

Chapter V

Therapeutic Dimension of Confession

The sacrament of confession has a vital role in the life of a real Christian. It is very unfortunate that many of the Orthodox believers do not take it seriously. Now a days it has become an annual exercise by which people get admission to the general bodies of the parishes. Most of those who confess on those occasions do it more as a ritual than as an act related to their salvation.

Some people, especially the youth of the Church find confession for its psychological effects. They recommend it as a therapy and they prefer a priest to a psychologist because the former is more trusted than the latter. However, it is fascinating to know that the interpretation of confession as a therapy is not a psychological discovery of the twentieth century. It was rather a part of the faith of the Ancient Church. Let us have a look at the origin of confession as a religious practice and the faith of the Orthodox Church regarding it.

Confession of sins as a religious activity

The word *confession* is derived from the Latin word *satisfact*, which basically means 'to acknowledge' or 'to avow'. Later it got the specific meaning of 'confessing a sin/ fault'. The early Christians used it on two very important contexts. The first was confession of one's faith before a tribunal during the time persecution and the second was confession of one's sins before the Church.

The origin of the confession of sins can be found in the life of the non-literate people of the world. They found confession of sins not only as a theistic concept, where the goal was divine forgiveness, but also as a non-theistic idea, where the end was the efficacy of the confession in its act itself. However, in most cases of these the central theme for confession was sexual transgressions. The hunters, fishers, members of an expedition team and those who had to fight with the devastating powers of nature believed in maintaining sexual purity. They as well as their wives had the responsibility not only to maintain sexual sanctity but also to prove it before the community, in which they lived. If somebody was accused of adultery, they had to make a confession either before the people concerned or before the heads of their clan.

The traditional high cultures and world religions also observed confession for various reasons. There were public as well as private confessions. People confessed to the fellow individuals and in some cases to the priests. Here also the sexual sins got more weightage than other sins. In Hinduism confession was

followed by an eliminating sacrifice whereas in Buddhism and Jainism it was a part of their monastic life.

Confession of sins as seen in the Old Testament

‘Turning back from sins’ was an important theme of the Old Testament period in general and the prophetic age in particular. The community of Israel was considered to be the elected People of God. They were holy people because their God was a Holy God (Lev. 19,2). If somebody committed a sin, it was thought to be affecting the whole community for a certain period of time. In some cases the sinner was stoned to death (Jos. 7). There were also practices of setting up trials against a man who was considered to be a sinner. It was accompanied by fasting also (1Kgs. 21,9.12).

Israelites transferred their sins to a scapegoat through the confession of their sins and thereafter they sacrificed the animal (Lev. 16,21-22). Sometimes the physical sickness was considered as an after effect of sins. One had to offer a Sin Offering in such cases (Lev.14).

The use of the Hebrew word *soob* is very important in our present discussion. It means a ‘turning back’ from something. The Old Testament books use this word to mean ‘turning back from sins’ which means to make repentance. Prophets like Isaiah, Amos and Zachariah preached the Israelites to turn back from their sins. King David sung the Psalm of repentance (Ps 51) after the visit of prophet Nathan (2Sam 12,1ff.) with the hope that Yahweh would forgive him. In the prayer during the consecration of the Temple of Jerusalem king Solomon prays for forgiveness from God for those who come to the temple and repent their sins (1Kgs. 8,48-50).

New Testament Understanding of Confession of sins

The New Testament also emphasizes the need for repentance as the requirement for the forgiveness of God. John the Baptist, the herald of Jesus Christ, preaches the baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins (Mk 1,4). Jesus Christ also opens his ministry by saying: “the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1,15). St. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to dissociate themselves from sinners and to expel them from the Church (1Cor 5,9f.). However, Jesus teaches his disciples to help a sinner realize his sins and to repent; expulsion comes as the last resort for those who don’t want to hear the advices of the Church (Mt 18,15-17). Also he authorizes his disciples to bind and lose the sins of the people (Jn 20,23).

The belief that confession of sins results in the forgiveness of sins (1Jn 1,8-10) was an essential part of the faith of the New Testament. The sick had to call the elders of the Church and to confess their sins before the elders. That led to the healing (Jam 5,16). The sin for which there was no possibility for repentance was apostasy (Heb 6,1f.) and the one for which there was no sacrifice was a deliberate

act (Heb 10,26). However, those who did not want to repent after committing a sin would invite serious punishments from God (Rev 2,16).

Confession of sins in the Ancient Church

The Early Church considered itself as the Body of Christ and therefore people had to throw away their pagan faith along with their sinful life before getting admitted in it. It thought of repentance followed by confession of sins only in the context of baptism. They maintained holiness not only of their heart but also in their body, because of their strong faith in the imminent Second Coming of Christ. It was illogical then to think of confession of sins after baptism because it would have weakened the repentance and confession of sins before baptism.

The confession of sins by baptized people became a necessity only from 2nd century onwards. The important challenges of Christians then were the following:

- a) The second coming of Christ was delayed; it was impossible for the believers to lead a pure life as they have imagined. It was the duty of the Church to console those who were disappointed for sinning after the baptism.
- b) There were a lot of Christians in the second and third generations and they were baptized as infants. They were unable to understand the seriousness of abstinence from sins; when they grew up they have committed many sins.
- c) To believe in Christ was a matter of life or death during the time of persecution of Christians. Some people became apostates only because they did not want to die. Later they wished to rejoin the Church after confessing their grave mistake.

The earliest document which gives evidence to the practice of confession of sins by a baptized Christian is the *Shepherd of Hermas* written in the second half of the second century. It sees repentance as a “great wisdom” and the Christians who did not confess as “those who have lost their lives” (*Shepherd of Hermas*, Book II, Commandment IV, Ch. 3,3). However, confession was allowed to the Christians only once after baptism. It was done for the forgiveness of the triad of sins- apostasy, murder and adultery- which needed a confession.

The Theology of Confession

There were two different streams of theology regarding the confession of sins as far as the Ancient was concerned. These were originated almost simultaneously and have later been developed as the theology of the East as well as the West.

Confession as an act of Satisfaction:

Tertullian (145-220 CE) was a man well versed in the Roman Law. He interpreted the relationship between man and God in legal terms. He professed the need for confession of sins in his treatise called *De Penitentia*. According to him the believers should confess their sins not because God is ignorant about their commissions and omissions but because they could appease God through the

confession. His statement about *Exomologesis*, i.e. the confession of a baptized Christian, is the following; *29 atisfaction confessione disponitur, confessione penitentia nascitur, penitentia Deus mitigatur*. This means; “by confession satisfaction is settled, of confession repentance is born and by repentance God is appeased” (*De Penitentia*, IX, 2).

By this interpretation confession becomes efficacious in the act itself. That means, one can appease God through his readiness to confess; it does not necessarily need a heart which feels pain over the sins. This theology has later influenced the Roman Catholic perspective on the theme. As per this theology the sinner is considered as a culprit; the priest as his advocate and God is the judge. Since the act of confession became more important than the repentance of the sinner, everything became mechanical. One could get absolution of sins even by paying money to the Church; that is what is called the sale of absolution. This thought has led to the Reformation in the 16th century.

Confession as a Therapy:

Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD) interpreted confession in a pedagogic and medical sense almost during the same time. He said: “...for those of us who are diseased in body a physician is required so also those who are diseased in soul require a pedagogue (teacher) to cure our maladies; and then a teacher to train and guide the soul to all requisite knowledge when it is made able to admit the revelation of the word” (Clement, *Instructor*, Ch.1). In Clement’s view the sinner is a patient and the priest is a physician. There may not be only mild but also stringent medicines to cure the diseases of the soul. Sometimes the physician had to give medicine to vomit what remains undigested in the soul. In some other cases the soul must be operated with exhortations, reprimand and conviction through exposure. Involuntary sin is a “sudden death” in Clement’s view. Clement realized the psycho-somatic impact of human activities and he was emphasizing a psychological approach in confession. The Eastern Church has seen this view more acceptable.

St.Basil the Great taught the monks to confess their sins to spiritual fathers who were wise, holy and men of rich spiritual experiences. He categorized the people who made repentance in to four different stages according to their position in the Church during the worship (see Basilius, Letters, CCXVII):

- a) weepers- those who stood outside the door of the Church
- b) hearers- those who stood inside the Church at the place called Nartex
- c) kneelers- those who stood along with the catechumens
- d) `standers`- those who stood with the believers

These had to undergo a long period of repentance: four years as weeper, five years as hearer, seven years as kneeler and four years as `stander`. The sinner was not permitted to take communion during the period of repentance. The duration of the repentance could be shortened if the Church saw that the sinner felt the pain of

his guilt and decided to keep himself away from that malice for ever. However, this was never considered as a penalty but as a spiritual exercise which helped soul to restore its health. Almsgiving, Bible reading, prayer and fasting were also associated with the exercise of repentance. The sinners did all these not for their efficacy but as part of their spiritual exercise.

The person who comes for confession needs a self examination; then he had to confess his sins with pain of his heart and the earnest desire for forgiveness from God. Thus the practice of confession was considered as a therapeutic process which helped one regain the strength of his soul. The role of the priest in this process is more of a doctor than of an advocate. He hears the sins of a believer not on the basis of his personal capacity as another believer, but on the basis of his priesthood. He does this in the Church which experiences the communion of the believers and the saints. The absolution of the sins comes only from God. The priest could only pronounce the blessing of absolution on the basis of his priestly authority which he gets during the mystery of ordination. At the end the believer receives the Eucharistic communion, which is called as the “medicine of immortality and an antidote against death” by Ignatius of Antioch.

Confession as part of a holistic spiritual life:

Confession is an essential part of our spiritual life. Good Christians are to be in a mood of repentance always. Around 244 CE Origen wrote some homilies on the Book of Leviticus. According to him there are seven ways for the forgiveness of sins and he puts these in the place of the Levitical sacrifices (*Homilies on Leviticus*, 2,4). They are the following: a) Baptism b) Suffering of Martyrdom c) Almsgiving d) Forgiveness of others' sins e) Converting others from doing sins f) Charity and g) Confession. Regular confession would cleanse us and thereafter we will be eligible to receive the Holy Communion. St. Paul warns the people: “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord (1 Cor 11,27).

The interpretation of Confession as an act of healing is very important in today's church life. Modern people are sick more in the psyche than in the body. Because of their life in a world of globalization, where competition and stress are the book marks, many people suffer from complexes of fear, hate, jealousy, aggression etc. The Church has to address these problems and give the believers a platform where they feel relieved. So there should be efficient Father Confessors. They can play a major role in the spiritual upbringing of the believers. Those who approach them would confess not only their sins but also their disappointments and grievances.