickson, pg. 29.

<sup>8</sup>Erickson, pg. 29

<sup>9</sup>Erickson, pg. 33.

<sup>10</sup>Erickson, pg. 33-34.

personally witnessed a priest refuse a church member communion because she had not been to confession for two or three weeks. *After* the liturgy, the person did confession and then was allowed to partake of the Eucharist while everyone else had already proceeded to the coffee hour.

We Orthodox Christians must return to the ecclesial understanding of the Sacrament of Confession. The current doctrine of today that makes confession a "legal" requirement for communion has no foundation in the Tradition of the Church and is, in fact, a distortion of the understanding of the sacrament.<sup>11</sup> Lost is the understanding that this sacrament was originally meant for those who by their sins had excommunicated themselves from the Eucharist by the action of sins defined in the canons of the church (apostasy, murder, adultery, etc.) This sacrament did not apply to one's everyday sinful fallen condition in this world. On the other hand, as Alexander Schmemmann stated,

It is not that these sins - the general sinfulness, weakness and unworthiness of our whole life - need no repentance and no forgiveness; the whole preparation for Communion...is indeed such repentance and a cry for forgiveness. What they do not need is sacramental confession and sacramental absolution, the latter applying only to those excommunicated.<sup>12</sup>

Rather, he points out, our general sinfulness is confessed in the context of the Eucharistic liturgy. Our entire Orthodox Christian life should be a life of repentance - not a once a month three minute post-Vesperal chat with the priest. The sacrament of Confession can be a time for one to confess his/her sins to the priest and allow the priest to recognize repeating sins or a spiritual condition that may require further pastoral/professional counseling.<sup>13</sup> We must return to focusing our lives as

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<sup>11</sup>Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha*, (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1996) pg. 126.

<sup>12</sup>Schmemmann, pg. 127.

<sup>13</sup>Schmemmann, pg. 131.

perpetual preparation for receiving the Eucharist and fulfillment of life in the Church, the Body of Christ. This preparation will constantly reveal to us our unworthiness to partake of the "heavenly and immortal mysteries" but at the same time will motivate us to seek Christ's gift of healing and forgiveness - the Eucharist. Then will we rediscover the importance of sacramental confession, not as a legal requirement for communion, "...but a deep spiritual renewal, the true reconciliation with God and a return to his Church from which we are indeed so often excommunicated by the hopeless secularism of our existence"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Schmemmann, pg. 133.