

Repentance: Sacrament and Experience (Christos Klavas)

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'Indeed, Good One, it's in your power to work miracles and there's no greater miracle than for someone to love sinners in their fall. It's easy to love saints. They deserve it'.

(Saint Silouan the Athonite †1938)

The period of holy and great Lent is the time above all in the Church year when the virtue of repentance is highlighted. The Gospel readings, the recollection of holy figures who were distinguished for the extent of their repentance, the content of the hymns and, in general, the atmosphere of 'bright sadness' which distinguishes it, constitute a continuous invitation to repentance. The virtue in question finds its practical application in the sacrament of repentance, holy confession.



When we speak of virtue, we have in mind the means by which people attempt to encounter God. According to Saint Maximos the Confessor, virtue is the first stage of our salvation, leading to knowledge and theology. According to the same Father, the basic characteristic of virtue is bravery. Therefore, repentance as a virtue has as its fundamental aim an encounter with God, or rather the reconnection of the fallen person to the source of true life. It's the necessary step which will bring us to real knowledge and to union with God. And, finally, it will have valour as its basic attribute.

Providing us with a brief, but very comprehensive and direct definition of repentance, Saint John the Damascan says that: 'Repentance is the return, through asceticism and pain from the unnatural to the natural, from the devil to God'. From this definition, we can see that repentance is clearly a process of flight from darkness, from the condition of sin which has blackened the 'image of God', leading us into the 'unnatural' and preventing us from ascending to the 'likeness of God'. Repentance is the quest for light, for the restoration of the 'natural', which is involved in the struggle to achieve the 'likeness'.

The root of sin is selfishness- egotism- and hence those who wish to overcome sin have to struggle with their ego, to say 'No' to their own will and to the habit of sin which keeps them bound to the old life. It's precisely this struggle that's implied in the definition of repentance as a progression accompanied by asceticism and pain. This is the pain caused in the soul when it's severed from the habit of sin. Without question, this painful process pre-supposes the bravery of which Saint Maximos spoke.

On the basis of the above, it can be readily understood that, in essence, repentance is founded on humility. The opposite of humility is pride, which is born from unrepentance. This latter is most plain in the case of the devil who's locked into the state of badness, self-enclosed in arrogant pride and unrepentance.

Saint Theognostos' way of expressing this is absolute, as regards, on the one hand, the loving-kindness of God and, on the other, the responsibility we bear as autonomous persons for our repentance. 'We'll not go to hell in the next life because we sinned, nor will we be condemned for this, since our nature is susceptible to alteration and change. We'll be condemned because we sinned and did not repent'.



The sacrament of repentance- holy confession- is the practical application of the virtue of repentance. Through this sacrament, people express their desire to

repent, to alter their mind-set and not to sin any more. In essence, confession is mostly the expression of the pain and anxiety of people who are experiencing the absence of God from their lives, their alienation from God. The whole sacrament is built on humility, since penitents are called upon to come and confess what they're ashamed about, not to someone who's without sin but to another person, equally of the flesh, the priest.

But the priest is the person who will feel the pain of others and will support them through his own personal experience. Another thing we should make clear is that, in the Orthodox tradition, confession is distinguished for its therapeutic nature.

According to Saint Nikodimos the Athonite, the person of the spiritual father is made up of three people: the father, the doctor and the judge. As father, he welcomes his prodigal children; as doctor he heals their wounds; and as judge he's fair and, where necessary, strict, in order to make the cure work.

The virtue of repentance and the sacrament of confession are a constant call on the part of the Church to people who are suffering. Whether we choose the path of healing or we remain in a state of sickness and pain is our free choice to make.