

## Sin--An Orthodox Understanding: A Lenten Reflection

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In the first chapter of Genesis we read that man is made in God's image and called to be like Him. The image, the Church Fathers say, is mainly our intelligence and free will. God so loved us, He sent His only begotten Son for our salvation (John 3:16).

If we put on Christ at baptism and continue to wash ourselves through repentance, then we are able to reflect the light of Christ. Our constant prayer is "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner." We are creatures. We have no independent existence. We depend on God for all and by his mercy we can have the light of Christ indwell in us. This is a spiritual reality revealed by Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The value of this is unfathomable.

Bishop Hierotheos Vlachos (1994, 1998) refers to the worth human beings can have:

It is said that God has essence and energy and that this distinction does not destroy the divine simplicity. We confess and believe that 'uncreated and natural grace and illumination and energy always proceed inseparably from this divine energy' And since, according to the saints, created energy means created essence as well . . . God's energy is uncreated. Indeed the name of divinity is placed not only upon the divine essence, but 'also on thee divine energy no less'. This means that in the teachings of the holy Fathers, 'this (the essence) is completely incapable of being shared, but by divine grace the energy can be shared.

This is a reality and truth. Based on the illuminative teaching of St. Gregory Palamas, Bishop Hierotheos tells us this is available to us "through God's benevolence towards those who have purified their nous." Bishop Hierotheos (1994) calls the Church a hospital that can cure our infirmities so our nous can be purified and this life in Christ can take place in us.

Passions Inclinations to sin:

After the Fall we are predisposed to self-centered choices directed by the passions (lusts) rather than choices based on agape. St. Isaac of Syria tells us: ". . . pandering to the flesh, produce(s) in us shameful urges and unseemly fantasies" (Early Fathers from the Philokalia).

The passions spring from the heart of the person. Jesus told us: "For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting,

wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man" (Mark 7: 21-23).

St. Paul wrote "While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death" (Romans 5:7). The work of the passions can take place either before marriage or after the marital union takes place. In either case they lead to a choice of singularity or self-satisfaction over a righteous joined union.

Passions may predispose individuals to discord from God and mankind. St. Paul's warning applies to the "demon's" attack upon union with God and neighbor: "Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:19-21). The Church Fathers attribute this to the demon of each passion that never tires of breaking union with God and mankind.

An example of how this works may aid our understanding. The demon of lust, the Church Fathers tell us, may take over our lives. Modern society facilitates this malady. Sex is broadcast everywhere for almost every use: art, fashion, music, news, pornography (especially the Internet), and the sale of almost any product from automobiles to computers. The secular world flagrantly exposes body parts, especially the genital areas.

The Church Fathers knew about such enticements a thousand years ago. St. Isaac of Syria wrote: "Passions are brought either by images or by sensations devoid of images and by memory, which at first is unaccompanied by passionate movements or thoughts, but which later produces excitation." One way to deal with these passions, continued St. Isaac: " . . . their thought must become attached to nothing except their own soul."

One has to make a choice between Christ and demon. St. Paul asked: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation . . . distress . . . persecution . . . hunger . . . nakedness . . . danger . . . the sword? For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ our Lord" (Romans 8:35-39). Vigilance and discernment are major virtues to be acquired by those seeking Christ indwelling in them and desire to overcome the power of passions.

Ilias the Presbyter tells us: "Demons wage war against the soul primarily through thoughts . . ." (Philokalia, III). Ideally Orthodox Christians will make a "spiritual desert" for themselves removing them from the "enticements" so prevalent in modern life. Spiritual death occurs when these thoughts are self centered.

St. Maximus the Confessor knew this as well: "The self love and cleverness of men, alienating them from each other and perverting the law, have cut our single human nature into many fragments." How much more should St. Maximus' words apply to those all of us seeing union with God and our all mankind.

## Sin is Disunion

Sin makes us to be out of communion or what might be called disunion with God and neighbor. St. John Chrysostom states: "Did you commit sin? Enter the Church and repent for your sin; for here is the physician, not the judge; here one is not investigated, one receives remission of sins" (St. John Chrysostom <http://www.goarch.org/en/...> , ). If the church is a "physician", then this break with God and neighbor needs healing. It is missing the mark of being centered on God and His Will. Sin is considered, therefore to be an illness or infirmity. With healing we are restored to a former condition.

We know this healing takes place in Holy Baptism, the Holy Mystery of Penance, Holy Unction and by worthy reception of the Holy Eucharist: The Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. St. John Chrysostom, in his Divine Liturgy reminds us, of all that God did for us: take on our flesh, the cross, the grave and the Resurrection. The end of which is to reconcile us to Him: "when we had fallen away didst not cease to do all things until thou hast brought us back to heaven." Need we be reminded that when Christ gave us the Eucharist he said; "Take eat: this is my Body which is broken for you for the remission of sins," and "Drink ye all of this: this is my Blood of the New Testament, which is shed for you and for many, for the *remission* of sins" (emphasis added).

Forgiveness is to be reconciled with Christ and all mankind. St. Matthew tells us:

But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny" (emphasis added) (Matthew 5: 22-26).

This involves an active behavioral effort toward reconciliation.

## Pride a barrier to Repentance-Humility the Gate of Repentance

St. John of the Ladder (1982) points out:

Pride makes us forget our sins ... the remembrance of them leads to humility." Thus we must heed the further words of St. John: "He must not allow the memory of things that afflict him to be stamped on his intellect lest he inwardly sunders human nature by separating himself from other man although he is a man himself. When a man's will in union with the principle of nature in this way, God and nature are naturally reconciled.

St. Isaac the Syrian has said, the person who has attained to knowledge of his own weakness has reached the summit of humility. (Brock, 1997)

## Repentance: The Condition for Forgiveness

When someone who offends God or us they must repent. God, and we in imitation of Him, should embrace the repentant sinner with God's own love, in order to forgive him. We have to pray that we or anyone who has offended us or God, be reconciled to God and to us through His Church. The foundation of this repentance is a sense of his unfaithfulness to God and offense to us, contrition of heart, and determination to amend and have a metanoia, a fundamental change of mind and heart so as not to offend again.

## Repentance

God recognizes the difference between authentic and inauthentic repentance. If this knowledge is used as a justification for sin, no true repentance occurred no matter how many words might have been expended in prayer. If the fallen brother calls out to Christ like the thief on the cross however, they will find the forgiveness of God.

A wise person once said that God doesn't look where we have come from, only where we are going. If repentance is drawn from a desire for a pure heart, the repentant will find God no matter how many times they have failed. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).

## Theosis

St. Silouan has pointed out that, "those who dislike and reject their fellow-man are impoverished in their being. They do not know the true God, who is all-embracing love." St. Peter in his second epistle tells us what God has given us: "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness ... and become partakers of the divine

nature" (2 Peter 1:3-4). We know this is not participation or becoming God in His Being or Essence but sharing in the warmth and light of His "Divine Energy" (Staniloae, 2003).

### Healing Passions Leads to Theosis

This can only happen, indicates Bishop Hierotheos Vlachos (1994, 1998), if we heal the passions of our soul. For the offender this means healing the passion that led to the offense. For the one who to forgive this means healing the passion of anger and increase in the virtues of humility and meekness. Forgiveness and repentance are a two sided coin. One cannot exist without the other.

St. Maximus the Confessor tells us the path this takes: "The first type of dispassion is abstention from the body's impulsion towards the actual committing of sin. The second ... rejection of the impassioned thoughts ..the thirds is quiescence of passionate desire. ..the fourth type of dispassion is the complete exclusion from the mind of sensible images" (Philokalia II). Psycho-spiritually this means the decision and will to stop sin, act in accordance with Our Lord's counsels, and do all we can to remove ourselves from events and images that arouse sin. This means substituting and have available the works of God, exercise and practice Godly virtuous thoughts and acts, and base all on the foundation of prayer and the Holy Mysteries.

### Let Us Commend Ourselves and Each Other ... Unto Christ our God

Theosis not only means being enlivened with the fire of God's warmth and light but being in communion with one another. St. Dorotheos of Gaza (Wheeler, 1977) likens our growth in union with God, to a compass. God is the center point. Each person is like the radials going out from the center to all the 360 degrees encircling it. As each person moves toward God, the center, they also move closer to one another, as each person moves away from God, the center, they also are more distant from one another. (Morelli, 2007)

Let us end reflecting on the prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian (1997): "If your brother is angry with you, then the Lord is also angry with you. And if you have made peace with your brother below, then you have made peace also with the Lord on high. If you receive your brother, then you also receive your Lord."

Jesus forgives our sins through the sacramental power given to the Church, first to the Apostles, then to their successors, the bishops and priests right down to the present day, when He told them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (Jn 20: 22-23)

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## EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

[From St. John of Kronstadt and St. Demetri of Rostov  
compiled and edited by V. Rev. Fr. George Morelli, Ph.D.]

### Sins Against God

- Do you pray to God in the morning and evening, before and after meals?
- During prayer have you allowed your thoughts to wander?
- Have you rushed or gabbled your prayers? or when reading in church?
- Do you read the Scriptures daily? Do you read other spiritual writings regularly?
- Have you read books whose content is not Orthodox or even anti-Orthodox, or is spiritually damaging?
- Have you pronounced the name of God without reverence, joking? Have you asked God's help before starting every activity?
- Have you made the sign of the Cross carelessly, thoughtlessly? Have you sworn? Have you murmured against God?
- Have you sinned by forgetting God?
- Have you been slack in attending church?
- Have you consecrated even part of the feast days, particularly Sundays and the Twelve Great Feasts, to God?
- Have you tried your best to attend church on these days? or have you spent them more sinfully than ordinary days?
- If unable to attend church for some reason, have you nonetheless tried to devote some part of these days to prayer and spiritual reading?
- Have you joined actively in worship services of the non-Orthodox or receive their sacraments.
- Have you kept the fasts?
- Have you behaved irreverently in church, or before the clergy and monastics?
- Have you laughed or talked in church, or moved about unnecessarily, thus also distracting other people from prayer?
- Have dressed modestly and in a becoming manner when in church?
- Have you tried to pay reverent attention to the readings, hymns, and prayers in church?
- Have you striven to pray with the service, crossing yourself, etc., or have you day-dreamed?

- Have you prepared for the services beforehand, looking up the Scriptural readings, making sure you have the texts to follow the service etc., especially if the service will be in a language you do not readily understand?
- Have you ever left church after the Divine Services, and particularly after receiving the Holy Mysteries and immediately engaged in light talk and thus forgotten the blessings and graces you have received?
- Have you been ashamed of your Faith or the sign of the Cross in the presence of others?
- Have you made a show of your piety?
- Have you used your Orthodox Faith or its teachings merely to browbeat others or belittle them?
- Have you used it as a shield or excuse for your own inadequacies rather than humbling yourself?
- Have you believed in dreams, fortune telling, astrology, signs and other superstitions?
- Do you give thanks to the Lord for all things?
- Have you ever doubted God's providence concerning yourself?
- Do you at least try to perceive His purpose in all the things that come upon you?
- Sins Against Your Neighbors
- Do you respect and obey your parents, legitimate religious (priest & bishop) and legal authorities?
- Have you offended them by rudeness or contradiction?
- Have you insulted anyone?
- Have you quarreled or fought with anyone? Have you hit anyone?
- Are you always respectful to old people?
- Are you ever angry, bad tempered or irritable?
- Have you called anyone names? Do you use foul language?
- Have you derided any that are disabled, poor, old or in some way disadvantaged?
- Have you entertained bad feelings, ill will or hatred against anyone?
- Have you forgiven those who have offended you?
- Have you asked forgiveness from those whom you have offended?
- Are you at peace with everyone?
- Have you left the needy without help when you could have helped?
- Have you attended the sick or elderly when they have asked you to do so?
- Have you shown kindness and attention to all, remembering that God is expecting just such an attitude from you?



- Have you hit animals without a cause or been cruel to them, or neglectful of those in your care?
- Have you stolen anything?
- Have you taken or used other people's things without asking?
- Have you kept money or things that were lent you without returning them?
- Have you wasted your employers' time or resources? Have you taken things from work for your own use, used the firm's phone or other facilities for your own purposes without permission or repayment?
- Are you obstinate, and do you always try to have your own way?
- Have you been inconsiderate of other people's feelings?
- Have you tried to have your revenge against those who have offended you?
- Have you harbored resentment? Have you deceived people?
- Have you gossiped?
- Have you told untruths?
- Have you judged and condemned others?
- Have you taken pains before approaching for confession to be reconciled with all?

### Sins Against Yourself

- Have you been proud? Do you boast of your abilities, achievements, family, connections or riches?
- Do you consider yourself worthy before God?
- Are you vain, ambitious? Do you try to win praise and glory?
- Do you bear it easily when you are blamed, scolded or treated unjustly? Do you think too much about your looks, outward appearance and the impression you make?
- Have you sinned in thought, word or deed, by a look or glance, or in any other way against by sexual sins? (Adultery, fornication, all extra-marital sexual relationships with others, masturbation, engaging in unnatural sexual acts, fantasizing, pornography, etc.)
- Have you envied anyone anything? Have you been over-sensitive?
- Have you been lazy? Have you done your duties heartily?
- Have you wasted your time, energy or abilities in things that do not profit the soul?
- Have you become obsessive about anything? Have you been despondent or listless?

- Have you had thoughts of committing suicide?
- Have you brought a curse on yourself or others or ill-wished them, being impatient?
- Have you drunk alcohol too much, or become dependent on drink?
- Have you taken drugs, other than necessary medicines? Have you smoked?
- Have you watched television too much or indiscriminately? Have you given yourself up to any other similar pastime which wastes your time and energy and might have harmed you?
- Have you been greedy, either with regard to food or to possessions?
- Have you indulged in comfort-eating? Have you become accustomed to eating between meals?
- Have you been picky about your food, or wasteful of foods, forgetting that so many people are without proper nourishment? Have you been extravagant? Have you been wasteful?
- Do you care for and seek first the salvation of your soul, the spiritual life and the kingdom of God, or have you put earthly considerations in the first place?
- Have you cared for all of God's creation, protecting the earth, environment, precious resources?
- Is there any other sin, which burdens your conscience, or which you are
- ashamed to tell?

A Brief Confession Before Father Confessors  
From the Full Confession of St. Demetrius of Rostov

I confess to the Lord my God and before thee, venerable father, all my countless sins, committed by me unto this very day and hour, in deed, word and thought. I sin daily and hourly by mine ingratitude toward God for His great and countless blessings and benevolent providence over me, a sinner.

I have sinned through: senseless talking; judging others; willful close-mindedness; pride; hard-heartedness; envy; anger; slander; inattention; negligence concerning my salvation; carelessness, indifference, disrespect, irritability, loss of hope, rendering evil for evil, bitterness, disobedience; complaining; self-justification; contradicting others; self-will; blaming others; gossiping, lying, frivolousness, tempting others, self-love, ambition, eating and drinking to excess, vanity; slothfulness and absent-mindedness in prayer in church and at home; not attending church and divine services because of laziness and carelessness; entertaining unclean thoughts, impure glances and deeds; desiring and obtaining excess possessions; neglecting the physical and spiritual needs of others and myself; not caring for the earth and its environment. I have sinned in deed, word thought; in sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and the rest of my mental and physical senses and by counsel, command, consent, provocation, flattery concealment, partaking, silence. and defense. I am truly sorry for all my sins I repent and beg forgiveness.

*(Here one should mention specifically any other sins which may be burdening the soul.)*

I also repent and ask forgiveness for all those sins that I have not confessed because of their multitude and my forgetfulness. I commit to Christ to change my heart, mind and behavior and beg His grace.

Forgive and absolve me, venerable father, and bless me to commune of the holy and life-creating Mysteries of Christ unto the remission of sins and life everlasting.

