

Thoughts on Repentance and Making a Confession

By Fr. Hayden Butler

Note: The following is profoundly shaped by a study of Elements of the Spiritual Life by F.P. Harton and should be seen as a sort of synthesis of that much denser text. It is also the product of countless conversations on the topic I've had with Bp. Scarlett.

Sin, Temptation, and Transformation

The Fall is a regression, a move away from the natural grace with which humanity had been endowed at Creation. Once man's nature had been disordered, grace was no longer able to operate in man's nature along its original trajectory. Baptism does not fully reintegrate man back into his original state but establishes again the pathway for grace to interact with the life that is capable of glory. In our fallen state we can come to desire to do good but simultaneously to be obsessed with and to desire the wrong thing. The enemy here is what is called *concupiscence*, the desire to requite our lower nature at the expense of the higher. The work of salvation is a progressive transformation of *concupiscence* into *charity*, but this transformation requires grace. We are saved by grace indeed. Grace is the vital principle of the life that leads to salvation. This unmerited grace of God enables us to reconnect to the grace of God. Without this grace as a fact, nothing we do can merit progress in the work of salvation. Even so, the idea of the concert of effort with grace is central to the Christian life. God desires that we participate in the work that He has initiated and sustained.

The enemies of this work are the world, the flesh, and the devil. Sins of the flesh are intended to introduce carnal excesses or deficiencies, and are met with fasting. Sins of the world are those of luxury and are met through the ability to give. The point of demonic temptation is not merely to cause sin but to engender despair or detachment from God. The devil, plainly, wants us to give up. There is a tendency in our time to collapse all ideas of sin as into an undistinguished moral sickness. However, there is a necessary treatment of these things in their distinction. In the order of things, utter despair is plainly worse than flirting with lust. When entering into spiritual transformation grounded in a life of prayer, there can be a sense of victory over sin that alludes to the grand victory that will embrace all of creation. It is a sign and gift of hope in the Resurrection. But the ongoing presence of sanctifying grace at the hands of the Holy Spirit reminds us that there is still work to do. Purification of the will—and this is the gritty reality of the spiritual life—involves God letting us stay where we are until we no longer want to stay there. We are led to holiness through this phase of recognizing fallen desires and coming to abandon them.

Failure, as such, is a part of Christian progress. Each failure is a vital component of reaching the

point at which we desire to turn away from our sins. The demonic temptation is to say that we cannot do it, or to point out the shortcut, or to simply give up. This temptation can generate the sense that the place at which we are stuck is all that there is and that there is no hope of change. The function of grace that reveals the things of Faith to be real in light of this temptation to despair is perseverance that brings forth the fruit of holiness. The main thing that we must do is to realize that no way in which we stumble is fatal unless that is the place at which we choose to stop by despairing of repentance. The demonic tells us that we can never overcome captivity and that failure renders us ultimately worthless. This is why a lot of people who feel like their sin is singular and special among sins or sinners. One of the great things that is done through one-on-one confession is that we learn are not all that special, that we are not alone, and that there is hope for change. This is the grace that helps to combat the demonic. The sense of singularity in sin serves the purpose of the demonic and must be overcome. We must be reconciled from the isolation of our despair to the fellowship of those who are being forgiven alongside of us. People must connect in order to be encouraged.

There is rarely a creative event in the history of Divine interaction with humanity that does not involve some sort of testing. It seems, based on God's revelation, as though the means of perfection are such that a person must choose and a person must succeed at the tests given to them. This does not mean that we are at the hands of a merciless Trickster! God does not lob grenades at us; rather he gives us temptations (better understood as tests) as a means of measuring growth, cultivating strength, and identifying weakness while leading us to the Promised Land. It is a means of purification and a means of progress, a means of making us ready to put on blessedness in the Resurrection.

This is why we have to understand is the difference between temptation and sin. Temptation does not become sin until we consent to it. This calls into a new light the idea of a besetting sin to which we are always called. If we have a "besetting sin" we have a real problem. More often, though, what we mean is a besetting temptation that must be continually and often annoyingly fought. We must go through the process by which we fight it but this means that we must first understand what sort of temptation it is. For example, sexual temptation might engage one in a different way than the sin of gluttony and would require a different fighting strategy. It is at this point that watchfulness becomes a matter of import. It is predicated upon knowing the area of our weakness and should be framed within the narrative of the watchman of a city who is on the lookout for the enemy to attack the gates. Self-knowledge is crucial, but only as a means to this end. This is a common theme in texts like the *Philokalia*, in which the Eastern Fathers stress watchfulness as a prayerful activity geared toward constant vigilance. Moreover, and if we are convinced that there is an enemy of our souls (or three classical enemies as defined by Tradition) then watchfulness becomes the only response that helps us to avoid a critical negligence. When dealing with sin, prevention is preferable to cure. But if prevention falters then there is a proper

means of grace (confession, absolution, and penance) that leads to amendment of life.

There is no way that we can avoid the reality of a struggle against sin. We live in a culture, however, that does not like to have struggle and pain. A lot of what such a culture offers is a shortcut that circumvents the reality of having to work through something with patience and perseverance through a course of time. The whole notion of asceticism acknowledges this struggle and restores the image of the struggle against sin as the fight it really is. The reason we embrace a life of prayer is so that we can conquer in the battle against sin. The ascetical life is a life burdened by a proper concern for victory over the world based on and ordered toward perfection as known in the glory of Christ.

Another matter to consider is the communal element—which is enormously important for spiritual progress. If we try to convince someone who feels worthless because of sin that they are love of God, then this must be experientially validated over time by a consistently loving community. The problem we see very often is that the struggle of the Christian life is overly-cognitive and is not rooted in the manifest life of a church family. Grace must be more than something that is talked about, but rather something that is experienced. When there is a significant effort to know and be known, then real progress is made because of the manifestation of the relational element. So too, growth cannot be a negative struggle against sin. It must also be the practice of positive ministry and virtue. The community is important because it is where we find out who we are. Nor may we always remain the patient on the table, but are all called to join in the ministry of healing and reconciliation that restores people to the practice of relationship as it was meant to be known from the very beginning. That is why it is important to stay among a particular worshipping community and develop relationships as known in the context of a life of prayer over a period of time. This is where we begin self-identifying as worthwhile, loved, and unconditionally cared for in an analogous relationship to the one we will be cultivating with God Himself.

Dealing with Sin: Approaching Confession

We start with a division between mortal and venial sins. There is a significant distinction, even though we must be careful about over-categorization. Where does one cross over into becoming the other? Mortal sin is a transgression against the known will of God in a deliberate and grave matter. Venial misses one or more of these conditions. We should not belittle venial sin because it conditions us to a cumulative effect that is an opportunity for mortal sin. As a rule, attentiveness of the small sins of the day help to deal in the moment with the venial so that it is brought into the world of God's grace and avoids quietly contributing to mortal sins.

Depending on the tradition, one finds lists of what are called “Capital Vices,” which are like

seedbeds that develop in our moral lives out of which flower sins that can choke the life out of us. In our tradition, these capital vices are Pride, Avarice, Wrath, Envy, Gluttony, Lust, Sloth—the importance of knowing the names of sins is because having a diagnosis is the first step on the road to a cure. We need to be intimately familiar with the names of our own sins. We have to assess the besetting temptations in the communities of which we are a part. A good way to begin this naming task is to spend some time in self-examination. A personal favorite is a guide from *St. Augustine's Prayer Book* ([Self-Examination](#)).

For us to repent we have to become aware of what we are doing that is wrong. But there are a lot of things that we fail to realize are wrong until supernatural revelation illuminates those things for what they are. Part of spiritual health is to feel guilty for what we have done wrong. Even so, there's a caution here: guilt has done its job when it persuades us to repent, but oversteps when it suggests that we are beyond forgiveness, or doomed. Holy guilt is nothing more or less than a right realization and awareness of what we have done; the rest is fruitless shame or the temptation of the devil to despair. This feels at first like a sadness over sin because we are afraid of being found out and punished, but as we grow in the spiritual life it becomes more a sadness for having offended a God who has done nothing but love us. This sorrowfulness for having offended God is what we call contrition, and it is the spur that leads us to the sacrament of confession and reparation or penance. We do well when we see it and use it as the opportunity to amend our lives and receive the terms by which we can experience reconciliation.

One of the manifestations of this is in the making of a confession on a regular basis. A good initial rule is at least once during each of the major liturgical seasons. In the same breath, it is good to break from a sense of confession being a merely transactional activity. The general confession and especially daily recollection is vital for growing in holiness, and are for our soul's health. The practice of dealing with sin in both explicitly sacramental and in general practices of recollection is the experience whose fruit consists both of the health of the one who practices it as well as in fruitful experiences that are useful in the formational counsel provided by those who will become spiritual directors. In short: it is good to confess everyday in the Daily Offices and it is good to make a Confession with a Priest.

I realize that there is a sort of anxiety that often arises at the thought of doing this, especially if it is for the first time. Owing to the seal of confession, the absolute secrecy that is imposed on those who hear confessions, much about the experience can only be talked about hypothetically. But I can speak out of my own experience of making confessions, and the truth is that few things have been more liberating or healing as making a confession. I highly recommend that you consider taking Lent to prepare to make a confession during Holy Week this year. It can be a beautiful part of the experience of moving into the joys of Easter.

A Note on Confession (from *Notes for the Inquirers' Class 101*)

By Bp. Stephen Scarlett

We do not believe that a person has to make a confession to a priest in order to be forgiven. However, the sacrament of confession can lead to a greater sense of repentance and a more profound experience of forgiveness. There are many things we don't have to do that are, nonetheless, good for us.

The person making a confession is confessing sins directly to God. The priest is present as a representative of God to pronounce absolution in the name of Jesus. The priest is also present as a representative of the church to welcome the penitent person back into the fellowship of the church. In the early church, confessions were made to the entire congregation. As the church grew, public confession became less practical. The priest came to stand in for the church in private confession.

St. James exhorts us to “confess our faults one to another” (5:16). This seems to refer to our common failings and shortcomings. However, not everyone is able to deal wisely with the knowledge of another's sin. Friends may make one of two errors. They may be shocked at what we've done and refuse to extend grace and forgiveness. Or they may be too soft, excusing our sin rather than helping us conquer it. A priest is one who is called and trained to deal with the reality of human sin, and a priest has been given authority from Christ to forgive (John 21:21-23).

Many are afraid that a priest will look at them differently after a confession. Two things must be highlighted here. First, no one's sins are all that unique. Typically, the priest hears a confession that sounds very much like his own. Second, the penitent soul is the attractive soul. Thus, the attitude of the priest hearing an honest confession is like the attitude of God and the angels (Luke 15:10).

Confessions are made under the “seal” of the confession. Nothing said in confession will ever be mentioned by a priest outside of confession. It will not even be brought up in private conversation with the person who made the confession unless that person asks specifically to talk about it.

Confession should be seen as a normal and natural thing to do. We take care of sin by confession the same way we take care of sickness with medicine. Confessions are typically made during Lent and at other times as is necessary and beneficial. A good confession will focus on specific acts of wrongdoing and neglect, and on our characteristic sinful patterns of thought and behavior. These are what we call “besetting sins.” A good confession is not a laundry list of everything, but concentrates on what is at the forefront of the spiritual battle right now. Self-examination for confession can begin with a review of the Seven Deadly Sins (Chapter 2).

Confession is sometimes made in a confessional “box” or room, or sometimes it is done in the nave or sanctuary of the church. It depends upon the set-up of a given church. Confessions are not typically made face to face. Rather, the person making the confession faces the altar or a cross to make his confession to God. The priest faces the same direction or sits to the side as witness for the church and to represent Christ in giving absolution.

The Form for Making a Confession

Penitent: Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.

Priest: The Lord be in your heart and upon your lips, so that you may worthily confess all your sins; In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Penitent: I confess to Almighty God, to all the Saints, and to you, Father, that I have sinned very much, in thought, word, deed, and omission, by my own great fault. I have committed these sins:

The penitent confesses in his or her own words.

Penitent: For these and all my other sins which I cannot now remember, I am very sorry, I will try to do better, and I humbly ask pardon of God; and of you Father, I ask for penance, counsel and absolution.

The priest may offer words of counsel. Then he assigns a suitable penance.

Priest: Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive thee thine offenses: And by his authority committed unto me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The Lord hath put away all thy sins.

Penitent: Thanks be to God.

Priest: Go in peace, and pray for me also, a sinner.

NOTE: Confessions are available to all by appointment by contacting Bp. Scarlett, Fr. Blake, or Fr. Hayden. They typically happen in the church unless specified otherwise. As Holy Week approaches, there will be sign-up sheets available in the narthex. Happy Lent!