

A Talk Before Confession

'BEHOLD, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation' (2 Cor. vi. 2). Now is the time for us to lay aside the heavy burden of sin, to break its chains, and to behold once more the 'fallen and shattered tabernacle' of our soul, renewed and radiant. But the way which leads to this blessed purification is far from easy.

We have not yet begun to prepare for confession, and already our soul hears the voices of temptation: 'Should I put it off? Am I sufficiently prepared, am I not making these special fasts and acts of preparation¹ too often?' We must firmly resist these doubts. 'If thou comest to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation' (Ecclesiasticus ii. 1). If you have decided to make this special act of preparation, you must expect to encounter many obstacles, interior and exterior; but they vanish as soon as you show firmness in your intentions.

Let us look more specifically at the question of frequent confession. We should go to confession far more often than is customary, and at least during the four Fasts.² We who are possessed by 'the slumber of laziness' and inexperienced in penitence, must first learn over and over again how to repent. And secondly, it is necessary to stretch out a thread from one confession to another, so that the interval between each act of special preparation should be filled with a spiritual struggle, with an effort nourished by the

¹ Here the Russian word is *govenie* (see p. 68, n. 2).

² In the Orthodox Church, besides the Great Fast of Lent (before Easter), there are three other periods of fasting: before the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul (29 June), before the Feast of the Assumption (15 August), and before Christmas.

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memory of our previous confession and stimulated by the expectation of the next confession drawing near.

Another difficult question concerns the spiritual director: to whom should you turn? Must you cling to the same director at all costs? May you change your confessor, and if so, in what circumstances? Priests experienced in the spiritual life assert that you should not change, even if he is only your confessor, not your spiritual director. True, it sometimes happens that after a successful confession, the next one, heard by the same priest, is uninspiring and produces only a feeble reaction; then the thought of changing his confessor occurs to the penitent. But this is no reason for taking such a serious step. Quite apart from the fact that our personal feelings during confession do not affect the essence of the sacrament, the absence of any spiritual feeling during confession is sometimes the sign of our own spiritual apathy. John of Kronstadt says of this state: 'Penitence must be free, not forced by the confessor.' If a man is really plagued by his sin, it makes no difference through whom he confesses this painful sin; all he wants is to confess it as soon as possible and to find relief. It is another thing if we go to confession just in order to talk to someone, leaving aside the essence of the sacrament. We must distinguish between confession and a spiritual talk, which can be conducted outside the sacrament. It is better for such a talk to take place separately, for conversation—even on spiritual topics—may distract the penitent and fill him with a certain coldness, leading him into theological discussions and diminishing the fervour of his repentance.

Confession is not just a talk about your faults and doubts, it is not a way of telling your confessor all about yourself, and least of all is it a 'pious practice'. Confession is an act of fervent, heartfelt repentance, a thirst for purification; it springs from an awareness of what is holy, it means dying to sin and coming alive again to sanctity. Contrition is in itself already a measure of sanctity. Insensibility and unbelief mean that we are outside sanctity, outside God.

Let us examine what our attitude should be toward the sacrament of repentance, what is demanded from one who seeks this sacrament, how to prepare for it, what is to be considered as the most important moment, in that part of the sacrament which concerns the penitent.

(1) Undoubtedly, the first act will be *a searching of the heart*. That is why the days of preparation have been instituted. 'To see your sins, in all their multiplicity and hideousness—this is indeed a gift of God,' writes John of Kronstadt. People inexperienced in the spiritual life usually see neither the number of their sins nor their 'hideousness'. 'Nothing in particular', 'like everyone else', 'only petty sins', 'I have neither stolen nor killed': such is the usual beginning of confession by many penitents. And what about pride, refusal to suffer reproaches, hardness of heart, sycophancy, weakness of faith and love, faint-heartedness, spiritual sloth, are not these serious sins? Can we assert that we love God sufficiently, that our faith is active and fervent? That we love every man as our brother in Christ? That we have attained meekness, freedom from anger, humility? If not, what does our Christianity amount to? How shall we explain our self-confidence during confession if not by 'petrified insensibility', by the 'spiritual death which precedes our bodily death'? Why did the Holy Fathers, who left us their penitential prayers, consider themselves the worst of sinners and cry out with profound conviction to the most sweet Jesus: 'Nobody, from the beginning of time, has sinned as I, wicked and profligate, have sinned!' And we are convinced that all goes well with us! The more brightly the light of Christ shines in our hearts, the clearer grows the awareness of our faults, ulcers, and wounds. And, conversely, people plunged in the darkness of sin see nothing in their hearts; and even if they see, they are not horrified, for they have no standard of comparison.

This is why the shortest way to attain a knowledge of our sin is to draw nearer to the light and to pray for that light which judges the world and all that is 'worldly' in ourselves (John iii. 19).

As long as we lack that closeness to Christ which makes the feeling of repentance our habitual condition, we must prepare for confession by an examination of conscience according to the commandments, by certain prayers (for instance the third of the evening prayers, the fourth of the prayers before communion), and by texts from Scripture (for instance, Romans v. 12, Ephesians iv, and James, especially chapter iii).

When examining your soul's economy you should try to distinguish the basic sins, from those that are derived from them, symptoms from deeper causes. For instance, distraction in prayer, drowsiness and inattention in church, absence of interest in reading the Holy Scriptures are certainly very serious; but are not these sins derived from lack of faith and a weak love of God? We must make ourselves realize our own self-will, disobedience, self-justification, refusal to accept reproaches, to make concessions, our obstinacy; but it is still more important to discover how these sins are linked with self-love and pride. If we are aware of being too socially inclined, too talkative, too ready to make fun of things, too much concerned with our outward appearance, and not only with our own, but also with that of our family and with the external arrangement of our home—we should examine carefully whether this is not a sign of 'many-sided vanity'. If we take our misfortunes too much to heart, suffer too deeply from separation, bewail the departed and find no comfort, then, setting aside the intensity of our emotions, does not this prove our lack of faith in Divine Providence?

There is also another helpful method bringing us to the knowledge of our sins—to recall what we are most often accused of by other people, especially by those who live near us, by our family. Their reproaches, attacks and accusations are nearly always well founded.

Before confession it is also necessary to ask forgiveness of all those whom we have offended, and so to go to confession with a clear conscience.

During such an examination of conscience we must take care not to indulge in an exaggerated scrupulousness and petty suspiciousness concerning every movement of our heart; if we give way to this tendency we may easily lose the power to discriminate between the important and the unimportant, and become lost in matters of detail. In that case, you should interrupt for a time the examination of conscience and, following a plain but wholesome spiritual diet, simplify and clarify your soul with prayer and good deeds.

Preparation for confession does not consist in recalling your sins as fully as possible and even writing them down. It means striving to attain such a state of concentration, seriousness, and prayer that your sins will become as clear as if they had been exposed to the light. In other words, you should bring to your confessor not a list of sins but a feeling of repentance, not a minutely studied dissertation but a contrite heart.

(2) But to know your sins does not yet mean to *repent* of them. True, our Lord accepts a sincere, conscientious confession even though it is not accompanied by a feeling of repentance (if we courageously confess as well this sin of 'petrified insensibility'). However, *contrition of the heart*, sorrow for our sins, is the most important thing that we can bring to confession. But what are we to do if our heart, 'dried up with sin', is not watered by the vivifying stream of tears? What if 'weakness of soul and frailty of body' are so great that we are incapable of sincere repentance? All the same, this is no reason for putting off confession—God may touch our heart during the confession itself; the very confession, the naming of our sins, may soften our heart, refine our spiritual sight, sharpen the feeling of repentance. More than anything else, our spiritual sloth can be overcome with the help of the preparation before confession: fasting which exhausts the body, breaking down our sense of physical well-being and complacency—things fatal to spiritual life—prayer, nightly meditation on death, reading from the Gospels, from the Lives of the Saints and of the works

of the Holy Fathers, an intensified struggle with self, and the practice of good deeds. Our insensibility during confession is usually rooted in the lack of fear of God and in a secret unbelief. That is where our efforts should be centred. And that is why our tears at confession are so important—they soften our petrified condition, they shake us 'from top to bottom'. They confer on us simplicity and self-forgetfulness, and remove the main obstacle to confession—our sense of 'self'. The proud, the vain do not weep. Once you begin to weep, it means that your heart is softened, melted, has humbled itself. That is why, after such tears, meekness, freedom from anger, a softening of the heart, tenderness, and peace of soul are granted to those whom God has sent these 'joy-creating' tears. We should not be ashamed of tears during confession, we should let them flow freely, washing away our iniquities. 'Grant me rivers of tears on this great day of Lent, that I may weep and wash away my iniquities, born of seduction, and I shall stand before Thee purified.'¹

(3) The third stage of repentance is the *oral confession of sins*. Do not wait to be questioned, make an effort for yourself; confession is a courageous feat of self-constraint. You must speak with precision, without veiling the ugliness of sin by vague expressions (as, for instance, 'I have sinned against the seventh commandment'). It is very difficult in confession to avoid the temptation of self-justification: we try to put before the confessor 'extenuating circumstances', and make allusions to a 'third person' who led us into sin. All this is a mark of vanity, indicating the absence of deep repentance and a continued stagnation in sin. Sometimes penitents excuse themselves by pleading a faulty memory which prevents them from recalling a sin. True, we often forget our trespasses. But is this due only to a weak memory? We remember for years on end certain occasions when our pride was specially wounded or, conversely, specially flattered. We recall for

¹ From a hymn sung during the first week of Lent.

many years the praise we received. We can remember distinctly and for a long time everything which made a deep impression on us. If we forget our sins, does this not mean that we do not attach a serious meaning to them?

As a sign that we have achieved real repentance, we experience a sense of lightheartedness, of purity and inexpressible joy, in which sin seems to us as difficult and impossible to commit, as this joy seemed to us unattainable only a short time before.

Our repentance will not be complete unless we resolve at the same time in our innermost heart not to return to the sin we have confessed. But you may say: how is this possible? How can I promise to myself and to my confessor that I will not repeat this sin? Is not the opposite nearer to the truth—the certainty that the sin will be repeated? Each of us (so we argue) knows from experience that after a certain time we return inevitably to the same sins. As we watch ourselves from year to year we see no progress whatever—we jump, and yet find ourselves again at the same spot. It would be terrible if this were really the case. But fortunately it is not so. Provided we genuinely desire to correct our faults, successive confessions and communions never fail to produce a salutary change in our soul. The fact is that, after all, we are not our own judges; a man cannot judge correctly about himself, nor tell whether he has become better or worse, because he who judges and that which he judges are both dimensions that are changing. A growing severity toward ourselves, an increase of spiritual insight, an intensified fear of sin, may create the illusion that our sins have multiplied and grown in force; they have remained as before, or perhaps have weakened, but previously we did not take so much notice of them. Moreover, God's special Providence often closes our eyes to our spiritual progress, in order to protect us from the grave sin of pride and vanity. It often happens that the sin has remained, but frequent confession and the reception of the holy sacraments have weakened and shaken its roots. And the struggle itself with sin, the suffering we endure because of our

sins, is this not an acquisition? St. John of the Ladder says: 'Do not be afraid, even though you fall every day, so long as you do not depart from the ways of God; stand courageously and the angel who guards you will respect your patience.'

If there is no feeling of relief, of renewal, you must find the strength to return to confession, to cleanse your soul entirely from impurities, to wash away its blackness and iniquity with tears. He who strives always finds what he seeks.

Only let us not ascribe our progress to *ourselves*, regarding it as something that depends on *our* strength, placing our hopes on *our* efforts. This would be to destroy all that we have gained. 'Gather together my distracted mind, O Lord, and cleanse my icy heart; grant me repentance as Thou didst to Peter, grant me sighs of contrition like the publican's, and tears like the harlot's.'