

## Five

### THERAPEUTIC DIMENSION OF CONFESSION

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The sacrament of confession has a vital role in the life of a real Christian. It is very unfortunate that many of the Orthodox believers do not take it seriously. Currently it has degenerated into an annual exercise by which people get admission to the general bodies of the parishes. Many of those who confess on those occasions do it more as a ritual than as an act of faith.

Some people, especially the youth of the Church participate in confession for its psychological effects. They recommend it as a therapy and they prefer a priest to a psychologist because the former is more trusted than the latter. However, it is fascinating to know that the interpretation of confession as a therapy, is not a psychological discovery of the twentieth century. It was rather a part of the faith of the Ancient Church. Let us have a look at the origin of confession as a religious practice and the faith of the Orthodox Church regarding it.

### Confession of sins as a religious activity

The word *confession* is derived from the Latin word *confiteor*, which basically means 'to acknowledge' or 'to avow'. Later it got the specific meaning of 'confessing a sin/ fault'. The early Christians used it in two very important contexts: The first was confession of one's faith before a tribunal during the time of persecution and the second was confession one's sins before the Church.

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The origin of the confession of sins can be found in the life of the non-literate people of the world. They found confession of sins not only as a theistic concept, where the goal was divine forgiveness, but also as a non-theistic idea, where the end was the efficacy of the confession as an act in itself. However, in most cases of these, the central theme for confession was sexual transgression. The hunters, fishers, members of an expedition team and those who had to fight with the devastating powers of nature believed in maintaining sexual purity. They as well as their wives had the responsibility to maintain sexual sanctity and prove it before the community, in which they lived. If somebody was accused of adultery, they had to make a confession either before the people concerned or before the heads of their clan.

The traditional high cultures and world religions also observed confession for various reasons. There were public as well as private confessions. People confessed to their fellow individuals and in some cases to the priests. Even here the sexual sins got more importance

than other sins. In Hinduism confession was followed by an eliminating sacrifice whereas in Buddhism and Jainism it was a part of their monastic life.

### **Confession of sins as seen in the Old Testament**

The community of Israel was considered to be the elected People of God. They were holy people because their God was a Holy God (Lev. 19,2). If somebody committed a sin, it was believed that it would affect the whole community for a certain period of time. In some cases the sinner was stoned to death (Jos. 7). There were also practices of setting up trials against a man who was considered to be a sinner. Confession was accompanied by fasting too (1Kgs. 21,9-12).

Israelites transferred their sins to a scapegoat through the confession of their sins and thereafter they sacrificed the animal (Lev. 16,21-22). Sometimes the physical sickness was considered as an after effect of sins. One had to offer a Sin Offering in such cases (Lev.14).

The use of the Hebrew word *soob* is very important in our present discussion. It means a 'turning back' from something. The Old Testament books use this word to mean 'turning back from sins' which means to make repentance. Prophets like Isaiah, Amos and Zachariah preached to the Israelites to turn back from their sins. King David sang the Psalm of repentance (Ps 51) after the visit of prophet Nathan, (2 Sam 12,1ff.) in the hope that Yahweh would forgive him. In the prayer during the consecration of the Temple of Jerusalem Hebrew word 'soob' means turning back from something. The Old Testament books use this word to mean 'turning back from sins' which means to make repentance. King Solomon prays for forgiveness from God on behalf of those who come to the temple and repent their sins (1Kgs. 8,48-50).

### **New Testament Understanding of Confession of sins**

The New Testament also emphasizes the need for repentance mandatory to the forgiveness of God. John the Baptist, the herald of Jesus Christ, preaches the baptism of repentance and forgiveness of

sins (Mk 1,4). Jesus Christ also opens his ministry by saying: "the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1,15). St. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to dissociate themselves from sinners and to expel them from the Church (1 Cor 5,9f.). However, Jesus teaches his disciples to help a sinner realize his sins and to repent; expulsion comes as the last resort for those who don't want to listen to the advice of the Church (Mt 18,15-17). Also he authorizes

his disciples to bind and lose the sins of the people (Jn 20,23).

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The belief that confession of sins results in the forgiveness of sins, (1 Jn 1,8-10) was an essential part of the faith of the New Testament. The sick had to call the elders of the Church and to confess their sins before them. This led to the healing process (Jam 5,16). The sin for which there was no possibility for repentance was apostasy (Heb 6,1f.) and the one for which there was no sacrifice was a deliberate act (Heb 10,26). However, those who did not want to repent after committing a sin would invite serious punishments from God (Rev 2,16).

### **Confession of sins in the Ancient Church**

The Early Church considered itself as the Body of Christ and therefore people had to throw away their pagan faith along with their sinful life before getting admitted into it. It regarded repentance followed by confession of sins, only in the context of baptism. The church maintained holiness, not only of their heart but also of their body, because of their strong faith in the imminent Second Coming of Christ. It was illogical then to think of confession of sins after

baptism because it would have weakened the repentance and confession of sins before baptism.

The confession of sins by baptized people became a necessity only from 2<sup>nd</sup> century onwards. The important challenges posed on Christians were the following:

- The second coming of Christ was delayed; it was impossible for the believers to lead a pure life as they had imagined. It was the duty of the Church to console those who were disappointed about sinning after the baptism.
- There were a lot of Christians in the second and third generations and they were baptized as infants. They were unable to understand the seriousness of abstinence from sins; as they grew up they could have committed many sins.
- To believe in Christ was a matter of life or death during the time of persecution of Christians. Some people became apostates only because they did not want to die. Later they wished to rejoin the Church after confessing their grave sins.

The earliest document which gives evidence to the practice of confession of sins by a baptized Christian, is the *Shepherd of Hermas* written in the second half of the second century. It regards repentance as a "great wisdom" and the Christians who did not confess as "those who have lost their lives" (*Shepherd of Hermas*, Book II, Commandment IV, Ch. 3,3). However, confession was allowed to the Christians only once after baptism. It was meant for the forgiveness of the triad of sins- apostasy, murder and adultery- which needed a confession.

### **The Theology of Confession**

There were two different streams of theology regarding the confession of sins as far as the Ancient church was concerned. These originated almost simultaneously and later developed as the theology of the East as well as the West.

#### **Confession as an act of Satisfaction:**

Tertullian (145-220 CE) was a man well versed in the Roman Law. He interpreted the relationship between man and God in legal

terms. He professed the need for confession of sins in his treatise called *De Penitentia*. According to him the believers should confess their sins not because God is ignorant about their commissions and omissions, but because they could appease God through the confession. His statement about *Exomologesis*, i.e. the confession of a baptized Christian, is as follows; *Satisfaction confessione disponitur, confessione penitentia nascitur, penitentia Deus mitigatur*. This means; "by confession satisfaction is settled, of confession repentance is born and by repentance God is appeased" (*De Penitentia*, IX, 2).

According to this interpretation confession becomes efficacious in the act itself. That means, one can appease God through his readiness to confess; it does not necessarily need a heart which feels pain over the sins. This theology has later influenced the Roman Catholic perspective on the theme. As per this theology the sinner is considered as a culprit; the priest as his advocate and God is the judge. Since the act of confession became more important than the repentance of the sinner, everything became mechanical. One could get absolution of sins even by paying money to the Church; what is referred to as the sale of absolution. This thought has led to the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Confession as a Therapy:

Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD) interpreted confession in a pedagogic and medical sense almost during the same time. He said: "...for those of us who are diseased in body a physician is required; so also those who are diseased in soul require a pedagogue (teacher) to cure our maladies; and then a teacher to train and guide the soul to all requisite knowledge when it is made able to admit the revelation of the word" (Clement, *Instructor*, Ch.1). In Clement's view the sinner is a patient and the priest is a physician. There may not be only mild but also stringent medicines to cure the diseases of the soul. Sometimes the physician had to give medicine to vomit what remains undigested in the soul. In some other cases the soul must be operated with exhortations, reprimand and conviction through exposure. Involuntary sin is a "sudden death" in Clement's view. Clement realized the psycho-somatic impact of human activities and he was emphasizing a psychological approach in confession. The Eastern Church has seen this view as more acceptable.

St. Basil the Great taught the monks to confess their sins to the spiritual fathers who were wise, holy and men of rich spiritual experiences. He categorized the people who made repentance into four different stages according to their position in the Church during the worship (see Basilius, Letters, CCXVII):

- weepers- those who stood outside the door of the Church
- hearers- those who stood inside the Church at the place called Nartex
- kneelers- those who stood along with the catechumens
- 'bystanders'- those who stood with the believers

They had to undergo a long period of repentance: four years as weeper, five years as hearer, seven years as kneeler and four years as 'stander'. The sinner was not permitted to take communion during the period of repentance. The duration of the repentance could be shortened if the Church saw that the sinner felt the pain of his guilt and decided to keep himself away from that malice for ever. However, this was never considered as a penalty but was seen as a spiritual exercise which helped the soul to restore its health. Almsgiving, Bible reading, prayer and fasting were also associated with the exercise of repentance. The sinners did all these not for their efficacy but as part of their spiritual belief.

The person who comes for confession needs a self examination; then he should confess his sins with deep sorrow and the earnest desire for forgiveness from God. Thus the practice of confession becomes a therapeutic process which helped one regain the strength of his soul. The role of the priest in this process is more of a doctor than of an advocate. He hears the sins of a believer not on the basis of his personal capacity as another believer, but on the basis of his priesthood. He does this in the Church which experiences the communion of the believers and the saints. The absolution of the sins comes only from God. The priest could only pronounce the blessing of absolution on the basis of his priestly authority which he gets during the mystery of ordination. Towards the end the believer receives the Eucharistic communion, which was referred to as the "medicine of immortality and an antidote against death" by Ignatius of Antioch.

### Confession as part of a holistic spiritual life:

Confession is an essential part of our spiritual life. Good Christians should always be in a mood of repentance. Around 244 CE Origen wrote some homilies on the Book of Leviticus. According to him there are seven ways for the forgiveness of sins and he puts these in the place of the Levitical sacrifices (*Homilies on Leviticus*, 2,4). They are the following: (i) Baptism (ii) Suffering of Martyrdom (iii) Almsgiving (iv) Charity and (vii) Confession. Regular confession would cleanse us and thereafter we will be eligible to receive the Holy Communion. St. Paul warns the people: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord (1 Cor 11, 27).

However, there is a major difference between *Confession* and *Spiritual guidance*. Some people seek only spiritual guidance during the act of confession; they neither repent nor confess any sins. What they do is simply explaining their mental tensions and the Father Confessor has to give them some guidance only. This is not the sacrament of confession. It is rather the realization and acceptance of sins committed, which leads to repentance and tears. Those sins confessed will only be forgiven. The role of the priest is very important here. Job Getcha quotes from an ancient Canon of a Synod, the Council of Trullo (St. Valdimir's Theological Quarterly, Vol. 51/ Number 2-3, 2007, pages 215-6):

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"For the diseases called sin are not simple affairs, but on the contrary various and complex, and they produce many offshoots of the *injury*, as a result whereof the evil becomes widely diffused, and it progresses until it is checked by the power of the one *treating* it. So that a person who is professing the science of treating *ailments* as a *spiritual physician* ought first to examine the disposition of the sinner and ascertain whether he tends to *health*, or on the contrary, provokes the *illness* to attack him by his own actions; at the same time bearing in mind that he must provide against any reversion, and considering whether the patient is struggling against the *physician*, and whether the *ulcer* of the soul is being aggravated by the application of the *remedy*; and accordingly to mete out mercy in due proportion to the merits of the case."

The interpretation of Confession as an act of healing is very important in today's church life. A human being can suffer from three kinds of illnesses: *physical illness*, *mental illness* and *spiritual illness*. Some mental disorders are due to spiritual illness. This can be healed by a *spiritual physician* only. Therefore one has to go to the Church to get the *treatment* just as he goes to the hospital for physical and mental illnesses. Modern people are sick more in the spirit and psyche than in the body. We are living in a society, where everything is permitted. The freedom of the media puts us in a world of temptations and illegal human relationships. Due to the disintegration of the joint family system there is no one in the family to correct and guide the youngsters. Because of their life in a world of globalization, where competition and stress are the book marks, many people suffer from complexes of fear, hatred, jealousy, aggression etc. Unless one realizes the danger of all these the whole life can be a failure. There are highly qualified youngsters, who become a prey to the challenges of this modernized life style of the world. The Church has to address these problems and give the believers a platform where they feel relieved. So there should be efficient Father Confessors. They can play a major role in the spiritual upbringing of the believers. Those who approach them would confess not only their sins but also their disappointments and grievances. These would get not only the medicines for their *spiritual ailments* but also *tonics*, which strengthen their life. •