

## COMING TO CHRIST THE PHYSICIAN: THE ORTHODOX EXPERIENCE OF CONFESSION



By: Metropolitan Kalistos of Diokleia

In the book by Tito Colliander, *The Way of the Ascetics*, a brief conversation is recorded between a monk and a layman. The layman asks the monk, “What do you do there in the monastery?” And the monk replies, “We fall and get up, fall and get up, fall and get up again.” It’s not only in monasteries that we do that. In our fallen and sinful world, an all important aspect of our personhood is our need to be healed, to get up after we’ve fallen, our need to repent, to forgive – and to be forgiven.

Let us begin with the familiar text of St. James, Chapter 5:14-16: “Are any among you sick? They should call for the presbyters of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up. If anyone has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Therefore, confess your sins one to another and pray for one another so that you may be healed.”

What we notice in this passage is that St. James is speaking about healing in an all-embracing sense of body and soul together. He talks about the sick person being healed through anointing with oil, but he also says that the sick person will be forgiven his sins. So, healing of body and soul go together. We are to see the human person in holistic terms. We are an undivided unity:

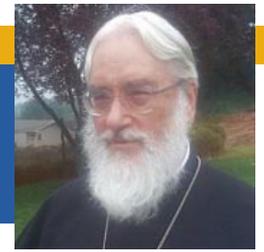
the body is not healed apart from the soul; nor is the soul apart from the body. The two are interdependent. St. James speaks at one and the same time of the sick person being raised from his bed physically healed, and he speaks of spiritual healing, of the forgiveness of his sins through confession. I find this to be a key that opens a very important door, a vital clue — the anointing of the sick and confession are essentially connected as two indivisible aspects of a single mystery of healing and forgiveness. It is significant that in some of the Byzantine liturgical commentaries, confession and the anointing of the sick are treated not as two distinct sacraments but as complementary aspects of a single mystery of healing. Each has its own specific function — they do not replace one another, but together they form a true union. What we seek in confession is much more than an external, forensic absolution; above all we desire noetic medicine for our chronic spiritual wounds. In confession we are not only to see Christ the Judge lifting from us the sentence of condemnation but also – and more fundamentally – we are to see Christ the Physician, restoring what is broken in us and renewing our life. Above all, the sacrament of confession is to be seen as a sacrament of healing. And as a sacrament of healing, confession is not simply a painful necessity, a discipline imposed on us by church authority, but an action full of joy and saving grace.

If we think of confession in terms of healing, we also have to remember that healing takes time. Normally it doesn’t happen suddenly. We shouldn’t think of each confession in an isolated way, separately from all the others. We should recognize that confession is a process as well as an event. How many of Christ’s parables in the Gospels speak of a slow, gentle, secret growth that is not seen by us but seen by God? In going to a series of confessions, if possible to the same priest, gradually we change, even though we may feel that nothing very remarkable happened at any specific confession. Yet over time we realize, yes, we have been healed.

Christ Himself recognizes how long and drawn out the process of forgiveness may be. We have to forgive people “seventy times seven” times. That’s often what God has to do to us. We shouldn’t feel discouraged if we have to keep mentioning the same sin over and over again at successive confessions. Does that mean that the confession is useless? Does it mean that we are just wasting our own time and the priest’s time? Not necessarily. When we feel, “well, I can’t go to confession because I’d only have the same things to say” — that is a temptation of the devil. We must go back. Real and lasting change often happens slowly.

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St. Tikhon of Zadonsk (1724-1783), paraphrasing the short exhortation addressed by the priest to the penitent in the Russian rite of confession, writes: “When giving instruction on the sacrament of repentance, the priest should speak to the penitent in this manner: My child, you are confessing to God who is displeased at any sin; and I, His servant, am the



unworthy witness of your repentance. Do not conceal anything. Do not be ashamed or afraid, for there are only three of us here, you and I and God. It is before God that you have sinned and He knows all your sins and how they were committed. God is everywhere and wherever you said, thought or did anything evil, He was there and knew all about it. He is here with us now and is waiting for your words of repentance and confession. You too know all of your sins; do not be ashamed to speak of all that you have committed. And I who am here, am a sinner just like you; so then, do not be ashamed to confess your sins in my presence.”

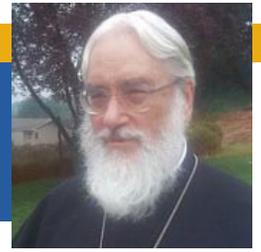
“There are only three of us here” – penitent, priest and Christ the Physician. What does each of these three do and whose action is the most important? Many people tend to put the greatest emphasis on what the priest does, on his words of counsel and encouragement; and if the priest fails to say anything eloquent or unexpected, they tend to assume that little or nothing has been achieved. Or else they overstress the second aspect, what they themselves are doing. They imagine that they must be deeply stirred on an emotional level – even though authentic repentance is not primarily a matter of emotions. And because they put the main emphasis on their own efforts, they are in danger of

regarding confession in bleak and discouraging terms, as something to be got over and done with, necessary yet disagreeable, like a cold bath. But in reality the most important action is not that of the penitent or the priest, but that of God. While the penitent is required to prepare himself by self-examination and to conduct a searching scrutiny of his conscience, in the last resort he comes to confession empty-handed, helpless, not claiming to be able to heal himself, but asking for healing from God. The priest is simply a witness, bearing testimony before God of what we have to say. To vary the analogy, the priest is no more than God’s usher introducing us into the divine Presence. The priest is merely the receptionist in the hospital waiting room or the attendant in the operating theatre, whereas the surgeon is Christ Himself. It is to Christ and not to the priest that the confession is made; and it is from Christ, not from the priest, that forgiveness comes. Once we regard the sacrament of confession as fundamentally Christ’s action, we shall begin to understand it in a far more positive way. Confession is an experience of God’s healing love, not merely of our own disintegration and weakness. We are to see not just the prodigal son, plodding slowly and painfully along the road home, but also the father, catching sight of him when he is still a long way off and running out to meet him (Luke 15:20).

As Tito Colliander puts it, “If we take one step toward the Lord, He takes ten steps toward us.” That is precisely what we experience in confession. Repentance and confession, then, are not just something that we do by ourselves with the help of the priest, but above all something God is doing with and in both of us. In the words of St. John Chrysostom, “Let us apply to ourselves the saving medicine of repentance; let us accept from God the repentance that heals us. For it is not we who offer it to Him but He who bestows it upon us.” It should be remembered that in Greek the same word *exomologesis* means both confession of sins and thanksgiving for gifts received.

What, more specifically, is the part of the priest in this shared action? All who have experienced the blessing of having as their confessor one imbued with the grace of true spiritual fatherhood will testify to the importance of the priest’s role. As an example, I can remember at the Russian convent in London many years ago there was a priest, Fr. John, who didn’t much like hearing confessions. He didn’t like giving sermons either. He was a person of few words and very humble, and didn’t feel he really had the authority to offer counsel in confession, but he was blessed by the bishop to hear confessions and so he did.

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On one occasion a woman was telling him at immense length of her almost constant quarrels with her husband: “I said this and he said that and I told him he was wrong and told him this” – and so it went on “and I told him this and this and this.” When she finally stopped all Fr. John did was turn to her and say “And did it help?” and then he gave her absolution. That came as a sudden revelation to her: the futility of the endless arguments she had with her husband, of her endless desire to prove that she was right and that he was wrong. Suddenly she saw that there was no point to all this, that it was quite simply unnecessary and she stopped from that moment.

But it is not the priest’s function simply to give advice. There is nothing automatic about the absolution he pronounces. He can bind as well as loose. He can withhold absolution – though this is very rare – or he can impose a penance, forbidding the penitent to receive holy communion for a time or requiring the fulfillment of some task. This, again, is not very common in contemporary Orthodox practice, but it is important to remember that the priest possesses this right. Not that the penance should be regarded as a punishment; still less should it be viewed as expiating an offense. We do not acquire “merit” by fulfilling a penance, for in our relation with God we can never claim any merit of our own. A penance is not a punishment, nor yet a form of expiation, but a means of healing. It is a medicine. If the actual confession is like an operation, the penance is the tonic that restores the patient to health during his convalescence.

Entrusted with authority to bind and to loose, to withhold or to confer absolution, enjoying wide discretion as to the advice he gives and the healing penance he chooses, the confessor-priest has laid upon him a heavy responsibility. And yet his role is also limited. The confession is made to God, not to the priest; and it is God who grants forgiveness.

“I am only a witness,” says the priest; and still more explicitly in St. Tikhon’s paraphrase, “I am a sinner just like you.” If at the moment of absolution the priest stands to a certain degree in God’s place, yet during the earlier part of the sacramental action he stands at the penitent’s side, as himself a fellow penitent, “a sinner just like you” who also needs divine forgiveness. There is indeed a two-way relationship between the priest and the one who is making the confession; the spiritual father is helped by his children as well as they by him. The confessor-priest also has to go in his turn to confession; and when he does so, it is usual for him to remove the priestly cross from around his neck.

During the concluding absolution the penitent bows his head or else kneels – not, however, in the direction of the priest but before the icon of Christ or the book of the Gospels, symbolizing the invisible presence of Christ who alone has the power to remit sins. The prayer of absolution makes it clear beyond all doubt that it is Christ, not the priest, who confers forgiveness. In the more ancient form, still employed by the Greek Orthodox, the priest does not say “I forgive you” but “May God forgive you.” In the 17th century, under Roman Catholic influence, this was changed in the Slavonic books to the first person: “I, an unworthy priest, through the power given to me by Him, forgive you.” However, this should be seen as an unfortunate distortion, for in no other sacrament of the Orthodox Church does the celebrant use the personal pronoun “I” in the act of administration.

The healing that we experience through the sacrament of confession takes the specific form of reconciliation. Sin, as we learn from the parable of the prodigal son, is exile, alienation, exclusion from the family. Repentance is to come back home, to return from isolation to fellowship, to be reintegrated into the family, to share fully once more in the life of the community.