

The Rite of Confession

By Fr. Robert Arida

What follows is an attempt to answer some basic questions posed by someone interested in the practice of confession in the Orthodox Church. While there are various approaches to confession throughout the Orthodox Church, the questions ultimately boil down to wanting to know the history and development of the rite and whether this rite is consistent with confessing directly to God. Though my response is not at all exhaustive, I have tried to show, on the one hand, the interrelationship of repentance/confession, reconciliation and the local Eucharistic community. On the other hand reference is made to the tension between charismatic and institutional confessors. To a certain extent this tension continues to be played out in the Orthodox Church and helps to promote the existing confusion and even misuse of the rite of confession whereby it is separated from the community and the Eucharist.

Dear G.,

Your questions, comments and observations about the rite of confession are well taken. That the role of confession has become obscured and misused cannot be disputed. On the other hand, as you point out, a look at the historical development of the rite of confession can be very helpful in understanding its purpose as well as restoring it to its proper place within the Christian community.

My response may seem a bit long. In spite of its length it is only a very brief outline that attempts to show the long and complex historical context in which the sacrament of Confession develops.

What seems to be a common context in both Judaism and Christianity relative to “repentance” and/or “confession” is the community. Even when one confesses “alone” one confesses as a member of a community. Personal confession and personal repentance are not private acts simply because sin is not a private act. Sin carries within itself personal, communal and cosmic consequences. Reducing confession to a private act – whether the act involves standing before a priest or standing alone – is one of the main reasons why confession is surrounded by misunderstanding and confusion.

Seen from a communal perspective sin bears on the lives apart from the one who has sinned. Sin is contagious. Even when the sinner is not physically separated or expelled from the community the community still bears the consequences of the sin(s) whereby its relationship with God is disrupted and even endangered. Within Judaism during the time of the temple, even when sin was committed unknowingly, sacrifices were offered on behalf of the sinner and the community. (Cf. Leviticus 4) In some cases (Leviticus 5) the knowing sinner is required to confess before offering sacrifice. That the confession preceded the sacrifice

indicates that it occurred within the temple before the officiating priest even though there are no details describing how the confession was made.

Perhaps the most well known act of public and communal repentance/confession and purification in the Old Testament is Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement – which was the culmination of a ten day cycle leading to the new year. Inextricably connected to the animal sacrifices offered on behalf of the people was the purification of sacred space and its contents. Because of its contagious nature, sin affected the purity and consequently the holiness of the temple. This meant that the tent of meeting (prior to the building of the temple), the altar, the sanctuary and priests themselves were ritually cleansed from sin and impurity. Accompanying the ritual of purification and atonement was a national fast which augmented the sacredness of the day. Details outlining the rites for Yom Kippur can be found in Leviticus 16, 23:26-32; Exodus 30:10; Numbers 7-11. When examined closely, one can see that the dynamic of national repentance/confession and purification focused first on the purification of sacred space. Following Leviticus 16, atonement was accomplished when the priest purified the temple ending with the sprinkling of blood on the altar sanctifying it from “the uncleanness of the people of Israel.”(vs.19) The altar was in fact the primary object of purification by which the person or the entire nation became the beneficiary of this purification. Once the temple was purified of the sins of the people the priest (Leviticus 16) laid his hands over a live goat confessing over the animal “all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins...” Once this was accomplished the priest was instructed to transfer the sins “ upon the head of the goat, and send him away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land; and he shall let the goat go in the wilderness.” (Vss. 21-22) With the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. the priesthood and animal sacrifice ceased but the Day of Atonement continued to be remembered and celebrated in the synagogue.

Both Judaism and Christianity perceive sin as that which alienates one from God and neighbor. The healing and restoration of a person from sin require conversion. This fundamental act of changing one’s psychological and even physical orientation expressed in Judaism (*shub* in Hebrew) and Christianity (*epistrephe* and *metanoia* in Greek) was a major development in the way word and ritual were used. Sacred incantations and rituals were not ends in themselves. They could not, by themselves, render one clean and hence reconciled to God and neighbor. The prophets were most emphatic about this. With forceful courage they reminded Israel of the need for ritual to be accompanied by true repentance, fidelity and love for God and a desire to follow his will. A change of mind and heart was essential. “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of he-goats. ...Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of assemblies – I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. (Isaiah 1; 10-13); “And the Lord said: ... this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote...” (Isaiah 29:13); “Yet even now,” says the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” (Joel 2: 12-13) Capturing the critical assessments of the

prophets regarding the misuse of ritual is the poignant verse from Psalm 50/51; “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God you will not despise.”

The rite of repentance/confession within Christianity has a long and complex history. Yet, in continuity with Judaism, repentance/confession was in its earliest stages a public act i.e. an act tied to the worship of the local community. The New Testament, patristic writings and liturgical texts attest to this. In the Acts of the Apostles Peter directs those “men of Israel” (2:22) who have been attentive and receptive to his teaching regarding the out pouring of the Holy Spirit as a consequence of the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth to “[r]epent and be baptized” in order to receive forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. (2:22-42) The call to “confess your sins to one another, and [to] pray for one another, that you may be healed” in the epistle of James finds resonance in the Didache, a text originating in Alexandria (cir.150): “In Church, confess you sins, and do not come to your prayer with a guilty conscience.” (4:14) In the Didascalia Apostolorum (a text originating in or around Antioch cir.230) there is, prior to the Anaphora, the exhortation by the deacon; “Let no one have any quarrel against another; let no one come in hypocrisy. Then let the men give the men and the women give the women, the Lord’s kiss. But let no one do it with deceit as Judas betrayed the Lord with a kiss.” (Bk. II, 7,57) Given Christianity’s continuity with Judaism relative to the public dimensions of sin, we can cautiously presume that a liturgical and therefore public context existed for repentance/confession and reconciliation even though there are no details offered as to how this was done.

Apart from the rite of Baptism and its relationship to repentance, one encounters in patristic texts references to those sins resulting in excommunication (i.e. prohibiting the reception of the Eucharist) and the process of reconciliation. In Asia Minor, St. Gregory Thaumaturgos (+ 275) in his Canonical Epistle, written perhaps to a bishop in Pontus or Bithynia after the Gothic invasions and following the Decian persecution, lists in canons VII and VIII the sins that led to excommunication. These sins were apostasy, betrayal of fellow Christians to the barbarians, murder and stealing. What is of special interest regarding this text is the outline in canon IX of the different stages of repentance leading up to reconciliation: 1) “Weeping takes place without the gate of the oratory; and the offender standing there ought to implore the faithful as they enter to offer up prayer on his behalf. 2) Listening to the word, again, takes place within the gate in the porch, where the offender ought to stand until the catechumens depart, and thereafter he should also go forth. For let him hear the Scriptures and doctrine, it is said, and then be put forth, and reckoned unfit for the privilege of prayer. 3) Prostration, again, is that one remain within the gate of the temple, and go forth along with the catechumens. 4) Restoration is that one be associated with the faithful, and go not forth with the catechumens. 5) And last of all comes the participation in the holy mysteries.” Within these stages of repentance and reconciliation, St. Gregory shows that one’s return to the community was a liturgical and therefore communal act culminating in the reception of the Eucharist.

At this point some questions can be asked; what about sins that did not result in excommunication? How were they confessed and how was the penitent reconciled to the

Eucharistic community? St. Gregory's much-admired older contemporary, Origen of Alexandria (+253), provides some insight to how such sins were handled. Even though Origen may not have regarded all sins (idolatry, adultery and fornication) as pardonable, he seems to have been aware of a type of "private" or "secret" confession made before a priest (= bishop) who would discern if the penitent needed to confess before the entire community: "But observe carefully to whom you confess your sins; put the physician to the test, in order to know whether he is weak with the weak, and a mourner with those that mourn. Should he consider you disease ***to be of such a nature that it must be made known to, and cured in the presence of the assembled congregation, follow the advice of the experienced physician.***" (In Ps. hom.37, 2, 5) The need for a skilled confessor was complemented by the need for discretion. The renowned Antiochian exegete Theodore of Mopsuestia (+428) compared the confessors whether they be bishops or priests to caring fathers who "will not declare the things that are not to be disclosed, but they will keep to themselves the things that have happened as befits true and loving fathers, bound to safeguard the shame of their spiritual children striving to heal their bodies." (Catechetical Hom.16,120-123)

Prior to his conversion to Montanism, Tertullian of Carthage (3rd. c) was one of the earliest writers who, because the local community was understood as the body of Christ, associated the entire community led by its ordained ministers with the person of Christ. Consequently, it was Christ himself who received and reconciled the penitent. "When you cast yourself at the brethren's knees, you are handling Christ, you are entreating Christ. In like manner, when they (i.e. the congregation) shed tears over you, it is Christ who suffers, Christ who prays the Father for mercy... Is it better to be damned in secret than absolved in public?" (Cf. De Paenitentia 9-10).

Public repentance and reconciliation was an act of Christ who, on behalf of the penitent, intercedes before his Father. This is accomplished in and through the local Eucharistic community. Yet, who presented the penitent before the community, at what point in the Liturgy was the penitent reconciled and what prayer or prayers were said remain unknown. What is known is that for a rigorist like Tertullian a "second baptism" occurred only once. "...let no one be less good, because God is more so, by repeating his sin as often as he is forgiven. Otherwise be sure he will find an end of escaping, when he shall not find one of sinning. We have escaped once (in baptism); let us commit ourselves to perils no farther, even if we seem likely to escape a second time." (De Paen. 10)

The practice of repentance/confession and reconciliation occurring only once after baptism was not universal. The Didascalia Apostolorum gives no indication as to the number of times a fallen Christian may be forgiven. Those who have been excommunicated and have sincerely repented are to be received by the local bishop and restored to the Church. "Receive therefore without any doubting him that repents. Be not hindered by unmerciful men who say that we must not be defiled with such as those, nor so much as speak to them..." (Bk. II,3,11) St. Cyprian of Carthage (d.258) stressed that forgiveness had to be offered after baptism otherwise "it would be a mockery and deception of poor brethren to exhort them to the act of atonement and then take away its logical outcome, the healing, to say to them 'Mourn and shed tears, and groan day and night, and labor largely and frequently for the working away and cleansing of your sin; but after all these things you

shall die outside the confines of the Church. Whatsoever things are necessary to peace, you shall do, but none of that peace which you seek shall you achieve.’” (Epistle 55, 27)

Prior to the conversion of Constantine some general remarks can be made regarding the understanding of the rite of repentance/confession and reconciliation. 1) Sins were pardoned by God in and through the Church which, by the Holy Spirit, is the living body of Christ. 2) Not all sins led to excommunication. 3) For those who *were not excommunicated* a public confession of sins took the form of a *Confiteor* in the context of the Liturgy. 4) Those excommunicated from the Eucharist (and the assembly) underwent a prescribed period of repentance culminating in public confession and reconciliation by the community through the prayer (or prayers) of a bishop or priest. 5) Reception of the Eucharist with the rest of the assembly was the sign and seal of forgiveness, reconciliation and healing.

Though attitudes and practices of repentance/confession and reconciliation varied within the Church, it nevertheless seems clear that they were inseparable from the local Eucharistic community. Yet, as Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire the role of the Eucharistic community in restoring a penitent gradually, over time, became minimized if not totally lost.

In part the divorce of repentance/confession and reconciliation from the Eucharistic community was due to a stress on personal purification and perfection. The ascetical life, which was to be practiced by all Christians, was perceived by some to be an end in itself. Extreme forms of asceticism such as that practiced by the Messalians, condemned by the third ecumenical council convened in Ephesus in 431, saw little if any need for liturgical and consequently sacramental life. Emerging concurrently with extreme forms of asceticism was an understanding that reception of the Eucharist was limited to certain times of the liturgical year.

Other factors contributed to the separation of repentance/confession and reconciliation from the Eucharistic community. From the beginning of Christianity the question of “*forgiving and retaining sins*” (Cf. John 20:23) became the basis not only from which developed the various controversies related to how often a penitent could be forgiven and reconciled but also who possessed the *power and authority* to forgive and reconcile one who had sinned after baptism. By the third century these controversies were gradually morphing into tensions between charismatic and ecclesial/hierarchical leadership. With the advent of desert monasticism in the fourth century it was customary for monks and nuns to attach themselves to a spiritual teacher who in most instances was neither a bishop nor priest. Within this context lay monks and presumably nuns were offering both spiritual guidance and absolution of sins. By the ninth century when monks had gained the reputation of being the defenders of the faith, especially during the waves of iconoclasm, they were also being seen as the ideal spiritual directors and father confessors for those inside and outside the monastery. Consequently, the issue of forgiving and retaining sins became an issue between the monks and bishops.

As the tension over who was able to forgive and retain sins heightened, the bishops attempted to confine the monastic spiritual father to the monastery. St. Patriarch Nicephorus

of Constantinople (806-815) thought that monks hearing confessions outside the monasteries was a novelty. In a letter to a certain Theodosius, Nicephorus the Chartophylax (who may have been Patriarch Nicephorus II [1260-1261]) insisted that the power to bind and loose was given by God only to the bishops. (CF. Patrologia Graeca vol. 100, cols. 1065-1067) Responding to Patriarch Mark of Alexandria (1195) who had asked whether or not monks have the right to hear confessions, Theodore Balsamon writes that the penitential ministry belongs to the bishops and then the priests while those priest-monks who hear confession without the bishop's permission over step their bounds. Balsamon further states that an even more egregious offense is committed when lay monks hear confessions. (Rhalli and Potli, Vol. III, p.311 also Vol. II, p.69)

Among the best know critics of bishops and priests having the sole authority to forgive and bind sins is St. Symeon the New Theologian (966-1022). In his Letter On Confession, Symeon writes : "Before (the monks), only the bishops received, as from the apostles, the power to bind and to loose... But over the course of time, the bishops lost their ability to carry out this service (achreioumenon=becoming useless) and this terrible (awesome) function passed to the priests who by the grace of God led an irreproachable and dignified life. Afterwards when they also, the priests and bishops became confused and became similar to the people and many among them fell under the influence of the spirits of error and empty words, this function was transmitted, as it was said to the elect of God, I mean the monks. Not that this function was removed from the priests and bishops, but that they themselves became alienated from their function." (Epistle I, 263-274. Cf. Archbishop Basil Krivovheine, Dans La Lumiere Du Christ: S. Symeon Le Nouveau Theologien,1980,p.143)

To insist or imply that St. Symeon adamantly ceased to count bishops and priests among those able to bind and to loose sins would be an exaggeration. What is important to understand from Symeon's perspective is that the binding and loosing of sins is a ministry reserved for those clergy and laity i.e. the monks who remain true disciples of Christ. Yet, what is striking about the Letter On Confession and other texts debating who is able to bind and loose is the absence of the local Eucharistic community. The accent on binding and loosing or on repentance/confession and reconciliation is placed on the relationship between penitent and confessor. Consequently, the liturgical context culminating in the reception of the Eucharist along with the rest of the local community is minimized if not totally ignored. The reason(s) for this require a separate study. However, it can be pointed out that with the influence of urban monasticism changes begin to develop relative to the rite of repentance/confession and reconciliation. Gradually the rite of repentance becomes removed from its ecclesial and therefore Eucharistic context. Repentance/confession and reconciliation is reduced to a private rite involving only the confessor who was not necessarily a member of the local community and the penitent. As a result of this development both the Eucharist and the local church assume new roles in the rite of repentance. In the past the Eucharist was the goal and seal of the penitential rite whose context was the community. It was the entire community, clergy and laity, which was perceived as assisting in the healing and reconciliation of the penitent. By the end of the eighth century the Eucharist begins to be understood as a therapeutic aid for attaining spiritual perfection. Consequently, reception of the Eucharist even when done frequently is reduced to a *stage* in the penitential process while the local community virtually disappears

from the penitential process. The rite of repentance and receiving the Eucharist became expressions of an *individualistic pietism* which, for all intents and purposes, became and remain, in the minds of many penitents and their confessors, private acts carried out in the context of communal worship. This is clearly seen in the prayer of absolution published in the Trebnik (Book of Needs) by Metropolitan Peter Moghila of Kiev in 1646 and still used by some confessors; “May our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, through his grace and love towards mankind forgive you my child all your sins and I the unworthy priest ***through the power given to me, absolve and forgive all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.***” Earlier prayers of absolution found in the Greek Euchologion place the emphasis on God as the one who forgives the sinner through the priest. One such prayer dating from the mid ninth century and perhaps coming from the Studios monastery in Constantinople reads; “May God who pardoned David through Nathan the prophet when he confessed his sins, and Peter weeping bitterly for his denial, and the sinful woman weeping at His feet, and the publican and the prodigal son, may that same God forgive you all things, through me a sinner, both in this world and in the world to come, and set you uncondemned before his terrible Judgment seat. Having no further care for the sins, which you have confessed, depart in peace.” Neither prayer refers to the penitent being (re)joined or reconciled to the local Eucharistic community.

The restoration of repentance/confession and reconciliation to a liturgical and therefore communal context demands careful examination. In part this requires, particularly on the part of the bishops and priests, a willingness to recognize how the entire sacramental process of repentance/confession and reconciliation have little if any grounding in the Eucharistic community. Reducing the confusion and misunderstanding surrounding the rite of Confession will help to better reveal the local Church – the local Eucharistic community – as the living body of Christ which, being gathered by the Spirit to celebrate the new covenant, reconciles all to the one God and Father.

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