

A Life of Repentance

(Adapted from a homily given on 1/29/2023)

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Earlier this year I received a question by email that not only ties in with themes from today's Gospel of the Canaanite Woman, but also with our preparation for Great Lent. The question is this:

Fr. John, I keep puzzling over something and then forgetting to ask you about it. Orthodox often speak of the work of repentance and a life of repentance. Yet, when I confess my sins to God with your absolution, I leave them behind forever, right? What am I repenting of? My sins between confession and the present moment? Sins I'm unaware of? And what is the practice of repentance besides confession and asking God to forgive me daily? I presume the Jesus Prayer lies at the heart of repentance, but what else do I need to know to clearly understand what a life of repentance is?

My reply follows.

You are asking an extremely important question, and there are two rather different ways to answer it. First and foremost, your question about repentance presupposes the common emphasis that repentance is *turning away from sin*. This is a mistaken emphasis because, as the church fathers frequently point out, we tend to turn from sin to sin, from one bad practice to another. We want to stop relying on food to comfort our anxieties so we switch to the distraction of binge-watching YouTube videos. Turning away from sin is not sufficient, and too often invites self-reliance instead of communion with Christ. Repentance should instead be practiced and experienced as *turning toward Christ*. If we are re-orienting ourselves toward Christ, the Orient from on high, we are of course turning away from sin, but not by our own strength or toward our own image of self-improvement. This understanding invites your suggestion that “the Jesus Prayer lies at the heart of repentance,” for the Jesus Prayer is the Church's gift to us to fulfill St. Paul's admonition to pray without ceasing—that is, to live a life of continuously and ever more fully turning toward Christ.

Of course, in the process of turning toward Christ, who is the Light that shines into the dark corners of our own souls, we notice—not by our own clever self-analysis but by the penetrating conviction of the Holy Spirit—that sin infects many aspects of our lives. Turning toward Christ doesn't ignore the reality of our sins, but invites us to confess them, that is, to agree with God regarding what the divine Light is revealing in us. While focusing on Christ, we become aware of and honest about our sins. We often think of repentance as a response to sin, and understandably so, but this too is a mistaken emphasis for *repentance is a response to Christ*, to the revelatory light he shines into our life. Thus, there is a second and complementary way to

answer your question that addresses the role of confessing sins to God, both on our own and with a priest in the Mystery of Confession, as an essential constituent of the life of continual repentance. Consider the following three ways in which our lives are more entangled with sin than we normally realize, and how a life of repentance is the means both for seeing these entanglements and for being released from their bondage.

First, a life of continual repentance reveals that our sins are much deeper than what we confess. Sins are like weeds in the garden of our heart, and our confession is typically more like cutting the weeds off at ground level rather than pulling them out by their roots. This is not to belittle our confessions; we confess what God reveals to us about ourselves, and gradually, as we are able to bear the revelations, he reveals the deeper sources of our sins. We are forgiven for what we have confessed, but our confessions are radically incomplete because we are so blind to our inner life. A life of continually turning toward Christ cultivates a continual openness to God's light shining ever more deeply into the dark recesses of our hearts, revealing the roots of our sins that remain.

God is lovingly patient with us; much more so than we are with ourselves; he's transforming us at the pace we can handle. In this way, the mystery of confession and the associated forgiveness is not about being freed from the deserved punishment of our sin, but is rather about being freed from the sin itself, where the sin is not simply this or that action but the disposition and passion that give rise to the action. To switch to the therapeutic analogy of sin and redemption, God is trying to heal us through and through; he doesn't simply treat the symptoms of our spiritual ailments but does radical surgery to remove the spiritually foreign invaders that are the causes of those symptoms. Our life of continued repentance is the cultivation of the disposition of offering ourselves to the divine Surgeon.

Second, a life of continual repentance reveals—if we understand properly what sin is—that we live a life of (nearly) continuous sin. What do I mean? St. Paul tells us that whatever is not of faith is sin (Rom 14:23). Thus, at any moment of our life that we are relying on ourselves, or on any other created thing, in place of relying on God, we are sinning. We have turned away from God. Sin, turning away from God, and repentance, turning toward God, are opposites. At any given moment we are doing one or the other. The more we attempt to turn toward Christ, for example with continuous prayer, the more we realize how much we are not present to God. St. Maximus the confessor, in his second of *Four Centuries on Love*, emphasizes that all our distractions, all the times we forget God, are simply to be understood as our failure to love God, which is the only real sin that there is; every sin is ultimately a failure to respond with love to God's love.

Maybe this seems overwhelmingly depressing to us, to realize that our lives are a nearly continuous expression of rejecting God's love by preferring the creation over the Creator. But if we find this disheartening, it is because we have a deeply mistaken image of God, as if he were a

monstrously vindictive police officer always looking for ways to ensnare and punish us. Properly understood, our life of nearly continuous sin reveals what a boundlessly loving God we have, who never ceases to be the good Shepherd calling out our name so that we might follow him. We need to remember, repentance is a response to Christ, not simply a response to sin. A life of continual repentance is the relentless practice of responding to that familiar voice instead of the clamorous distracting noise of this world that masquerades as a voice.

If we think of sin as brokenness, then the first revelation of a life of continual repentance is that our brokenness is *more structural* than what meets the eye. The second revelation is that our brokenness is *more persistent* than what meets the eye. The third revelation in living a life of continual repentance is that our brokenness is *more relational, more communal*, than what meets the eye. Our brokenness is inseparable from the brokenness of the world we inhabit—from the brokenness of our family members, our co-workers, our fellow parishioners, our priest and bishop, our political leaders, and so forth. Indeed, our brokenness is the brokenness of the entire fallen creation which is groaning as it awaits redemption, and our calling, our privilege, as a children of God is to bear the sorrow of the world's hostile rejection of its compassionate Creator, the rejection that gives rise to all its turmoil, pain, suffering, and self-destructive behavior. St. Paul says that when one member of the body suffers the whole body suffers (1Cor 12:26); a life of continuous repentance is allowing ourselves to feel that suffering, instead of being distant from and numb to it, and to carry that brokenness as our cross to Golgotha to be crucified with Christ. St. Paul says that we are to “bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2), which is love. The Canaanite Woman so fully took on herself the suffering of her daughter that she prayed, “have mercy *on me*” and “help *me*,” and her daughter was healed (Mt 15:22,25,27). If love fulfills the whole law, if love is the *raison d'être* of human existence, then our posture toward all of creation must be nothing less than God's love for his creation expressed as Emmanuel, the one who is uncompromisingly present with it, uniting himself to it, suffering with it even to the point of death and descent into hades in order to raise it to new life.

As Dostoevsky famously put it, we become responsible to all for all. To be a christian is nothing less than to let Christ be so fully formed in us that our presence is his presence in the world, and we thereby become those who are not in this world to be served, but to serve and to give our lives as a ransom for it. Having remembered the Mother of our Lord and all the saints who have lived out this self-emptying love, we are repeatedly exhorted in the services of the Church to offer not only ourselves to Christ but also one another and indeed our whole communal life to him who alone takes upon himself our infirmities and bears our diseases (Mt 8:17). In this way, then, the ultimate expression of a life of continual repentance is not only re-orienting our own lives to Christ, but the full and—if I may be so bold as to say—impassioned embrace of the fallen world as our very life which we are re-directing toward him who is the Orient from on high, the magnetic East, drawing us toward himself; who is the good Shepherd whose familiar

voice is calling out to us; who is knocking on the door of our hearts and lovingly waiting for us to open to him; who is the Bread and the Wine longing to be consumed by us so that we might with one heart and one voice and one mind proclaim: your own of your own on behalf of all and for all!