

But like ourselves or not, we still *love* ourselves. So it follows that *loving* our enemies doesn't mean that we have to *like* them.

Christians always say to "hate the sin, but love the sinner." But just how is this done?

If you think about it, the one person for whom we have done this all our lives is ourselves. However much we hate some of the things we do, we still love ourselves. In fact it's because we love ourselves that we hate that we're the kind of person that would do some of these things.

So our Christianity doesn't reduce our hate for evil. We *ought* to hate evil. But we should hate evil in others the way we hate evil in ourselves – being sorry that things were done and hoping that the person doing them will repent and be saved.¹

It is a human tendency to become complacent in the knowledge that though we have sinned, there are many others with much greater sins than ours. It is easy to think that by comparison, "we are not that bad."

But God doesn't call us to be "not that bad." We can always find someone who appears to be more sinful than ourselves.

Yet if we look at ourselves, can we be so sure that we have lived a life of penitence and confession which will keep the gates of heaven open to us? Father Anthony Coniaris writes, "One unconfessed, unforsaken sin is enough to keep us out of the Kingdom, I'm not going to tell you what that secret sin is for you. The Holy Spirit no doubt has already told you what it is. Jesus calls on you today to repent and forsake that sin so that you may be in the Kingdom."²

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¹ ibid

² Coniaris, Anthony M., *Daily Vitamins for Spiritual Growth I*, Light and Life Publishing, Minneapolis, 1994.

PREPARING FOR CONFESSION

Father James Kordaris



*"Enter the Church and wash away your sins.
For here there is a hospital and not a court of law.
Do not be ashamed to enter the Church;
be ashamed when you sin, but not when you repent."*

-St. John Chrysostom

In the film, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indiana Jones finds himself in a cave, trying to pass three obstacles in order to reach the Holy Grail. To pass the first he is told, "Only a penitent man will pass." As he repeats this phrase to himself, he approaches the place where, only moments before, many had fallen before him.

At the last instant, just as blades are falling over his head, he cries out to himself, "a penitent man is *humble* before God!" Indiana drops to his knees and the blades pass harmlessly over his head.

We, too, are called to drop to our knees before God. But this is only the outward sign of repentance. There must also be a *spiritual* dropping to the knees in humility before God.

Repentance has its roots in the apostles. In the Book of Acts the Apostle Peter says, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:37-38)

When we fall away from God, we have removed ourselves from His communion – communion with Him and with all other Christians. We have *excommunicated* ourselves. To re-enter communion with God is the on-going activity of all Christians. We fall away daily in some way or another. No one is exempt. As Father John Chryssavgis writes, "Both prodigal and saint are 'repenting sinners.'"³

Often, when children play in competitive games, one will call out "that's a *do over!*" Haven't we all, at more than one time in our lives, wished for that chance to undo the past and start over? This is the first step in repentance. Repentance offers us this new beginning.

We are telling God that we have *changed our mind* about our past direction and would like to move back into communion with him. The Greek work for repentance is *metanoia*, and translates as a *change of mind*. This change implies a very deep and fundamental transformation in the way we see ourselves, those around us, our world, and our relationship to God. So it is often a good thing to change our mind.

To change our mind in repentance is the starting point in our journey toward the re-centering of our lives in God the Trinity. We leave behind regret as we move toward hope.

³ Chryssavgis, John, *Repentance and Confession*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, 1990, p 4.

We turn our focus from our own shortcomings to the power of God's love. Failings are forgotten and we see before us what we may become by God's divine grace.⁴ Repentance is not a single action but an attitude, a frame of mind.

In his book, *Achieving Your Potential in Christ: Theosis*, Father Anthony Coniaris writes of the Transfiguration of Christ as a transformation of the darkened nature of man into the restored "positive beauty of the image of God that had been marred by sin..." In striving toward Theosis, union with God, we are led to repentance. As we move toward the light of God, we become more aware of our sin, and develop the attitude of continual repentance.⁵



Think back over your life of things which you regret having said or done – hurtful, inconsiderate, selfish, deceitful. Think also of those things which you have done which may not have directly affected others, but which you know to be wrong according to the teachings of the Church. Bring them to mind as if they were occurring right now. Think of how it would have been if you had acted differently. Take this regret and turn it into repentance. Feel the falsehood, and acknowledge that you have offended another person or the Church, and in doing so you have offended God.

This regret now requires a personal response. Just as God's love for us is personal, so must ours be for Him. In the words of Fr. Theodore Stylianopoulos, "As the baptized Christian grows from child to adult, and participates in the sacramental life of the Church, his personal response to God becomes crucial."

The personal response is the act of confession, which is recognized as a sacrament in the Orthodox Church. Confession is an important aspect of our spiritual growth process, and should not be seen as legalistic, nor should it be shrouded in guilt.

Confession is one aspect of a spiritual life in Christ and should be seen as a sort of spiritual check-up with one's spiritual father. Just as we go to the doctor who is able to see our medical history in order to make the appropriate diagnosis and to prescribe the necessary medicine, so it is necessary for us to go to a spiritual father who knows us and is able to prescribe the most appropriate spiritual medicine.

In Orthodoxy, confessions are heard in any convenient and open part of the church, quite often in front of the iconostasis. As one stands before the iconostasis, the priest stands beside, serving as a minister and a witness before Christ on behalf of the individual. It is not the priest, but rather God who is the judge.



Several prayers and Psalms are read. Sometimes hymns are chanted. The priest then encourages the individual to repent, "My brother/sister, do not be ashamed to relate to God, before me, all that you came to tell; because you are not telling these things to me but to God, before whom you stand."⁶

Following the confession, the priest reads the

following to the individual:

"My spiritual child, who have make your confession to my humble person: I, a humble sinner, have no power to forgive sins on earth; only God can do that; but trusting in the divinely spoken words that were addressed to the Apostles after the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, which said, "If you pronounce unforgiven the sins of any, they remain unforgiven", we are bold to say: Whatever you have related to my humble and lowly person, and whatever you have failed to say either from ignorance or from forgetfulness, whatever it may be, may God forgive you in this present age and in the age to come."

Confession is not a duty nor requirement to be fulfilled. Repentance and confession have an important place in the development of our Christian life. The sacrament of Holy Confession may be seen as a gift from God for the reception of forgiveness. It is also an opportunity to receive spiritual guidance from one's spiritual father. With practice, Holy Confession may begin to appear as an opportunity for personal spiritual growth.⁷

By keeping ourselves in front of God, we find it easier to remain free from the bonds of sin. In the words of St. Thallassios, "As wax melts before fire, so does an impure thought before the fear of God."⁸

In everyday terms we might call this the *Clean Slate Theory*. This theory holds that when something is dirty, a little more dirt is barely noticeable. But when that same thing is clean, even the slightest bit of dirt becomes immediately noticeable.

So it is with sin in our lives. Without confession, each additional sin appears to stain us very little and we become numb to the difference between right and wrong. But when we receive the gift of a clean slate through confession of our sins, we find our sins more uncomfortable, because they are so very clear to us in our current state of cleanliness.

It is important to remember that If we are to be forgiven our sins by God, He requires of us that we also forgive one another. For many of us, this is the most difficult aspect of repentance and confession. Yet we say it each time we pray the Lord's prayer, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

This is also repeated by Jesus in Matthew 6:14-15, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

This is what Christianity is. It is right in the middle of everything – even the Lord's Prayer – "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We are not offered forgiveness on any other terms.

Do you find it hard to forgive? In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until we have someone to forgive."⁹

How are we able to forgive someone if we don't like that person? Is it realistic to strive to "love one's neighbor"? Do we have to like him or find him an attractive person? It's hard to make yourself like someone. Often, we don't even like *ourselves*.

⁴ Ware, Kallistos, *The Orthodox Way*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1993, p 152.

⁵ Coniaris, Anthony M., *Achieving Your Potential In Christ: Theosis*, Light and Life Publishing, Minneapolis, 1993, p 56.

⁶ Constantinides, Evagoras, *The Priest's Service Book*, Published by the Author, Merrillville, 1994, p149.

⁷ Harakas, Stanley S., *The Orthodox Church: 455 Questions and Answers*, Light & Life Publishing, Minneapolis, 1988, p 87.

⁸ Grube, George W., *What the Church Fathers Say About...*, Light & Life Publishing, Minneapolis, 1996, p89.

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