The Sacrament of Confession, Part One

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The work of the priest has expanded in our time, and his duties have multiplied, no longer limited to performing rituals, but extending to the fields of education, guidance, and social services. Amidst these diverse services, the risk of the priest losing sight of his purpose is very real. According to our Orthodox faith, everything must contribute to the primary goal we call "life in Christ," that is, helping people achieve spiritual healing and open themselves to the work of the Holy Spirit in their person and life. Therefore, his role as confessor is paramount. His essential service lies in being a spiritual father who raises children in Christ and for Christ.

The sacrament of confession in the Church is not merely a retrieval of memories, nor simply psychological analysis or social guidance; rather, it is the creation of a new person and the bestowal of life in Christ.

God created humankind out of love, creating them in His image and likeness. But after Adam's fall, sin entered human nature, causing confusion within humanity, dividing it against itself, and making it susceptible to corruption, having become enslaved to its desires. From this stems the Christian perspective on understanding humanity's many psychological and spiritual problems and struggles. As Jesus said:

> “For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man” (Mark 7:21–23).

How do we define the word “passion,” and its plural “passions”? It is a tendency or movement of the soul that manifests in the act of sin and is repeated until humans become enslaved to it, possessing, controlling, and subjugating them. To the extent that it holds sway over them, they drift away from God and are swept away on a path contrary to His life. The Church performs its healing work in the sacrament of confession, by treating the passions of the individuals and restoring them to their original state before the fall of man.

The Holy Fathers of the Church, like Saint Dorotheus of Gaza, distinguish three powers within the soul: the appetitive, the irascible, and the rational. The rational powers manifest themselves in the dominance of pride and its associated vices; the appetitive in the desires of the flesh and the like; while the irascible in hatred, anger, resentment, and the like. All passions are summarized in these three powers. According to the Orthodox Church's doctrine, healing is based on restoring passions to their natural role in human nature, not on their suppression.

In this regard, St. John Climacus says:

> "Vice or passion is not originally planted in nature, for God is not the Creator of passions. But there are in us many natural virtues from Him... We have taken natural qualities from ourselves and transformed them into passions..." (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 26).

St. Maximus the Confessor explains this in more detail, saying:

> "It is not food that is evil, but gluttony; it is not the birth of children that is evil, but adultery; it is not money that is evil, but the love of money; it is not glory that is evil, but vainglory. This being so, nothing in existence is evil in itself; rather, evil lies in its misuse." (*Four Hundred Chapters on Love*, third century, 4)

Man was created for glory, but through God. This glory is achieved through the fulfillment of God's image within him, in its supposed journey toward the divine ideal. However, what happened after the fall is that man began to seek his lost glory in ways contrary to his creation, and therein lies sin. Sin, in the Orthodox understanding, is the disease that manifests itself in the misuse of the soul's powers.

In other words, we can summarize the condition of man after the fall in the words of the contemporary Greek theologian Christos Yannaras:

> "The road, then, remains open after the fall for the person of man to become once more an hypostasis of life, no longer of a biological life, corruptible and temporary, but of an incorruptible and

> immortal life. This new existential possibility God inaugurates himself with his incarnation, becoming the beginning of salvation and renewal of the human race" (*Elements of Faith*, chapter 7).

The Sacrament of Confession:
A Healing Process Through Christ the Savior and Healer

We find the roots of healing in the New Testament in many words with "medical" terminology, indicating that Christ came to heal humanity and restore it to its original state. For example:

- "When Jesus heard their words, he replied, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick'" (Matthew 9:12).
- "When the people of the town recognized Jesus, they spread word throughout the whole region. They brought their sick to him and begged that they might touch even the hem of his garment, and everyone who touched it was made well" (Matthew 14:35).
- "Thus, sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ" (1 Corinthians 8:12).
- "Then the angel showed me the river of life, clear as crystal… either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (Revelation 22:1-2).

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Lord reveals several truths:

> "A Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him" (Luke 10:33-34).

Christ heals the wounded man and takes him to the inn. Christ, the Samaritan in this parable, is clearly portrayed as a physician who heals the sick and takes them to His Church (the inn) or hospital.

(To be continued)