

Recovering Confession

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Biblical Foundations

Whenever we sin, the Lord calls out to us, as he did to Adam after the first sin, “Where are you (Gen 3.9)? because the Lord knows we are lost when we sin; and He wishes to retain an honest personal relationship with each of us. Therefore, we need to have sufficient self-awareness and spiritual maturity to know when and how we have sinned and to wish to repent in order to recover integrity before God and within ourselves This need to confess sin is ever-present in both the Old and New Testaments, beginning with the exhortations in Leviticus to both the individual (5.5) and the community (16.21), and concluding with the promise in 1 John that “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1.9).

In the Old Testament (OT), the Hebrew word *yâdâh* is the primary root for “to confess,” but this same Hebrew word has many meanings, including “to give thanks, laud, praise.” Thus, “a confession of sin may be articulated in the same breath as a confession of faith or praise and thanksgiving.”¹ In the New Testament (NT), the Greek word *hōmōlōgēō* has a root meaning of “to acknowledge, to assent;” Thus, “‘to confess our sins’ is to admit to God that our actions were indeed sin [and that] we agree with him, in his evaluation of our wrong actions.”² However, it is important to see that in both the OT and the NT, “confession is not a moralistic, autobiographical catalogue of sins—individual infractions of a legal code...”³ Rather, the focus is on retaining a relationship with God through personal repentance and the worship of the Church. Therefore, this essay links an academic study of confession to a moral and personal search for how to draw closer to the Lord.

It is clear that in both the OT and the NT, confession is often linked to “public confession of God’s character and works.”⁴ The OT urging to confess the name of God (1 Kin 8.33-35, 2 Chr

¹ James Strong, *The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), ISBN 978-1-4185-4237-5, p. 137, Main Concordance; and p. 107 Hebrew and Aramaic Dictionary, word no. 3034 (3h).

² Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* (Basingstoke, Hants UK: Marshall Pickering, 1988), p. 183. See also Strong, p. 137 Main Concordance; and p. 179 Greek Dictionary).

³ Strong, Hebrew and Aramaic Dictionary, p. 107. Strong’s comment about the OT has also been applied here to the NT. However, his concluding phrase has not been given, because his contention is quite negative that confession is primarily “a confession of the underlying sinfulness that engulfs all mankind and separates us from the holy God.”

⁴ Richards, p. 595; Strong, Hebrew and Aramaic Dictionary, p. 107; Greek Dictionary,

6.24-26) is made explicit in the Gospel of St. Matthew with the promise of Jesus Christ that: “Everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven” (10.32; cf. Luke 12.8). This subtle linking of confession of sin with confessing the Lord in a statement of belief to others is evident in both the OT and the NT, concluding with the glorified Christ Himself confessing our names before “His Father and before His angels” (Rev 3.5). Thus, confession in its fullest Biblical meaning links earth to heaven, as well as human beings as individual persons to Christ and His Church.

Learning to Repent

Confession by an individual person in the Early Church was public, before the members of the local church as a community, and as witnesses of honest repentance. Centuries later this public witness was replaced by private auricular confession—that is oral confession to God, to be heard only by a priest. To understand how and why this happened, it is first essential to appreciate the importance of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ for humanity and for the world. As James Dallen writes in the opening sentences of Chapter One of *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance*, the first disciples “experienced first-hand how God was making possible a new and simple intimacy of human beings with a God who was closer to them than their own parents.”⁵ The “long reign of sin” had ended; and for St. Paul and the first disciples, “sin after baptism was unthinkable” precisely “because of what God had done in Christ;” and this “authority over sin” was to be exercised by the Church.⁶ It was indeed “holiness [that] distinguished Christians from the society out of which they had come and to which they were contrasted (cf. 1 Pt 2.9-12).”⁷

However, the Early Church found that sin “could once more take hold of a [baptised] person who had been liberated from it.”⁸ Repentance by the sinner and reconciliation with the Church became essential both for the sinner to attain salvation and for the Church to retain its holiness. Yet how to achieve this personal repentance by sinners and their reconciliation with the Church was not immediately defined in formal, doctrinal guidance. In large part, this ambiguity was because “grave sin was considered exceptional, [and] each case seems to have been dealt with individually and hence somewhat informally.”⁹ As St. Clement noted in 96 AD, when seeking to restore the sinner to the Church, reliance was initially placed on “admonition [of those who

p. 179.

⁵ Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1986), p.5.

⁶ Dallen, pp. 5-6. Dallen rightly cites Rom 6.2b: “How can we who died to sin still live in it?”

⁷ Dallen, p. 7.

⁸ Dallen, p.17.

⁹ Dallen, p. 19.

sinned after baptism], compassionate correction [by Church members and leaders] and intercession in prayer.”¹⁰ Then, “from the mid-second century on ... [Christian] communities began to develop more formal ways of initiating new Christians and receiving back repentant sinners.”¹¹

This movement from informality and a case-by-case sensitivity to the development of a Church theology and practice on repentance was greatly strengthened by St. Irenaeus of Lyon, especially in *Against the Heresies*, which set out “for the first time, a fully articulate account of ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heresy.’”¹² It was this theology of St. Irenaeus that made possible

... again for the first time, a full account of the human being, the clay moulded by God throughout the whole economy from Adam to Christ, to bring about the stated intention of God in Genesis, spoken of as his own particular work, to make a human being in his image and likeness, the ‘glory of God [that] is a living human being.’¹³

Thus it was the theology of St. Irenaeus that greatly assisted the Church (and us) to define and confront sin and address “the question of Christian identity and its truth claims in a pluralistic culture, the meaning of suffering and death, and what it is to be human.”¹⁴ As James Dallen concludes Chapter 1: “Simple gospel themes, played out amid controversy, became elaborate orchestrations in response to the needs of [the] Church and sinners.”¹⁵ Public repentance and private oral confession were each in their own ways, both for the Church and for those who sinned after baptism, explorations in learning how best to repent and return to the Church that had clarified the meaning of Christian orthodoxy and heresy.

Learning to Confess: Publicly and Then Privately

It is clear that repentance had “a prominent place” in the early Church; however, it is not clear what Church structures supervised and supported repentance, because most local Christian communities “seemed ready to welcome the repentant sinner without special conditions.”¹⁶ The rise of private auricular confession “was canonically established and regulated during the fourth century and the first half of the fifth, as the Church struggled to accommodate itself to the large

¹⁰ *The Epistles of St. Clement of Rome*, 56:1-2. The quotation is from Dallen, p. 20.

¹¹ Dallen, p. 24.

¹² John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 205. James Dallen also notes the importance of the theology of St. Irenaeus in emphasizing “that conversion to the Church is a factor in receiving forgiveness.” p. 24.

¹³ Behr, p. 205. The quoted concluding phrase is from *Against the Heresies*, 4.20.7.

¹⁴ Behr, p. 210.

¹⁵ Dallen, p. 24.

¹⁶ Dallen, p. 2.

numbers of people who became Christian.”¹⁷ Archdeacon John Chryssavgis agrees with the Roman Catholic Father James Dallen that: “It was only after the fourth century that private confession was more widely practiced.” However, Archdeacon John continues: “But even then penance did not have the legalistic and clericalistic character which it acquired later.”¹⁸ Furthermore, “‘public’ penance in the first centuries may imply [either] the absence or coexistence of ‘private’ penance [although] the two forms [of ‘public’ and ‘private’ penance are] ... radically different and discontinuous institutions.”¹⁹

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware has suggested that we should always “think [of confession] primarily in therapeutic rather than juridical terms;” and that perspective has been adopted in this essay.²⁰ Even in the context of the Last Judgement, St. Clement of Rome, at the end of the first century, stressed the therapeutic centrality of repentance:

While we are on earth, let us repent. For we are but clay in the hands of the artist [who is the Lord]. Just as the sculptor makes a vessel: while the clay is in his hands, even if it falls, he is able to remould it; but once it is placed in the furnace of fire, he can do nothing more to it. Similarly, while we are in this world, let us repent with all our heart for the evils we have committed in flesh, so that we may be saved by the Lord while there is yet time for repentance. For after we have left this world, we are no longer able to confess or repent. While there is time to be healed, let us offer ourselves to the healer God, giving Him as recompense our sincere-hearted repentance.²¹

This therapeutic centrality of repentance was well captured in the concise advice of St. Clement of Alexandria: “It is of course good not to sin, but it is also good for the sinner to repent; just as it is very good to be healthy, but it is also good to heal the infirmity.”²²

Well into the fourth century, St. John Chrysostom was still stressing the importance of personal repentance grounded in the conscience of each person standing before God: “If you have sinned and fallen, rise, arise please. For the good and loving Master who was put to shame by your sin is beside you and does not reject cohabitation with you. Give him your hand.”²³ Later in the

¹⁷ Dallen, p. 3.

¹⁸ Archdeacon John Chryssavgis, *Repentance and Confession* (Brookline, MA, 1990), p. 13.

¹⁹ Dallen, pp. 2-3.

²⁰ Cited by Chryssavgis, p. 15.

²¹ Cited by Chryssavgis, pp. 20-21, from *The Epistles of St. Clement*.

²² Cited by Chryssavgis, p. 24, from *Quis Dives Salvetur*, 39 and 41.

²³ Cited by Chryssavgis, p. 26, from *Contra Virginum Corruptores*, PG 60.742.

fourth century, again without any reference to Church structures and discipline, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, stressed how when a person read the Psalms that experience could be received as

being about Him [i.e. God], and either, when he is convinced by his conscience, being pierced, he will repent, or hearing of the hope that resides in God, and of the succour available to believers—how this kind of grace exists for him—he exults and begins to give thanks to God. You have sinned, and being ashamed, you repent, and you ask to be shown mercy.... You have in Psalm 50 the words of confession and repentance.²⁴

Thus St. Athanasius saw both personal conscience (grounded in reading and praying the Psalms) and a deeper understanding of theology (grounded in the experience of grace) as leading to confession and repentance.

Precisely how this focus on the person's relationship to God encouraged either public or private confession and repentance is much disputed among theologians, but the increasing awareness of the importance of spiritual direction and pastoral counselling is significant. Earlier, Origen (d. 254) had become "the first theologian to deal systematically with penance."²⁵ It then became possible to view private and public confession as two hands drawing sinners who had been baptised back to Christ. Father Dallen sets out a balanced approach:

In the East, 'private confession'—more a manifestation of conscience than a confession of sins—came to have a bearing on the public discipline beyond the counseling offered to penitents subject to the public discipline. People frequently did not become penitents until forced to do so by public accusation and a legal process, but Origen recommended this manifestation of conscience to other serious sinners. He advised them to go privately to a presbyter and seek his counsel on whether they needed the support of the institutionalized process of repentance (*In Ps. 37, hom 2*). 'Private confession' thus became another way of beginning penance but was not a substitute for it. Grave sins still came under the official discipline [of the Church], whether the sinner took the initiative in seeking private counsel or waited for legal action.²⁶

The rise of private auricular confession did not in itself undermine the importance of public confession, but rather indicated the need to work out how the benefits of accountability and

²⁴ Cited by Chryssavgis, pp. 25-26, from *Letter to Marcellinus*.

²⁵ Dallen, p. 44.

²⁶ Dallen, p. 45.

openness integral to public confession (which was falling out of favour with the faithful) could in some way be retained beside the role of the personal conscience and pastoral counselling in the newly accepted private confession.

Integrating Public and Private Confession: Historical and Theological Insights

In order to integrate public and private confession in a rounded theological understanding of repentance, it is necessary to consider carefully the political, social and theological factors that led to the wide acceptance of private confession. Politically, given the legal and moral support of Christianity by Constantine in the Edict of Milan in 313, being Christian became socially advantageous, rather than prospective martyrdom. Both the Romans and the Jews were people who sought purpose in their lives beyond themselves. While the Romans believed in many gods and the Jews in the One True God, both communities were drawn to consider the possibility of following the teachings of Jesus (who impressed many as an attractive human being) and living Christian lives. However, initially some members of each group did not understand how significant a change this would require in their lives. Suddenly, local Christian communities were confronted with large numbers of people who genuinely wished to join their local churches, but were not necessarily prepared to change their attitudes and their lives to become fully observant members of those local churches. The leaders and members of the local churches too were confronted with the reality that some people when they were baptised continued to sin. Therefore, a whole theology of repentance as a life-long goal needed to be developed.

New members of the Church, theologians and local churches and their leaders all needed to learn that confession and repentance meant engaging in spiritual warfare with the devil, as well as confronting those who objected to and persecuted Christians at various times. In an example of confession, St. John Cassian (c. 360-after 430) described his own initial experience of private confession in which an old man

said this to me: 'Take heart, my son. Without my saying anything, your confession has set you free from this captivity [by the devil]. Today you have won a victory over the adversary who had beaten you.... Now because of this open denunciation of him, that most evil spirit will not be able to trouble you, and this most loathsome serpent [of sin] will not be able to take up a hiding place within you, for he has been pulled out into the light from your shadowed heart by this saving confession of yours.'²⁷

²⁷ Chryssavgis, p. 28, from *Conference 2*.

This was private confession at its best, from a person with a sincere desire to please God and change his behaviour before a person who knew how to counsel him. Yet ironically although private confession could pull sins “into the light” these sins remained private.

Clearly, Archdeacon John Chryssavgis is right to point out that “the communal, sacramental aspects of confession was more apparent in the early Church when penance constituted a public act rather than an individual episode.”²⁸ Yet a public confession of sin could be a personally and legally dangerous act—personally dangerous in how others related to you and legally dangerous if any laws had been broken. Whether confession is made publicly or privately, the act of repentance which is evidenced by confession is “not a state but a stage, a beginning.”²⁹ Precisely because we each have free will, the outcome of our lives is not predetermined and set into recurring sin.

Archdeacon John sets out fluently a pathway through the confrontation between sin and holiness:

...The sinner can reach out to holiness. Passions are conquered by stronger passions; love is overcome by more abundant love. One repents not because one is virtuous, but because human nature can change, because what is impossible for man is possible for God. The motive for repentance is at all times humility, unself-sufficiency—not a means of justification for oneself, or of realizing some abstract idea of goodness or of receiving a reward in some future life.³⁰

Such a perspective is somewhat against the grain of attempting to differentiate public and private confession; however, as noted earlier, it was precisely this confrontation between public and private confession that indicated the necessity that the Church should develop a theology of repentance and confession that could be exercised practically. Thus, both the Church and the individual sinner sought to understand and experience that “the aim of repentance is not self-justification, but re-entry into that consuming fire of love where all sin and imperfection and selfishness are burned away.”³¹

The philosophical and theological insights of Archdeacon John focus on humility as a defining characteristic of being truly human:

²⁸ Chryssavgis, p. 13.

²⁹ Chryssavgis, p. 4.

³⁰ Chryssavgis, p. 4.

³¹ Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Brookline, MA, 2000), p.20 [hereafter Chryssavgis 2].

Just as the strength of God is revealed in the extreme vulnerability of His Son on the Cross, so also the greatest strength of man is to embrace his weakness: ‘For my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I render glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me [2 Corinthians 12.9].’ To be flawed is the illogical, perhaps supernatural characteristic of humanity in which one encounters God.³²

How then is this ideal of confession and repentance grounded in humility to be realised in the contemporary Orthodox Church?

Guidelines for the Renewal of Confession and Repentance in the Contemporary Church

By the sixth century there was widespread “dissatisfaction and fear” of public penance evident in the refusal of penitents “to come forward voluntarily as penitents and in their reluctance to do so even when coerced.”³³ Liturgies of canonical penance had been developed.³⁴ These canonical liturgies did introduce clear guidelines for when confession was essential, but there was an offsetting effect: “Sin, insofar as it was subject to formal ecclesiastical discipline, became an abstract reality determined by canonical regulations rather than a concrete experience of failing one’s community.”³⁵ In effect, whether people were offered private or public confession, they were often not interested. Thus, it is important to see that public confession became prominent not because of its attraction *theologically*, but because of the *sociological* rejection of private confession. However, if Church members did not wish to confess and repent their sins, neither public nor private confession could be effective. “For all practical purposes canonical penance [became] a dead letter during the sixth and seventh centuries.”³⁶

This historical background is important in order to develop guidelines for the renewal of confession and repentance in the contemporary Church. Public penance requires a degree of public humiliation which is not appropriate or helpful in preventing further sin. Yet canonical penance linked to private confession is not widely practiced in many countries today. If widespread renewal of confession and repentance is to occur within the members of the Orthodox Church, focus needs to be placed first on how baptised Orthodox persons can learn to live out their experiences of Christ and His Church. Then appropriate structures for repentance and confession can be considered.

³² Chryssavgis, pp. 4-5.

³³ Dallen, p. 77.

³⁴ Dallen, pp. 65-66.

³⁵ Dallen, p. 57.

³⁶ Dallen, p. 100.

As we live out our lives with free will, we receive feedback from the Lord and the devil, from friends and enemies, from our own consciences and from our own hopes and fears. We choose what feedback requires changes in our behaviour and our relationship to Christ and His Church. As Archdeacon John has pointed out, repentance requires both a divine initiative and a human response. Thus, a renewal of repentance requires “a perennial [human] striving, an all-embracing motion not merely an occasional emotion.” Yet repentance is “not a fruit of individual effort or anguish [but] ultimately a gift of the Holy Spirit who transforms the heart of the human person.”³⁷ St. Gregory the Theologian set a challenging, but highly personal, goal: “All must shed tears, all must be purified, all must ascend.”³⁸ Such a goal requires an insightful awareness of one’s strengths and limitations. The closing words of Archdeacon John’s study, *Repentance and Confession*, set out a crucial guideline for contemporary renewal of confession and repentance: “Acknowledgment of one’s limitations leads to personal communion with God who alone can erase sin: ‘I acknowledged my sin to You, and I do not hide my iniquity.... Then You did forgive the iniquity of my sin’ (Psalm 32.5).”³⁹

The personal challenge to renew our relationship with the Lord should not be underestimated. In *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, Archdeacon John sets a goal for each of us:

The Greek term for repentance, *metanoia*, denotes a change of mind, a reorientation, a fundamental transformation of one’s outlook and vision of the world and of oneself. Repentance, ultimately, means a new way of loving, that is, of loving others and of loving one’s deepest self, one’s soul. It involves not mere regret of past wrong but also recognition and reversal of a darkened vision and version of our own condition. As we repent we begin to see how sin, by dividing us from God and also from God’s creation, has reduced us to a separated, pseudo-autonomous existence and deprived us of our true freedom and our natural glory.⁴⁰

Thus, freedom becomes an experience in self-discipline and prayerful searching, rather than an abandonment to self-will. Strikingly, Archdeacon John sees repentance and the resulting need to confess sin as positive steps toward life with the Lord: “To repent and confess is not so much to

³⁷ Chryssavgis, p. 9.

³⁸ *Oration 19,7* cited by Chryssavgis, p. 9.

³⁴ Chryssavgis, p. 16.

³⁹ Chryssavgis, p. 16

⁴⁰ Chryssavgis 2, p. 21.

recognize and expose a failure as it is to respond from within to the call of God in whose image and likeness every person is created”⁴¹

How Can We Recover the Sacrament of Confession in Our Own Lives?

To implement these guidelines for the renewal of confession and repentance in the contemporary Orthodox Church requires an understanding of two conflicting trends that are lived out within each of us. On the one hand, there has been a decline in confessional practice in the Orthodox world in the last 100 years. However, on the other hand, there has also been a rebirth in the broader context of the therapy of soul guiding, particularly among the so called new elders of Eastern Europe, Mount Athos and elsewhere. Consider three examples.

Father Deacon Stephen Muse is a Greek Orthodox pastoral counsellor who serves as Director of Education and Training at the Pastoral Institute in Columbus, Georgia, USA. He has written of “the presence of a trialogical encounter between self, other and God that is the primary context for authentic pastoral care.”⁴² In his view, “counselling is pastoral to the degree that it clears obstacles from the way of a person fully embracing the path of deification in Christ.”⁴³ His perspective is that of St. Anthony who saw “the purpose of lifelong ascetical struggle” as “to become yourself.”⁴⁴ Father Deacon Stephen sees the Church as “a developmental proving ground, an arena where we struggle to become beings capable of loving as we are loved by Christ.”⁴⁵ Such a transformation of life is not possible without regular confession.

In *Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives*, Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica, Serbia (1914-2002) has confronted us with both a goal for our lives and the consequences of failing to reach that goal. He has written:

We need repentance. You see, repentance is not only going to a priest and confessing. We must free ourselves from the obsession of thoughts. We fall many times during our life, and it is absolutely necessary to reveal everything [in confession] before a priest who is a witness to our repentance.

⁴¹ Chryssavgis 2, p. 23.

⁴² *When Hearts Become Flame: An Eastern Orthodox Approach to the Dio-Logos of Pastoral Counseling* (Rollinsford, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2011), p. xxii.

⁴³ Muse, p. 51.

⁴⁴ Muse, p. 55.

⁴⁵ Muse, p. 134.

Repentance is the renewal of life. This means we must free ourselves of all our negative traits and turn toward absolute good. No sin is unforgivable except the sin of unrepentance.

... we must strive to improve our character while we are still in this life—we will pass into eternity with this very same character. We have the chance to change for the better if we repent of all our evil ways, but when a soul passes into eternity it does not have the capacity to pray for itself. I did not know this, but once I had the opportunity to feel as though my soul were about to depart my body. I felt that I could no longer pray for myself. A monk prayed for me, but I could not: my time for repentance was finished.⁴⁶

The choice is ours, no matter how serious our earlier sins. The elder insists that it is especially “important how we spend the last years of our lives. A God-pleasing life in old age blots out the sins of youth.”⁴⁷

There has been extensive renewal of Orthodox prayer and spiritual guidance on Mount Athos in recent years.⁴⁸ Therefore, it is difficult to select one example. However, consider *Repentance and Confession* by Hieromonk Gregorios.⁴⁹ He begins by acknowledging that we are each “wounded by sin after our baptism,” citing the words of John Chrysostom: “Sin is the wound and repentance is the medicine. As wounds are to the body, so sins and repentance are to the soul.”⁵⁰ It is important to see that “consciousness of one’s sin is the starting point for the return to the benevolent Father” and that this awareness of sin can begin “in countless ways” including “some misfortune with our health, an accident, an encounter with a man [or woman] of God, or a book that we happen upon.”⁵¹ It is at this point of the initial awareness of sin that we each decide whether to “remain in the darkness of sin or return to God.”⁵²

⁴⁶ *Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives: The Life and Teachings of Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica*, Compiled by the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Trans. Ana Smiljanic (Platina, CA: 2009), pp. 103, 105.

⁴⁷ *Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives*, p. 104.

⁴⁸ For a comprehensive study, see Graham Speake and Metropolitan Kallistos (Eds.), *Spiritual Guidance on Mount Athos* (Bern: Switzerland, Peter Lang, 2015). See also Douglas Demetrios Lyttle, *Miracle on the Monastery Mountain* (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group/Douglas Lyttle, 2002) and Graham Speake, *Mount Athos: Renewal in Paradise* (Limni, Evia, Greece: Denise Harvey, 2014).

⁴⁹ English edition (Columbia, MO: Newsome Press, 2013); first published in Greek by the Cell of St. John the Theologian, Holy Monastery of Koutloumousiou (Mount Athos, Greece, 2010).

⁵⁰ p. 9, citing St. John Chrysostom, *On Repentance*, 8.2.

⁵¹ p. 11.

⁵² p. 12,

The unfortunate reality is that we are each confronted with numerous obstacles to repentance. At times, “some people are in a state of insensibility” unaware of when they are sinning, while others are in despair because they “believe they are so sinful it is impossible for them to be forgiven,”⁵³ Yet St John Chrysostom rightly insists:

None should despair about [their] salvation.... Are you a tax-collector? You can become an Evangelist. Are you a blasphemer? You can become an Apostle. Are you a thief? You can plunder Paradise.... There is no sin that cannot be expunged by repentance.... You have a doctor who is able and wants to cure you. [Christ Himself].⁵⁴

Yet even when we are aware of our sins and overcome despair, other obstacles often present themselves such as shame at the depth of our sins, postponement, distrust of priests, or an inability to overcome habitual sin.⁵⁵

In response to all these obstacles and hesitations, especially the postponement of confession, Hieromonk Gregorios offers a balanced affirmation of confession as a continuing sacrament that slowly transforms our lives. He urges:

If you had an incurable illness and were suffering severe pain, wouldn't you take some sort of medication? If you waited to feel better before taking medicine, you would just have suffered all the more. The illnesses of the soul are curable, and confession is their effective medicine. And even if [a single act of confession] does not cure a chronic affliction immediately, it helps greatly in remedying [that affliction] because it strengthens us with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the struggle against the passions becomes easier. If we are beset by some sin which has become a habit, then precisely for that reason we should go to our Spiritual Father more often, because he will employ the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6.17) to cut at the root of the sin until it is completely severed.⁵⁶

Of course, an examination of conscience is necessary before confession, considering our relationship with God and with our fellow human beings (especially our families), as well as how we are living ourselves. However, neither a long catalogue of sins nor a quick word with Father will lead to “the gradual cultivation and sensitisation of the conscience.”⁵⁷ The reality is that we

⁵³ pp. 21-22.

⁵⁴ p. 24, citing St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew, Homily on the Canaanite Woman*, 2.

⁵⁵ pp. 25-32,

⁵⁶ pp. 30-31.

⁵⁷ pp. 33-47.

need to make regular confession part of our lives, which requires an acceptance “that we only have *today* [because] *tomorrow* belongs to God. How many people have left this life without having made the time to prepare themselves spiritually?”⁵⁸

Conclusion: Taking the First Steps Towards Recovering Confession

These historical and theological reflections are helpful to recover confession for each of us and for our local Orthodox communities. However, we still need to act on our new insights about confession. Two suggestions from Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) provide appropriate advice. First, find a suitable confessor who welcomes you and whom you respect. As Metropolitan Kallistos has written of spiritual guidance:

There are numerous priests and lay persons who, while lacking the spectacular endowments of the famous elders, can yet in a more humble and less startling way, provide us with exactly the help we need. Perhaps in looking far and wide for distant treasures, we are neglecting the opportunities that God is setting before us near at hand. Moreover, let us not forget that besides spiritual fatherhood and motherhood, there is spiritual brotherhood and sisterhood. Frequently, we learn more from our peers than from our teachers.⁵⁹

This broad affirmation of spiritual guidance is an appropriate reminder to see confession in a broader context as both a sacrament and a tool in our continuing efforts to live with integrity as Orthodox Christians. We must never forget, as Metropolitan Kallistos reminds us: “What matters most of all in our experience of the Christian life is not rules, but persons. We are to understand guidance in exactly this perspective.”⁶⁰ There is, therefore, an intimate relationship between confession and spiritual guidance. Each, while distinct, informs the other. They are the two coordinated hands of repentance and sanctification whereby salvation is acquired in all its fulness.

⁵⁸ p. 26.

⁵⁹ Metropolitan Kallistos, “What Do We Mean by Spiritual Guidance” in Graham Speake and Metropolitan Kallistos (Eds.), *Spiritual Guidance on Mount Athos*, p. 14.

⁶⁰ Metropolitan Kallistos, “What Do We Mean by Spiritual Guidance?” p. 7.