

## A call to repentance (Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi)

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After the fall man

has come under the yoke not only of sin (dispersed throughout his body) but also of the 'spiritual changes' and the many twists which co-exist with us as nasty neighbours. All these incite, delude and entice us so that we are unable to safeguard that which we most desire.

According to our Holy Fathers, it is not possible for man to remain without sin even if he lives for only one day. Therefore, we ought to be most preoccupied with our repentance. Our Fathers say that the Lord is not upset -so to speak- because man had not been successful and fell. The Lord will not judge him for this. What upsets divine Grace is that man does not wish to repent. This is regarded as a kind of despair and somehow as a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, we ought to intensify our effort. If remaining without sin is not possible, then continuous repentance must become indispensable. We must convince divine Grace which resides in us that our trespasses are not wilful. Namely, that we do not wish ever to deny the Lord and betray His love but that we make mistakes out of inexperience, weakness and ignorance. Thus we must continuously fall onto our knees and plead: 'The Lord, have mercy on me, the

sinner'. We must ask the divine Grace to cooperate with us in a different way; perfecting our knowledge, our abilities and our sight, so that we behave properly and remain steadfast during these difficult times. As Paul says: *'Salvation is nearer to us now, than when we first believed'*. We all have the experience and are able to understand from the current events that 'our time is near'. We see that the power of our enemy is gathering pace while our own capacity is more restricted restricted; people are more reluctant nowadays and even the social environment becomes an obstacle; devout people became scarce and very few have remained.

How united and careful we ought to be, if we are to cope! Our victory is not a technical matter to need assistance from others. Of course it is useful if we live among people who share our goals and views. But our success is essentially the result of our alliance with Grace. *'Without me you can do nothing'*.

We must totally concentrate on how to preserve the energy of Grace inside us, namely the promise *'And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'* (Matthew 28, 20) We must particularly pay attention to 'I am with you always' and wonder if He truly is with us always. The Lord is 'potentially' present 'with us'. 'Potentially' He is not absent from anywhere. Alas, if He was! If He removes Himself even for a second from the creation, it will be dissolved. He is all things to all things. 'Potentially' He is with us. Is He also 'actively' with us, though?

Origenis wisely said: 'What's my benefit if Word- God was incarnate but I do not possess Him?' And I also say: What's our benefit if Word God is 'potentially' with us, but we do not 'actively' perceive Him? Of course it is not His fault. We are at fault because we did not handle things properly. Thus we must pay attention to this. Namely: how to activate the presence of the divine Grace by utilizing all available means and opportunities at every given moment. Let Grace *'which heals what is ailing and fulfills what is missing'* be with us so that we are able to accomplish our goal since *'the times are near'*. *'Walk in wisdom toward outsiders'* (Colossians 4, 5).

Let's see what we are made of. How does sin attack man? It attacks from the outside, the inside and from the environment. It attacks from the outside directly. It throws on the mind's screen an image and provokes it to scrutinize it. The mind must be careful here. What is this image about? Do we need it or not? If the mind is healthy it immediately rejects it. *'Be gone, Satan! You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'* (Matthew 4, 10).

Nevertheless, sin does not disappear even though it was defeated in the way it had attacked. Thus, abandoning the direct hit, it now takes the side road. It

attacks 'sideways', through pretext in the name of natural laws and necessity. Yet, no matter how it shows up, it is a scam. Sin abandons the direct attack and takes on the form of deception. If the mind is again careful and scrutinizes the attack well, discerning whether it falls within the law of necessity or of desire, sin again abandons this alternative way and takes on the nature of force. Aided by satanic force, sin furiously attacks in the name of passion and seizes man as if by the throat, strangling him. Sin at this stage uses blackmail like Nebuchadnezzar: 'Unless you worship my icon, because this is my wish, I will throw you into the forge'. The entire confusion of the satanic passion rests on these words and this is how it attacks man. Therefore, man must always be vigilant not to be swayed, since sin is not cowed, neither does it retreat. It will use all available means and ways to deceive man. Here we must be careful, since after committing the sin, despair follows, just as pain follows injury. This is not a natural event but a symptom. Similarly, despair and cowardice which ensue on the soul are not natural phenomena but satanic deceit, despite being presented as a natural occurrence! Man ought, therefore, be vigilant not to be disheartened when he makes a mistake, since it is well known that there is no life without sin.

Several times we hear people complaining: 'I am a sinner and the Lord does not listen to me' or 'I am a sinner, I have no courage, I cannot do it, I am unworthy' etc. This is not true. All these are pretexts 'coming from the right'. The Lord came on this earth to save the sinners. It is not a matter of worthiness. The more undeserving one is the more necessary it is to appeal to the Lord. The Lord is more 'attracted' to such a person, since He came to this world to heal the wounded and not the healthy.

Therefore, in practice it is very useful if one does not lose his courage after his mistake. This is crucial even if it requires guts and good intentions. When man watches out for all these, his mind remains vigilant and ready to fight and thus it never faces defeat. Being careful in this way, man is continuously repenting. Incessant repentance means to be forever pleading to the Lord: 'Lord, I have sinned. I did not manage to resist. Stay, with me. You are the one who said: 'Without me you can do nothing'. I have understood this. I have absorbed it. This is why I insist knocking, asking. I will not stop pestering you. I can not live without You. I am not going anywhere. If your ears do not become weary hearing me, my mouth will not stop calling. I insist. You have not made a mistake in calling me to repentance. You, the Most Holy are the One who accomplished this, not me. I knew nothing about God, and it was not possible for me to find out about You. You, Lord, All merciful, came and found me and asked me to follow You. I have agreed to this. I desire this. But I cannot manage it though. This is why I persist in asking You to

help me. I must not lose what You have granted me’.

See, I have given you an example of what true repentance is! This is the disposition of one’s heart if he is under repentance. If one truly preserves this condition, then a different kind of unknown courage flourishes inside him. It is a kind of bravery (parrisia: παρρησία). Children exhibit this kind of bravery towards their father; it cannot be assumed by servants or employees. One fights against sin and keeps himself in a state of repentance when he acquires this kind of bravery. In practice bravery is crucial for all of us and particularly for our brothers who live in the world and are exposed to the causes of sin.

After the fall man has ‘lost’ his personality and became susceptible to the causes of sin, or rather they acquired a hold on him. If sin managed to deceive him when he was a ‘whole’ person, how much more forceful is it now that he is not a whole person and is under its yoke? Now that man is weak because he is wounded from the causes of sin and his senses are unhealthy, he unfortunately becomes a victim and falls prey to such causes. Therefore, he ought to preserve a state of continuous repentance. This is the humble mindset, since true repentance is practical humility. The only condition which rational beings may exhibit in order to incite the Lord’s mercy is the one of practical humility and humbleness. The Lord ‘*opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*’ (1 Peter, 5, 5). We ought to walk this path since this is how things are. It is clear. Without Grace’s cooperation, it is impossible for us to manage. We must therefore, find even more ways to incite Grace to assist us, if we are to succeed through Grace. What does Paul say? ‘*I can do all things through him who strengthens me*’ (Philippians 4, 13). Christ tells us as well: ‘Without me you can do nothing’. Paul, having experienced the presence of the divine Grace, declares: ‘I can do all things through him who strengthens me’. Therefore, if we can do all things through Grace which strengthens us, our whole effort must be how to attract Grace to us.

All virtues aim to invite and hold on to Grace. The most crucial of all, according to the Holy Fathers, is humility. Grace is very fond of this virtue. This is not strange. Since our Jesus has revealed that He Himself is ‘*gentle and humble in heart*’ (Matthew 11, 29) then humility is not just a preference of the Divine Essence or a divine command to the rational beings, but it is something which attacks the divine, for reasons which the All Merciful Lord knows. Therefore, since His own attribute, His essence is humility, we have a double duty to become humble ourselves.

The practical way to acquire humility, which is so very helpful, is to honestly repent. He who honestly repents is constantly on his knees before the Lord. He

throws himself at the Lord's feet crying: 'The Lord, have mercy on me'. 'Most Merciful Lord, have mercy on me, the sinner'. 'My Lord forgive me, I cannot manage alone'. 'Come, Lord, abide by me'. This is a simple way to acquire the alliance of Grace if we are to accomplish our salvation in a faultless way. Since David said: 'I humiliated myself and the Lord saved me', it is imperative that no devout person excuses himself from humility.

Our salvation is and is described as 'free'. All virtues are useful, but some entail a fighting spirit which not all of us possess. In practice, this fighting spirit needs spontaneity, decisiveness, fervor for struggle and continuous vigilance. This is something which we do not possess all the time. To preserve the state of humility- which is tiring- is not beyond our human nature, namely unattainable. To think humbly is very simple. Aren't we humble, really? We are literally truly humiliated, since sin has crashed us. If we harbor humble thoughts, we are telling the truth since we have discovered our true personality, which was crashed by sin. We have neither utilized the 'image and likeness' which the Lord bestowed on us when He created us, nor have we preserved Grace and the gift of adoption which He granted us. If one, therefore, is thinking humbly about himself, what has he done? He has discovered the truth, the reality about himself.

This line of thinking comes to us naturally and is very helpful. It is easy for anyone to harbour such thoughts until such time as he manages to acquire the spiritual humility which completes his personality through Grace. Honest repentance has revealed the state of humility; honest humility has given birth to comprehensive repentance. The one gives birth to the other.

Since, as we have mentioned earlier, there is no such thing as a life without sin, we must live in honest repentance. Then slowly, through Grace, sin which was earlier powerful and pressured man-through the senses or his mind- begins to diminish and remains only as a faint memory. Even this faint memory disappears and man feels repulsion for sin if he continues his struggle. Sin is irrationality. It is not but an irrational thing; something unnatural. It is irrationality, a wicked thinking, a misapprehension. It has neither substance nor place of abode. It is created because goodness is missing. When one is cleansed, one looks at this monster and detests it. If, however, he doesn't repent, sin controls and strangles him.

We need the assistance of Grace if are slowly to do away with our wicked disposition. We must first avoid committing a sin in practice and then avoid committing a sin 'through thoughts and desires' so that sin is totally erased from our minds. Then the mind is cleansed and becomes free to always contemplate and

consider what the Lord wants. His 'heart is also cleansed' through Grace, if he continues in this way. According to our holy fathers, he becomes sanctified and the Lord's promises are fulfilled for him. Thus we ought to be careful to utilize everything we have in our disposal- the place, the time, the means and our abilities. We ought to let nothing go to waste.

The mind needs to be in its proper place, if all these are to be accomplished. The mind is in its proper place if it holds on to the memory of the Lord. The most efficient way is the 'mental prayer'. Paul insists: '*pray without ceasing*' (A *Thessalonians* 5, 17). The mind cannot drift if it is continuously under the effect of the memory of the Lord.

Sin, because it neither has a personality, neither substance nor place, may only enter by using deception and blackmail. It is impossible for the mind to be swayed if it remains steadfast in its place. Sin cannot achieve much; it appears only as a faint memory and nothing else.

Take for example our Lord Jesus. After His Baptism, He left for the desert and fasted. There, He was tempted by Satan through the three top temptations. However, they appeared as faint memories and nothing else. First, He is being called to deal with 'self satisfaction'. 'Since you are hungry, why don't you eat?' 'Yes', He says, 'I will eat, but only when I want to'. What is the meaning of this? I will not succumb to the egoism of appetite; I will only adhere to the laws of need. This is the so called 'freedom of use' and not of 'abuse'. It proves that man must eat to survive and not live to eat.

The second temptation, 'egoism' strikes. It says to Him: 'since you are the Son of God, engage the divine Grace, to save You, because this is the Lord's wish'. 'Yes' He says. 'This is true. But I will not tempt the Lord. I know that He is the Father and will look after me. He will provide for me when He knows that I need Him. I will not be the one to prompt Him'. This was Satan's power. He left Him and '*angels came and were administering to him*' (Matthew 4, 11). By 'angels' it is meant the grace of sanctification. Therefore, sin only takes the form of an attack. Sin becomes an oppressor which ties up man and drags him along, when man is repeatedly defeated by it. Here we have a state of captivity. But we have mentioned earlier how all these happen.

We must engage the mind with the memory of the Lord if we are to keep our eyes open and watch where the attack is coming from to defend ourselves. There is no easier way to remember the Lord than through prayer. That's the reason why Paul commanded 'pray without ceasing'. We also see this happening among the

angels, who throughout their long existence are doing only one thing: praising the Lord. Also all rational beings in eternal life – in the Kingdom of God- will be doing the same thing. Even in this life, one must constantly pray if he is to be described as a genuine spiritual person. This is the proof that he has advanced spiritually. Thus, eternal life has to do with incessant prayer; the constant recycling of the Lord's name inside us. This constitutes our glory and our repose.

I have mentioned all these so that the commands 'pray without ceasing' and 'become praying beings' does not seem strange to us. *'Whoever is wise; let him understand these things'* (Hosea 14, 9). Each one of us has an imperative duty to exercise the mental prayer, to the best of his ability. When the mind holds on to the prayer, it stays alert and is able to detect where the thoughts are coming from and what the various designs of sin are, which are trying to enslave the mind.

Repentance reinstates man from its impassionate to its natural condition. When man attains to the natural condition, away from passions and desires, then the divine Grace pulls him towards the 'condition beyond nature' which is sanctification. It is impossible for Grace to influence man and remain with him if he continues to commit sins since this is an 'unnatural' condition and the Lord *'into a malicious soul shall not enter; nor dwell in the body that is subject unto sin'* (See Wisdom of Solomon, 1, 4). Therefore, every man with all his might ought to fight against sin; whatever transgressions were made up to now, must not be repeated; man must reach the state where he does not commit a sin in practice and starts crying for his past transgressions. By not sinning, he stops borrowing. By crying for his past transgressions, he pays off his past dues and his relationship with the Lord becomes balanced. This is the practical way of repentance.

Once our relationship with the Lord becomes balanced, divine Grace is able to affect us since it is said 'I will glorify those who glorify me and those who contradict me will be shamed'. When the correct conditions are present it is impossible for Grace not to act. Besides, we also have the Church, which is our Jesus' presence with us. He says *'I am with you always, to the end of the age'* (Matthew 28, 20). Through the Church and the Holy mysteries, Jesus extends towards us and continues to be with us every time we ask for His assistance. It is so simple. Man may accomplish his salvation, through Grace, if he thinks about all his deeds and makes good use of the time available, the place, his abilities, his intentions and all means which become available to him in this life as a psychosomatic being.

Our salvation is not accomplished through our own effort. This is the Roman Catholic view. Our salvation comes from the Cross and it is free. We do not 'buy it'

with our actions. Whoa! It is a blasphemy even to consider such a thing. It is *'the blood of Jesus which cleanses us from all sin'* (A John 1, 7) and not our deeds. We do not resist sin and wickedness to buy off our salvation but to show that we are rational beings and do not succumb to any unnatural way of living.

Virtue is a natural phenomenon and not something imposed on us. The fact that the Lord has demanded that we become virtuous rather than wicked constitutes a kind of devaluation for our personality, since virtue is natural for us. Virtue is present naturally in the human personality because man has been created 'in the image and likeness' of God. Man becomes sub human when he lives his life outside the realm of virtue. We accomplish virtue in order to free ourselves from the unnatural life which sin has thrown on us. Now we must drag ourselves out of this vile place and beastly condition. This is the reason why we struggle spiritually and not in order to secure our salvation. Our salvation flows out of our Jesus' Cross and the mysteries of the Church. This is the genuine theology which our holy fathers handed down to us. They explain this issue in no uncertain terms as well as all the ways which Satan uses to promote wickedness. He doesn't use his various ways in order to measure the extent of wickedness, no matter how widespread it is. He knows that as soon as the faithful turns to the Lord and says 'Please forgive me', God will immediately forgive him. The Satan's power and his insistence to convince man to commit a sin, rely on the fact that after sinning man will fall into despair. Despair promotes the loss of eagerness and thus man surrenders without a fight.

Now let us say that despair is the consequence of sin but also an 'unnatural' phenomenon. It is a necessary evil. It is just like injury and pain. Man must heal both the wound and do away with the pain. Otherwise he will be ruined. No matter how serious the transgression is, one's fall into despair is a demonic condition. There is no such thing as 'sinlessness'. The Lord came in this world, knowing that man is most- sinful, has gone astray and has been degraded to the level of death and destruction.

He came willingly, out of love, by Himself and embraced man and lifted him up. How can we then say 'we are sinners, we are not saints and therefore we have fallen into despair'? He came to heal the wounded not for the sake of the righteous. He says this Himself! He handed over the keys of the kingdom to Peter, who had denied Him three times and not to John, whom He loved and was sitting close to His heart. The Lord does not diminish the value of virtue; but rather His fatherly love overflows towards the weak, the crushed and lost man. Therefore, when one comprehends this, one must not allow himself to fear despair or lose his courage



because of his transgressions. But he ought to pull himself up the shoes strings and say: 'Forgive me my Lord; do not hold it against me. I repent'. Thus he will be able to continue his spiritual struggle bravely, having resolute faith in the most Loving and Most Kind Lord, our Jesus. Amen.

### **chapter one: The call to repentance**

**From the book 'GUIDANCE FROM MOUNT ATHOS' by Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi.**

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