The Sacrament of Confession, Part Two

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In the Church, we find people advanced in their spiritual lives and others just beginning. Some understand Christianity as merely a religion, a way of life, or a social welfare institution. But the Church is much more than that. The Church is the hospital where people are healed when they live and grow in Christ. It is living in the Kingdom and the path leading to it. In it, a person is saved and regains their lost joy. Healing the spiritually ill is the work of the Church, and the Church's contribution to serving the physically ill is simply a step in this healing process.

This healing can be made through purification. Christianity without purification is utopia. “If any one among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this; to visit the orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:26–27).

What is the role of the priest? If the Church is a hospital, then the priest is the physician. Therefore, the priest is not a religious businessman, no matter how important; all his work (sacramental, service-oriented, social, administrative, etc.) must be done with the aim of healing people. He is the spiritual physician who heals the sick. He is the father in Christ. We call him "father" because he begets in Christ. Worship and sacraments must be placed within the therapeutic method and treatment.

In this context, Orthodoxy does not view confession as a mere formal or legal absolution from sins. It is more than that. St. John Climacus says in a patristic spiritual reading of the Book of Exodus:

> "Those of us who wish to go out of Egypt and to fly from Pharaoh, certainly need some Moses as a mediator with God and from God, who, standing between action and contemplation, will raise hands of prayer for us to God, so that guided by Him we may cross the sea

> of sin and rout the Amalek of the passions" (The Ladder of Divine Ascent, step 1:7).

There is no healing without a physician. Saint Symeon the New Theologian says that the priest is Moses, who leads his spiritual children as a knowledgeable and compassionate physician.

Saint John Chrysostom elevates the priesthood, saying, “The work of the priesthood is done on earth, but it is ranked in the heavenly ordinances.” For this reason, the degrees of priesthood (deacon, priest, bishop) in the Orthodox understanding are closely linked to the three fundamental stages of spiritual life: purification, enlightenment, and deification. This practically means that the more a person progresses in healing, the higher he ascends the ladder of priestly grace and blessing.

Hence, providing the task of identifying the sick—that is, diagnosing and then treating them to achieve healing—is considered one of the most important tasks of the Orthodox Church.

This requires, first and foremost, self-knowledge. How can one be saved without knowing and confessing his sins? How can one reveal his illness to a physician if he does not feel pain? The first step is self-knowledge. The Desert Fathers used to say, “First of all, let us return to ourselves.” Self-knowledge is one of the greatest tasks facing the priest in our contemporary society. How can a priest help people come to know themselves, become aware of their sins, feel the pain of their transgressions, and ultimately confess them? Confession is not merely a recounting of sins, but a revealing of them, allowing us to name our sins.

A priest must know and be aware of his own sins, explain the spiritual life, talk about the lives of the saints, and interpret the Gospel on a spiritual and personal level. He needs to be well-versed about sins, passions, temptations, and their effects on the soul. A sense of holiness must grow in the faithful, and the priest's ministry requires him to help them understand Christianity as a spiritual battle against the demons.

The second thing is repentance. We do not strive merely to become good and virtuous people in this society. The goal of confession is not to make people upright and sociable, nor is it a self-serving exercise, but rather it is the forgiveness of sins and guidance that helps in healing from them and developing personal communion with God. Thus, God becomes a light that illuminates, not a fire that burns. Repentance means change.

To be continued.