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Practical repentance and its fruits (Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)





Christ is the living truth. “I am the way, and the truth and the life” (John 14, 6). Therefore, He is life without beginning, unlimited (ἀπεριόριστος), unbound

(ἁδέσμευτος), co-eternal with the Father, inseparable and undivided from him. “*Praise be to God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For, he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding*”. After this revelation follows the infinite blessing of the divine promises, which is initiated by the first calling made by Lord: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (Matthew 4,17). Through our repentance the essence and power of life is being revived inside us and the honor and value of our lost humanity is being restored through faith. Our ability to come into contact with and receive the grace of the Holy Spirit and in general of divine enlightenment is being renewed through the lament of repentance. This ability had initially been weakened by our transgressions. At the beginning of practical repentance, no matter how hard one is struggling one cannot achieve, as he imagined, his redemption nor can he be freed from the limitations of the ‘old self’ (παλαιόν άνθρωπον). Initially, he simply tries to control his sinful intentions and stop his practical submission to the passions and the sinful customs. He finally stops borrowing and begins to think about pay off. Sometimes he happily repels his passions and temptations, and at other times this becomes painful. Then he begins comparing to the best of his ability, how far he still is from true spiritual life, especially when his behavior towards others is improper. At this point he is presented with the need to blame himself and this leads him to humility without which there is no social life. Such task needs patience and perseverance, but the complete success only depends on God’s grace and “*has nothing to do with us*”.

The Lord of the entire universe is truly encouraging us. He is the one who says: “*Take heart, I have overcome the world!*” (John 16, 33) Our real triumph is not the fact that these guarantees are being offered by the All Mighty Creator and God, but by Him as a person as well. The winner of the world, that is the winner of sin or rather the winner of all sin in all worlds and all time, the person Jesus Christ has become transcendent so that He renders transcendent all His followers. When we heed the divine commandments in our whole life, we are heading exactly towards the same victory. “*If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples*” (John 15, 7-8). We are only made worthy of this with Him (εν αυτώ) and by the power of His grace. There is no other path. No one else is capable of leading us, or of revealing to us the mysteries

of divine treasures which are beyond nature, *“for in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form”* (Colossians 2,9). He alone contained in a single, eternal, divine deed the entire universe, the heavens, the earth as well as the infernal regions. If we decisively follow in His footsteps and remain steadfast in His teachings, we are able to perceive through His illumination, to participate in His transcendental “BEING” to the measure of our repentance.

He who humbly repents feels that he embraces not just the visible but also the invisible creation by the power of love which spills over from his heart. This is so because this kind of prayer is most welcomed by God and an indication that he has acquired a “crashed spirit”. He, therefore, becomes, just as our Jesus, *“all things to all men”* (1 Corinthians 9, 22).

From now on, he who has tasted this sweetness let him be prepared to also taste the corresponding bitterness which is the result of the changes. Mother grace, which has so affectionately consoled and fortified the repenting soul and has saved it from the effects of temptations and ignorance; which has raised it to perceive so many mysteries, suddenly becomes merciless and hides her presence. The repenting soul knocks at the door of repentance in vain; it knocks at the same door which had immediately being opened in the past. Everything everywhere looks gloomy and there is no help from anyone. *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*(Matthew 27, 46) There is no Simon Canaanite to lift our cross. Even if we thrice or many times cry out we are not able to clearly perceive the response. There is only one secret consolation: hope has not been extinguished but it silently encourages the fighter: *“Do not be afraid. Just believe”*. Let me rather cite the words of our great Father, the most Holy Elder Silouan: *“Keep your mind in hell and do not despair”*.

The saying : *“I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting”* (Psalm 35,13) becomes our daily duty as well as this one: *“my tears have been my food day and night”* (Psalm 42,3). Then again we remember our Lord’s encouraging words: *“ I will see you again and you will rejoice”* (John 16, 22).

Serenity follows brainstorming and calm seas follow stormy waters. Grace reappears after the test of partial desertion; the soul begins to triumphantly chant: *“You my Lord removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy”* (Psalm 30, 12). The presence of the divine grace after the testing period is of higher value and *“sweeter than honey, honey from the comb”* (Psalm 19, 10) because it enhances the perception of the divine love more than the soul had ever known before. Humility is also improved, since human worthlessness is being revealed compared to the might of the divine love and the soul confesses with crashed spirit: *“It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees*

" (Psalms 119,72 ... *"I know o Lord that you laws are righteous"* (Psalm 119, 75 ...*" I have suffered much; renew my life o Lord, according to your word"* (Psalm 119,107). This deep sense of humility expands man's spiritual powers and introduces him to the realm of freedom. We come to perceive our *"gentle and humble in heart"* Jesus in humility and this is the meaning of *"you will know the truth and the truth will set you free"* (John 8, 32).

Thereafter, we enter the realm of the new creation and restored nature, where the air and the climate, according to our blessed elder, are different. The proprietors of this state become sons of the new age, according to Saint Makarius, and come to develop different kind of senses. *"What is mortal is swallowed up by life"* (2 Corinthians 5, 4). Our senses are completely revived so that they no longer behave irrationally but only as *"in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness"* (Romans 6, 19). Let no one think, however, that this luxury comes handy and effortlessly to anyone, but only after his victory over a tough trial of being patient in the face of temptation, through which the divine grace tests and tempts the fighters. *«I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on rock and gave me a firm place to stand"* (Psalm 40, 1-2). This saying comes from David's psalms, who wishing to declare the hyperbolic degree of something, repeats the word *"ypomenon ypemeina"*(I waited patiently): I have excelled myself in the state of perseverance. This is what draws the Lord's attention. He subsequently *"lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire"*. These are the deprivations and the desperation which follow harsh temptations. Then, *"He set my feet on rock and gave me a firm place to stand"*. *"The rock"* on which He set his feet is the acquired state of freedom. *"The firm place"* is the virtue of discernment. This is how the "old self" is being renewed. Soon, those who receive Christ with faith, conceive the hitherto strangeness of his teaching as the absolute truth. Man recognizes his worthlessness and comes towards the Father who has no beginning. He regards everything else as made of stone, as corrupted and worthless and the desire for prayer attracts him towards the personal, living God. He comes to perceive Him by His emptying of himself, since He went down to the infernal realm, down to Hades and subsequently ascended above all heaven and sat to the right of the Father in order to fulfill everything. Therefore from now on, He is the path and only through Him each one of us is able to come to the Father: *"No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14,6).

As Paul says the Christians have inherited an abundance of grace, more than what has been given to the prophets and those who lived before the law and during the appearance of the law. They came to perceive the divine matters in a shadowy and

enigmatic manner, while *"we have participated in divine nature"* (2 Peter 4,). We have perceived with our senses and *"our hands have touched"* the Word of life. He Himself testifies: *"Blessed are your eyes because they see and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it"* (Matthew 13,16-17). Paul assures us that the knowledge of Christ's mystery was given to us by the Holy Spirit, something which *"was not made known to men in other generations"* (Ephesians 3, 5). This mystery is so great and wonderful that the Church should make known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms *"the manifold wisdom of God, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In Him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence"*. (Ephesians 3, 10-12) The essence of this mystery is for us to recognize Him, as well as the power of His resurrection and to communicate with His PASSION in order *"to attain to the resurrection from the dead"*. (Philippians 3, 10) The risen Lord, who has sat at the right of the Father, has descended to the lowest regions of the earth. Therefore, the path which leads us to Him requires us to empty ourselves through suffering. That is the reason why the phase of the various temptations exists. Our corrupted image has distorted the faculties of our intellect. Therefore the decrees *"be holy for I am holy"* (A Peter 1, 16) and *"be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect"* (Matthew 5, 48) must become our absolute duty. *"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God"* (Acts 14, 22) and justifiably *"a righteous man may have many troubles"* (Psalms34, 19). It is through the violent struggle against the irrational laws which affect our corrupted body, that we convince the restoring grace to reform us. That is the reason why our Fathers have embraced the love for hard work even to an extent well beyond their own ability. They have grasped the meaning of the saying: *"if we died with him we will also live with him"* (B Timothy 2, 11) and have truly nullified their bodily members. Thus they became worthy of wearing the image of the divine. They have learnt by experience that before they enter life they must go through Golgotha. Therefore, they did not allow their tired feet to walk the broad and easy road, but they followed the narrow and steep path throughout their lives in order to reach their Savior Christ, who had died and risen for them.

Our Lord promises to those who wish to follow Him with the appropriate self denial, a hundredfold reward in this life and His eternal kingdom in the afterlife. By 'hundredfold' reward He does not mean the physical goods or peoples' appreciation, but the spiritual gifts which freshen the soul, and the supernatural contemplations which render us capable of communicating with the divine mysteries. Since *"the kingdom of God is within us"* (Luke 17, 21) it does not hide

its mysteries from the one who heeds its precepts, but responds to the silent exhalations of his heart in a motherly way, and reveals to him what is in store in the future for him. It also shows him those who lived before him and how they are now participating in the divine glory to the measure of their adequacy. The fruits of the Holy Spirit, the divine gifts which are the strength of the Church, are shared among the god-loving and hard-working fighters. It is in this way that those who live insignificant and despised lives during the period of their struggle become honest and respected later because they offer support and comfort to the faithful since they have been *“instructed by God”* and *“bring out of their storeroom new treasures as well as old”* (Matthew 13, 52). *“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires”* (Galatians 5, 22) and *“no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again”* (2 Corinthians 5, 15). It is obvious that they also participate in His charismas. *“To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another the ability to speak in different kind of tongues and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines”* (1 Corinthians 8-12).

If all these and other gifts, which the Lord distributes to those who love him, are only the hundredfold of those they themselves have abandoned to follow Him, no one is able to describe how grand would the eternal gifts be after the regeneration. The godly have only been “partly” allowed to comprehend such grandeur since they still are in the struggling (στρατευομένην) Church. No one is capable of judging “spiritual people and spiritual issues”, but the spiritual people alone judge everything. We are therefore not able to evaluate anything, but we may only slightly describe what they themselves have confessed to us. Spiritual charismas are a gift of the very same All Holy Spirit; some precede and others follow. But all are given to the Church to meet its needs and therefore they are revealed in the appropriate circumstances to help the faithful. Some like the gifts of prophesy and healing are described as ‘introductory’. To some the gift of healing is given in accordance with their faith while the gift of prophesy is given to those who have a more strict conscience. The gift of prophesy is sometimes given in stages through prescience; the latter seems to be rather a residue from man’s original personality which has been corrupted by the fall. Prescience is also met amongst relatives. Therefore, many mothers have a premonition about the suffering of their own children or twins share in each other’s pain even when they are far away from each other. This gift is sometimes found in the faithful during their first spiritual stage, as

soon as they start living a godly life and are cleansed from sin. Any spiritual advancement boosts prescience to the level of vision. If the intellect reaches illumination by the grace of Christ, then the gifts of foresight and prophecy are granted by the will of the Holy Spirit. God's charismas are always found in abundance in those who are simple in their character and are like children spiritually. All these gifts are handed over to the ardent lovers of the divine love, like Paul, who was thinking "*that everything was insignificant to him in order to win Christ*" (Philippians 3, 18?) Very few people in each generation are granted such charismas.

Discernment is regarded by the Fathers as "*the highest of all virtues*". Therefore, we will not be mistaken if we place this virtue in the highest rank. What else is discernment other than 'the spiritual eyes', which perceive and discriminate the mysteries of the natural and spiritual world in all dimensions like the cherubs do? The Lord's decree "*have salt in you*" (Mark 9, 50) is not far removed from the meaning of the virtue of discernment. "*The wise man has eyes in his head*" (Ecclesiastes 2, 14). What else does this verse mean other than the 'eyes' of discernment? How many times did our blessed elder describe this virtue to us and how many times have our Fathers written about it from their own experience? Those of our Fathers who have been blessed with the fragrance of this virtue of the Holy Spirit, have always become the centre of attention for the people of their generation, who approach them to learn God's wishes and solve their personal queries. Such people are like the Abbot Pimen- the true lamp stand of discernment; the great elders Varsanoufius and John; the professors of the spiritual law: Marc the Ascetic and Saint Maximus the Confessor and many others, who have always been regarded as the "proprietors of sight" among the congregation of the Church. These people, as participants in the all illuminating charisma of the Spirit, may repeat along with Paul "*We are not unaware of Satan's schemes*" (B Corinthians 2, 11). They are pure in heart, have perfected themselves in obedience and submission and have completely denied their own will; they also possess strict conscience and have absolutely no selfishness; they persevere in the spiritual task of the Lord's Prayer and keep the memory of God constantly in their minds; they diligently persevere in the face of temptations. Such people are declared as the true keepers of the mysteries of the Lord and are awarded the virtue of discernment. They become spiritual beacons for the people, the spiritual eyes of the Church and the break-waters of the evil one. The Lord's command "*work and keep*" (Genesis 2, 15) is perfectly applied to them and they become able to shepherd Christ's flock.

Therefore, after God, let us regard our conscience as the sleepless guardian and

the unambiguous rule for each of our actions. “Then, being aware of the direction of the wind, we will open our sails accordingly” (Saint John of the Ladder, Chapter ΚΣΤ, paragraph 5).

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