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Repentance according to Saint Gregory Palamas - Part I (Archimandrite Ephraim, Abbot of the Vatopaidi Monastery)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



As we all know, Saint Gregory Palamas is a great luminary of the Orthodox Church, who with the whole of his theology- the fruit of his life in Christ- managed, in his day, to revive Orthodox theology in all its profundity. It is said on the Holy Mountain that Saint Gregory Palamas' theology covered all the gaps from the past and the future.



The Athonite saint began his life on the Mountain at the monastery of his “repentance”, i.e. where he was tonsured, the Great Monastery of Vatopaidi, being taught the tasks of the spirit and the ascetic life by Saint Nikodimos the Hesychast the Vatopaidan. Illumined by the uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit, Saint Gregory acquired spiritual wisdom and became an outstanding teacher of the virtues and of the life according to God.

Following in the pure Patristic tradition, he did not accept a moralist view of the spiritual life, which some people were attempting to bring from the West and to project onto the sphere of Orthodoxy.

Throughout the whole of the Patristic tradition it is emphasized that repentance is not exhausted by certain objective improvements in behaviour, nor in external formalities and patterns, but rather that it has to do with a more profound and more general change within a person. It is not a passing feeling of being crushed

by the awareness of having committed some sin or other, but rather a permanent spiritual state, which means that the person turns steadfastly to God and has an enduring readiness for reform, cure and engagement in the spiritual struggle. Repentance is a new outlook, a new, correct spiritual direction which should accompany people until the time of their death. Repentance is the dynamic progression from the unnatural state of the passions and sin into the area of naturalness and virtue, it is the total rejection of sin and the road of return to God.

Saint Gregory Palamas repeatedly points out this truth. "Repentance", he says, is to hate sin and love virtue, to abjure evil and to do good". It is perfectly clear from this definition that the Holy father was unable to see repentance as a formal, mechanical change, since he defines it as an ontological renewal of the person. For precisely this reason, the fact of repentance cannot be objectivised within the dimensions of an impersonal recipe or tactic, but is always a contingent personal revelation. "A person who repents from the soul reaches God by good intentions and avoidance of sin" (Homily 3, *PG* 151, 44B).

For Palamas and all the Holy Fathers in general, this personal nature of repentance precludes any of the shades of piety that the West has wanted to give to repentance, and, in consequence, to the whole of the spiritual life. The holy Hesychast stressed that: "Godliness is not in our words but in our actions". (To Filotheos 6, *Writings II*, p. 521).

But since repentance is the beginning and the end of the life in Christ and since it is the aim of that life, it follows that everything will be seen through it and will acquire merit or demerit. Even "faith is beneficial if people lives their lives in good conscience and re-purify themselves through confession and repentance" (Homily 30, *PG* 151, 185A). This in any case is given as a promise and agreement at the moment of Holy Baptism.

A fundamental stage, which precedes repentance is the recognition and awareness of sins "which is the great cause for propitiation", as the Holy Archbishop of Thessaloniki put it. (Homily 28, *P.G.* 151, 361C). According to Palamas, for people to come to repentance it is sufficient that they first arrive at recognition "of their own transgressions" and show remorse before God, to Whom they have recourse "with a contrite heart". They cast themselves upon the sea of His mercy and believe, like the Prodigal Son, that they are unworthy of God's clemency and to be called His children. And when with recognition and awareness of their sinfulness they draw upon themselves the mercy of God, they obtain complete release through self-censure and confession.

In his efforts to define all the stages of repentance, the wise Father said this: "Recognition of one's own sins is followed by self-condemnation; this is the sorrow for one's sins which Paul declared to be Godly. He tells us that this sorrow is followed by confession to God with a contrite heart, by supplication and by the promise to avoid evil in future. And this is repentance.

As a new condition in people's lives, repentance is accompanied by certain consequences which, in Biblical and Patristic language are called "the fruits of repentance". The first of this is highlighted by Saint Gregory as being confession, since, through this, the cure and purification of the soul of the believer is gained and the new life inaugurated: "For the confession of sins is the beginning of this cultivation, that is to say repentance and the preparation for people to receive within themselves the seed of salvation, that is the Word of God" (Homily 56).

Confession is not, however, the only fruit of repentance. In calling people to repentance through his preaching, Saint John the Baptist urged people to embrace charity, justice, humility, love and truth, as well as confession, because these are the attributes of the transforming power of the truth.

In his Homily 23, the saintly Athonite hierarch emphasizes that people who really live their repentance do not return to their former sins, nor attach themselves to people and things of corruption, nor engage in doubtful pleasures, but rather they scorn the present, look to the future, struggle against the passions, pursue the virtues, are vigilant in prayer, do not seek unfair profits, are lenient to those who have done them harm, compassionate towards those who plead, and willing to help, with words, deeds or even sacrifices those who have need. And when Saint Gregory urges Christians to acquire works of repentance, he particularly stresses a humble outlook, compunction and spiritual grief. Summarizing all the attributes of those Christians who live their repentance, he says that they are serene and calm, full of mercy and sympathy towards others, they desire justice, seek purity, have peace and bring it, suffer pain and trouble patiently and feel joy and satisfaction in persecutions, insults and slander, losses and anything else they suffer for the sake of justice and truth (Homily 31, *PG*, 151, 392C).

The path of correction through repentance, of escape from enslavement to the passions and of asceticism in order to follow the divine commandments is that of holy beings who have been glorified. Starting with this truth, Saint Gregory emphasizes the following: "If not all Christians can equal the Saints and the great and wonderful achievements which characterize their lives and are, as a whole, inimitable, they can and should emulate and follow them on their path towards

repentance. Because on an everyday basis, “they are unwittingly at fault in many things” and the sole hope of salvation for all of us remains, according to Saint Gregory, the embracing and experiencing of “abiding repentance” (Homily 28, *PG*, 151, 361C).

Remorse as a condition for asceticism

A fundamental condition for the escape from the bonds of the passions and, at the same time, for the beginning and source of repentance is Godly remorse, what the Fathers call “mourning”. In his texts, Saint Gregory refers very frequently to this “mourning” and to the painful but also joyful condition through which Christians have to pass if they want to live the real life. This is why he does not hesitate to call Great Lent the supreme period of mourning and spiritual struggle, as a symbol of the present age and a pre-condition for resurrection for the lives of the faithful.

Saint Gregory, who really did live Godly repentance and who said that his deep sighs “illuminated my darkness” rightly could not see how anyone could pass from the life of sin into “real life” without remorse and repentance. He said that when the faculty of direct perception, the “nous”, is liberated from every perceptible thing, it rises above the maelstrom of earthly things and can see the inner person, since it is able to perceive what he calls the “hateful mask” which the soul has acquired through its vagrancy among worldly things. At this point it hastens to scour the defilement with tears of repentance (Discourse on Peter the Athonite, *PG*, 150). The more people distance themselves from worldly cares and return to themselves, the more receptive they become as regards divine mercy. Christ commended those who mourn for their sins and for the loss of their salvation, which is caused by sin. This is, in any case, the reason why this remorse is called “blessed”.

While, according to the Patristic and ascetic tradition, mourning is a fruit of God, it still presupposes the co-operation of people themselves, and this requires humility, self-censure, mortification, fasting, vigilance, and, above all, prayer. And this persistence in cultivating the virtues and striving to achieve Godly remorse is reinforced by the experience of hesychasm, which testifies that this “mourning” does not cause debility and hopelessness, but creates in people the conditions to experience spiritual gladdening, comfort and, according to Palamas “the procurement of sweet joyfulness” (To Xeni, *PG*, 150). And when it assists the nous to lift the veil of the passions, it softly introduces it into the true treasures of the soul and habituates it in the prayer “in secret” to the Father.

There are many reasons which should cause the faithful to mourn. Just as the Lord's disciples were saddened when they were deprived of the "truly good teacher, Christ", so we, who experience the same deprivation and absence of Christ from our lives, ought to have within us and cultivate this same sorrow (Homily 29, *PG*, 151) But there is also another reason to mourn: the ejection from the realm of truth in paradise to that of pain and passions. This fall is so painful because it contains the whole drama of the banishment from God, the withdrawal of the "person to person" discourse with Him, of eternal life and co-glorification with the angels. Saint Gregory asks who has ever completely realized the deprivation of all these things and not mourned? And he urges all the faithful who live "in awareness of this deprivation" to mourn and to wash away with Godly remorse "the stains of sins" (Homily 29, *PG* 151). This exhortation on the part of the saint is completely in accord with the exhortation and experience of the Church, which, in the hymnography for the Sunday of Cheese-Week calls upon Christians, on the eve of the Great Fast, to remember their banishment from forfeited Paradise and to mourn this loss.