

# CONFESSION AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

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## SOME MODERN QUESTIONS TO A VERY ANCIENT PRACTICE

In the Orthodox Church today, one can notice a very large variety in the practice of confession. A recent colloquium<sup>1</sup> has even shown that the understanding of confession may vary from one place to another. The differences in the practice of confession, which is indeed a very ancient one, arise a long list of questions to the modern man:

1) Where does the confession take place? In a church, or in a room? In front of an icon, or in front of the cross and the gospel? Is the penitent standing, kneeling or seating? Today, in most Ukrainian parishes, the priest hears confession in the church, and the penitent is often kneeling, as in Greece, it is common to confess in an office while the penitent is seating.

2) Which « absolution » prayers should be used? We find indeed a large number of prayers in the Byzantine Euchologia (Books of needs). Some of them use a *deprecativ*e formula (« May God forgive... »), others use an *indicative* formula (« I forgive and absolve you »), as for instance in the Trebnyk of St. Peter Mohyla.

3) Is confession regarded as optional or required? Is this a necessity to go confession before receiving communion, or should one approach the mystery of confession when he feels that he needs to confess something? Is confession a normal practice, that should be regarded as a regular practice, or is it linked with moments of crisis only? Is confession a necessity, like a cold bath, or is it an opportunity, a moment when one can experience divine grace? Once, in a parish in Western Europe, a priest obliged an old Greek parishioner to come for confession. The old man was quite furious and said to the priest: « Father, I have been married for more than fifty years, and I have never committed adultery. So, I do not have anything to confess! »

4) How often should it be practised? Before each communion, once a month, few times in the year or once a year? Does any canon speak of its regularity? Should we repent

only once for each sin we have committed, or can we confess the same sin several times? On that matter, there is a very famous story which professors of pastoral theology love to tell to their students. Once, an eighty-years old woman was confessing her sin of fornication to a priest. The priest said: « Well, you have already confessed this sin to me and received absolution ». The old woman replied: « I know, but it is such a pleasure to recall it! »

5) How long does it take? 1 minute, 3 minutes, 15 minutes, half of an hour? When should it be practised : before the Divine Liturgy? The night before Liturgy? Independently from the Divine Liturgy? It is obvious that when 30 people are waiting in a line twenty minutes before the Divine Liturgy, confession becomes rather a formality than a Mystery.

6) At what age are children expected to start coming to confession? How are they prepared? How do they perceive it : as a constraint, or as something they do willingly? Once, a priest was visiting a very ancient church during a pilgrimage to Italy with his pupils from Sunday school. As he was showing them the architectural specificity of that church, a young child came up to him and asked him: « Father, do you think you could hear my confession in that lateral chapel? »

7) Does the penitent expect the priest asking questions or does he expect telling him his sins by himself? Is the ministry of the confessor to be an inquisitor, or should he be a listener? A bishop once told me his experience of confessing in a monastery nearby Paris. It was after a very long Vigil service. He was quite tired and hungry, but before going to trapeza and having some rest, he had to confess an old lady. She began to tell him once again the same confession, as she did several times before. Quite exhausted and wanting to make the confession shorter, the bishop, who was a young priest at that time, told her: « Well, this you have already told me. Do you have anything else to confess? » The old lady replied, quite irritated: « Please, don't interrupt me. Your task is not to speak, but to listen... »

8) What is the place of *epitimia* (*ejpitimiva*, penance) in confession? Could we apply literally the canons in our days? Is the penitent expecting receiving an *epitimia*? How is it perceived today?

9) Is confession only individual, or could it be corporate? We know, for instance, that St. John of Kronstadt (XX century), receiving hundreds of people for confession, practised corporate confession. Should it be private or public? Is it implies necessarily a personal contact, or could it be done through correspondence (mail) or via internet (e-mail)? Is there a

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia for inviting me to participate in the colloquium on Confession and Spiritual Direction in the Orthodox Church on Mykonos, in October 2004. The present paper presents the results of some of our common reflection.

risk in the privacy of confession for the confessor being falsely accused of sexual abuse? Indeed, many priests are now scarred to receive people for confession in an empty church or in their office.

10) What about the secrecy of confession? In the times of Peter the Great in imperial Russia, priests were expected to reveal any conspiracy against the state. Today, is the priest expected to inform the police in case of sexual abuse? Recently, in France, a Roman Catholic bishop was condemned for not having denounced his priest involved in sexual abuse, although he knew about it from confession.

11) Who may hear confession? Any priest, including the newly ordained one, or only priests having been appointed by their bishop as confessors? Up until today in the Greek Church still only a minority of priests hear confessions. This is not something conferred automatically at ordination. Priests begin to hear confession only after having received a special blessing from their bishop. Therefore, two questions maybe raised: what is the training required to hear confessions? Is there any kind of supervision over the priests hearing confession?

12) How do we choose a spiritual father? Is he by necessity our parish priest, or can we choose someone else? Are we obliged to confess always to the same person, or can we go to different priests for confession? I recall once, when I was serving as a deacon in a cathedral, seeing people waiting in several lines for confession. One young man told me: « Today, I need a very quick confession. Therefore, I will go to this priest... »

### ***Three periods in the history of the mystery of confession***

In order to help us clarify our understanding of the question, we should say a few words about the history of the mystery of confession since, as M. Arranz once said, « the Byzantine penitential practice, as the one of all the other Churches, is the one which presents the greatest development »<sup>2</sup>. Following G. Wagner, we can distinguish three periods with regards the development of the practice of confession<sup>3</sup>.

The first period is the classical period closely linked with the canons of the ancient councils and the Church Fathers. The penitential discipline had to deal mostly with major

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<sup>2</sup> M. ARRANZ, « Les prières pénitentielles de la tradition byzantine, 1ère partie », *OCP* 57 (1991), p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> G. WAGNER, « Penitential discipline in the Oriental Tradition » (in German), *Liturgie et rémission des péchés. Conférences Saint-Serge. 20e Semaine d'Etudes Liturgiques*. (A. TRIACCA, ed.), Rome, 1975, p. 251-264 [=« La discipline pénitentielle dans la tradition orientale », *La liturgie, expérience de l'Eglise. Etudes liturgiques*. (AS 1). Paris, 2003, p. 67-80]. See also: J. ERICKSON, « Penitential discipline in the Orthodox Canonical Tradition », *The Challenge of our Past*, Crestwood, NY, 1991, p. 23-38.

sins: apostasy, murder and adultery, and therefore, confession was a very rare event, since it had to deal with major sins. It had three moments in its application: exclusion from the Church community (excommunication), period of penance (*ejpitimiva*), and finally, the reintegration of the penitent into the Church community (reconciliation). The power received by Church from Christ to bind and loose (cf. Mt 16:19) was interpreted precisely as the power to excommunicate and to reconcile. The moment of penance (*ejpitimiva*) was not regarded as a punishment but as a therapy. It was a period of trial, during which the Christian had to prove his willingness to reintegrate the community. This moment had four progressive stages of reintegration into the community and therefore there was four categories of penitents (*provsklasi*", mourners; *ajkrovasi*", hearers; *uJpovptwsi*", prostrators; *suvstasi*", standers). Each of these penitents stood in a different place of the church building and participated in different parts of the divine service: mourners would stand outside the door of the church, hearers — inside the door of the church in the narthex, prostrators would stand within the door of the nave, but attend only the liturgy of catechumens, and finally, standers would stand in the nave for the whole service but not receive communion<sup>4</sup>. At the beginning of this period — confession was public, since it implied the relation of the sinner and the Church community.

The second period begins with the *Kanonarion* attributed to John the Faster, patriarch of Constantinople (582-595). Some scholars think that this document is in fact from the VIII or IX century. It is a collection of instructions for confessors, helping them to apply the penance (*ejpitimiva*) of the ancient canons in new situations, in a new context: the length of excommunication was therefore considerably reduced and often replaced by acts of piety (prostrations, fasting, etc.). By that time, confession already became private and personal, and the secrecy of confession was enhanced. This led to the creation of special « orders » or « rites » of confession in Byzantium. The oldest ones that are known to us are from the X century. We find two types of these rites: a *presbyteral type*, when confession is received by an ordained minister, and a *monastic type*, when confession is being heard by a non-ordained monk. The second type is much influenced by the *Kanonarion* and confession is made according to a very long, very detailed questionnaire. This fact indicates that confession, in this case, was still probably a very rare, exceptional event in the life of the person: perhaps before entering a monastery or prior to the monastic tonsure, the postulant had to confess and

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Canon 12 of St. Gregory of Neocaesarea, the Wonderworker. *The Rudder*, (D. CUMMINGS, ed.), Chicago, 1957, p. 787.

repent from all the sins of his previous life to his sponsor (ajna-decovmeno")<sup>5</sup> who was not necessarily a priest. Henceforth, the power received from Christ to bind and loose (cf. Mt 16:19) was given to the confessor<sup>6</sup>. The first type did not know any examination, but on the contrary, retained a very liturgical form (with ectenia, readings of Apostle and Gospel, etc.) which seems to indicate that it was at least partially public<sup>7</sup>.

The third period in the history of the practice of confession corresponds to modern times (starting at least in the XVIII century). The characteristic of this period, according to G. Wagner, is the almost complete absence of application of penance (ejpitimiva)<sup>8</sup>. The practice of confession became identified with spiritual direction, and therefore, became a very frequent event in the life of the believer, remaining at the same time entirely private.

### ***Two models for confession***

The modern questions that are arising regarding the very ancient practice of confession have also to deal with two different models, to different concepts of confession. In fact, depending where we put the main emphasis in the mystery of confession, the approach can be completely different.

The first model is the model of a law court. It is *juridical*. Here, Christ appears as the Judge, and sin is regarded as the breaking of the law. In this model, one needs an absolution to be washed from his sense of culpability. This approach refers to the words of Christ to His apostles: « If you forgive sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained » (Jn 20:23).

The second model is the model of the hospital. It is *therapeutic*. Christ appears as the physician, the healer. Sin is regarded as a spiritual illness. In this model, penance appears as the medicine which brings restoration to wholeness. This approach can be linked with the teaching of the Holy Apostle James who said: « Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the priests of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that it is the same term which is used for sponsors in the mystery of baptism.

<sup>6</sup> St. Simeon the New Theologian (XI century) states: « Before the monks, the bishops alone by succession from the apostles had the power to bind and loose. This redoubtable function... was then transferred to the elect people of God, that is, the monks ». SIMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Letter on Confession*, 11. (K. HOLL, ed. *Enthusiasmus und Bussgewalt beim griechischen Mönchtum*, Leipzig, 1898, p. 120). Quoted by: ERICKSON, « Penitential discipline in the Orthodox Canonical Tradition », p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> J. GETCHA, « Une prière pour ceux qui se confessent d'un Euchologe slave pré-moghilien: quelques implications théologiques », *La prière liturgique. Conférences Saint-Serge. 47e Semaine d'Etudes Liturgiques*. (A. TRIACCA — A. PISTOIA, ed.), Rome, 2001, p. 141-143.

<sup>8</sup> WAGNER, « La discipline pénitentielle dans la tradition orientale », p. 79-80.

the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. *And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven* » (James 5:14-15).

If the last model corresponds to the ancient Patristic approach and to the spirit of the ancient Byzantine tradition, the first model has been inherited from scholasticism. As we know, the Medieval Latin theology referred itself almost exclusively to the doctrine of the Blessed Augustine of Hippo until the XIII century. This great figure of Christianity introduced a vision of the fall which is different from the one of the Greek Fathers. For him, after the ancestral sin, after the fall, all humanity became a « *massa damnata* », a condemned society, and therefore, every human being bears culpability for the ancestral sin<sup>9</sup>. Scholasticism which appeared in the XI century as a school and method of theology inherited of Augustine's theological vision. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), considered by many as the father of scholasticism, has developed a juridical view of Redemption known as the « *theory of satisfaction* »<sup>10</sup>. According to him, sin was viewed as a transgression of the law. Therefore, sinful humanity was considered as a thief who had to be condemned and punished. Henceforth, salvation brought by Christ was regarded as the ransom paid by the Son of God in order to free humanity from its damnation<sup>11</sup>.

This view had of course its repercussion on the understanding of confession in the Medieval Latin Theology. Sin was considered as a transgression. Coming to confession was regarded as coming to a law court. The confessor became the judge who had the power to bind and loose sins (Mt 16:19). Penance was therefore understood as a means of paying a ransom and the prayer of absolution was considered in a juridical terms as releasing the sinner from his transgression.

This view of confession had its repercussion in the Orthodox Church, since St. Peter Mohyla inspired himself of the Latin Ritual of Pope Paul V for the prayer of absolution that he introduced into his *Trebnyk* published in Kiev in 1646<sup>12</sup>. From there, this prayer of absolution was adopted in the XVII century during the correction of liturgical books undertaken by the Russian Patriarch Nikon<sup>13</sup>. The absolution prayer written by Metropolitan

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<sup>9</sup> See the third paragraph (« *The Original Sin* ») of the chapter on « *Man* » in: J. MEYENDORFF, *Introduction to Byzantine Theology*, New York, 1987<sup>3</sup>, p. 143-146.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. V. LOSSKY, « *Redemption and Deification* », *In the Image and Likeness of God*, Crestwood, NY, 2001, p. 99-101.

<sup>11</sup> ANSELM OF CANTURBURY, *Why God became Man II*, 18 (SC 91, R. ROQUES, ed., Paris, 1963, p. 438-448).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. A. WENGER, « *Les influences du rituel de Paul V sur le Trebnik de Pierre Moghila* », *Mélanges en l'honneur de Mgr Michel Andrieu*, Strasbourg, 1956, p. 477-499.

<sup>13</sup> N. USPENSKY, « *The Collision of Two Theologies in the Revision of Russian Liturgical Books in the Seventeenth Century* », in: ID., *Evening Worship in the Orthodox Church*, Crestwood, NY, 1985, p. 191-240, particularly p. 226-239.

Peter Mohyla stated: « May our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, through the grace and bounties of His love toward mankind, forgive you, my child (name), all your transgressions. *And I, an unworthy priest, through His power given to me, do forgive and absolve you from all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen* »<sup>14</sup>. This prayer replaced the former one, which was nevertheless preserved in the rite of confession and communion of a sick person in the Slavonic *Trebnyk*<sup>15</sup>. The former prayer stated: « O Lord our God, who have granted remission [of sins] to Peter and to the sinful woman because of their tears, and have justified the publican having recognised his own sins. Receive the confession of your servant (name), and if he has committed a sin willingly or unwillingly, in word, or in deed, or in thought, since You are good, ignore it, since You are the only One who has the power to remit sins. For You are the God of mercy, compassion and love for mankind, and to You we ascribe glory, to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, both now and ever and to the ages of ages. Amen »<sup>16</sup>.

We can notice that in the second (oldest) prayer, the priest is an intercessor: he prays for the remission of sins of the penitent, confessing that God alone can remit sins — referring to Mt 9:6, Mk 2:10 and Lk 5:24. In the first prayer, the priest forgives himself the sins of the penitent, according to a power that has been given to him — referring to Mt 16:19 and Jn 20:23. If the second one implies an ordained minister who is asking for divine grace for a person undertaking a spiritual therapy, the first one admits that the priest has a power to release the sinner from his transgression. If the second one reflects the patristic theology on confession, the first one has inherited of the scholastic view on confession. If the second one reflects more a therapeutic approach, the second one implies rather a juridical approach<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> *Trebnyk of Metropolitan Peter Mohyla*, Kiev, 1646, p. 356-357.

<sup>15</sup> This was not the case in the *Trebnyk* of Peter Mohyla. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 329-330.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Trebnyk*, Part 1, Moscow, 1991, p. 127-128.

<sup>17</sup> See my article: J. GETCHA, « Une prière pour ceux qui se confessent d'un Euchologe slave pré-moghilien: quelques implications théologiques », *La prière liturgique. Conférences Saint-Serge. 47e Semaine d'Etudes Liturgiques*. (A. TRIACCA — A. PISTOIA, ed.), [BEL 115], Rome, 2001, p. 137-149. See also: A. LOSSKY, « Les prières byzantines de confession: repentir et rémission des péchés par miséricorde divine », *La prière liturgique. Conférences Saint-Serge. 47e Semaine d'Etudes Liturgiques*. (A. TRIACCA — A. PISTOIA, ed.), [BEL 115], Rome, 2001, p. 151-163; ID., « 'Remettre les péchés': quelques aspects liturgiques et doctrinaux de la confession et de l'absolution », *Qusiva aijnevsew". Mélanges liturgiques offerts à la mémoire de l'archevêque Georges Wagner*. (J. GETCHA — A. LOSSKY, ed.), [AS 2], Paris, 2005, p. 173-185.

### *The role of the spiritual father*

Spiritual direction is based on freedom. God has created man as a free creature. God has always respected man's freedom, and in fact, sin is a consequence of a misuse of human free will. Therefore, the confessor has to respect man's freedom. He cannot exercise any pressure nor violence. He should be careful not to destroy the person's innocence by asking questions that suggest sins<sup>18</sup>. He has to exercise discernment (*diavkrisi*) which is a very important quality of the spiritual father in confession. The role of the spiritual father is not to tell his spiritual child what to do, but to educate him making by himself the right choice, helping him to acquire himself this spiritual discernment.

A good spiritual father emphasises freedom. He does not impose his own will on his spiritual children, nor makes of them clones of himself. He does not create either spiritual dependence, but develops in them the sense of freedom and discernment. Each human being has his own conscience, and the task of the spiritual father is to educate his spiritual children how to use their conscience correctly.

Sometimes, there could be in confession a problem of spiritual tyranny or abuse. This problem has appeared lately in the phenomenon of so called «young elders» (*mladostarchestvo*) who try to impose on their spiritual children their own will. Lately, we have also witnessed the problem of parish priests, involved in spiritual direction of some divorcing parishioners, who at the same time of giving them advise fell in love with them. This suggests that there should always be a certain distance between the confessor and the penitent.

Another problem that may arise in spiritual direction is the cult of the personality, when the spiritual father is becoming the centre of confession. People are not coming to God, but for the personality of the spiritual father. To avoid this cult of personality, the spiritual father has to be drawn aside, has to be transparent. When we confess, we are confessing as members of the Church to God and to the Church (represented in the person of the priest). When the priest speaks in confession, he does not speak in his own name, but tries to be an instrument of God. He has to put aside his own skills and try to be a channel of the Holy Spirit, an instrument of God.

In spiritual direction, it is not always good to have a spiritual father who is at the same time a superior (as for instance our bishop, our abbot, our professor or the priest we are

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<sup>18</sup> For an example, one of the first questions found in many rites of confession is: « Tell me, my son, how did you first lose your virginity? ».



working for), since this sometimes creates a confusion of roles. It is always better when there is a clear distinction of roles between the superior and the spiritual father. Traditionally, in the Byzantine monastic tradition (like it is observed today in large monasteries, as for an example, on Patmos), as well as in the Benedictine Roman Catholic tradition, abbots are not allowed to hear confessions from their monks. The confessor of the monastery is usually an old, well experienced monk, having a good sense of spiritual discernment but who is not at the head of the monastery. One can say that there should be two hands guiding us in our life: a strong hand and a forgiving hand — the hand of our superior and the hand of our spiritual father.

The spiritual father should be close to us, but not too close to us. He should be someone with whom we can speak easily and freely, with whom we feel in confidence, but at the same time, he should be someone who can share with us his experience, his discernment, someone who is for us an example and a living model.

### ***Distinction between confession and spiritual direction***

It seems that a confusion exists in our days between sacramental confession and spiritual direction (manifestation of thoughts). In fact, many people ignore this distinction. Nevertheless, we think that the two which are closely linked should be clearly distinguished<sup>19</sup>. The practice of spiritual direction is very old and has admirably been described by Fr. Ireneus Hausherr<sup>20</sup>. This very ancient practice was widespread in the monastic setting of Christian East. The young disciple was expected to open his heart and tell his *geronda* (*starets*, spiritual father) all his thoughts every day, and sometimes several times a day<sup>21</sup>. This practice, inherited from antique philosophy (stoicism), helped the young novice to acquire the necessary experience for the spiritual warfare he was undertaking. The spiritual father who was well experienced and had the gift of discernment could help the novice, by his counselling, to make the right decisions and to adopt the right attitude in his spiritual life in order to recover from his spiritual illness.

In this practice of spiritual direction, the spiritual father was not necessarily a priest. We know from history that St. Anthony the Great (IV century), often regarded as the

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<sup>19</sup> This is our opinion, which we share with Jean-Claude Larchet. See his book: *L'inconscient spirituel*, Paris, 2005, p. 166.

<sup>20</sup> I. HAUSHERR, *Direction spirituelle en Orient autrefois*, Rome, 1955.

<sup>21</sup> The examination of conscience was a daily practice among Pythagorean and Stoic philosophers. Anthony the Great prescribed also a daily confession of thoughts (*Life of Anthony* 55, 7. 9-10). Abba Isaiah recommended to

prototype of the monastic spiritual father, was not a priest. The spiritual father of St. Simeon the New Theologian, Simeon the Studite (XI century), was not a priest. St. Silouan the Athonite (XX century) was neither a priest. But in order to give spiritual counselling, the spiritual father had to be a charismatic person, being well experienced in spiritual life and having the gift of discernment.

This practice was not always observed through a personal contact, but could be undertaken through correspondence. We have, as a result of that, in a monastic setting, the spiritual correspondence of John and Barsonuphios of Gaza (VI century), as well as the letters of Staretz John of Valamo (XX century) in a larger, non-monastic context.

On the contrary, sacramental confession requires necessarily an ordained minister, a priest, who is the intercessor and the celebrant of the mystery which is the channel of grace between man and God. Confession requires the presence of the penitent and of the confessor, since a mystery is the manifestation of the divine grace *hic et nunc*, here and now.

There is also a major, essential difference between confession and spiritual direction. Confession consists in revealing sins that we have committed (actions from the past) in the presence of a priest in order to receive from God forgiveness, as manifestation of thoughts is revealing our inner state (present thoughts and feelings) in order to receive counselling to achieve progress on the way of spiritual healing and salvation. Therefore, if the two are closely linked, and even though it is always more profitable if the confessor is at the same time the spiritual father, sometimes, since presbyteral ordination does not make automatically of a man a charismatic spiritual father, it may appear necessary to make a clear distinction between the confessor and the spiritual father, as well as between confession and spiritual direction.

## CONFESSION AS A THERAPY

### *The therapeutic aspect of confession*

Confession, as the mystery of Holy Unction, is a sacrament of healing. Therefore, we have to regard the ministry of the confessor and of the spiritual father in medical, therapeutic

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confess the thought immediately, at the very moment when it appeared (Logos 5). Abba Dorotheus of Gaza instructed his disciples to confess their thoughts every 6 hours (*Instructions* 11, 117. SC 92, p. 365).

terms. The canon 102 of the Council in Trullo dealing with the ministry of the spiritual father speaks precisely of it in these terms:

« Those who have received from God authority to bind and loose (Mt 16:19) must take into consideration the quality of the sin and the willingness and readiness of the sinner to return, and thus offer a *treatment* suited to the sin in question, lest by employing an immoderate adjustment in one direction or the other, they fail in compassing the salvation of the one *ailing*. For the *diseases* called sin are not simple affairs, but on the contrary, various and complex, and they produce many offshoots of the *injury*, as a result whereof the evil becomes widely diffused, and it progresses until it is checked by the power of the one *treating* it. So that a person who is professing the science of treating *ailments* as a *spiritual physician* ought first to examine the disposition of the sinner and ascertain whether he tends to *health*, or on the contrary, provokes the *illness* to attack him by his own actions; at the same time bearing in mind that he must provide against any reversion, and considering whether the patient is struggling against the *physician*, and whether the *ulcer* of the soul is being aggravated by the application of the *remedy*; and accordingly to mete out mercy in due proportion to the merits of the case. For all that matters to God and to the person undertaking pastoral leadership consists in the *recovery* of the straying sheep, and in *healing* the one *wounded* by the serpent (cf. Gn 3,13). Accordingly, he ought not to drive the *patient* to the verge of despair, nor give him rein to dissoluteness and contempt of life, but, on the contrary, in at least one way at any rate, either by resorting to extreme and stringent *remedies*, or to gentler and milder ones, to curb the *disease*, and to put up a fight to *heal* the *ulcer* for the one tasting the fruits of repentance, and wisely helping him on the way to the splendid rehabilitation to which the man is being invited. We must therefore be versed in both, that is both the requirements of accuracy and the requirements of custom. In the case of those who are obstinately opposed to extremities, we must follow the formula handed down to us, just as sacred Basil teaches us outright »<sup>22</sup>.

According to this canon, sin is an illness. The spiritual father is a physician. He has to find not only the proper medication (*ejpitimiva*, penance), but also the proper measure, since the same medication cannot be used in the same proportions for each sick person. Therefore, the confessor has to use discernment and has to apply the holy canons, the sacred rules with a sense of economy. It is not correct to regard the principle of economy in Byzantine canonical tradition as an exception, or as a dispensation. The principle of economy is the pastoral

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<sup>22</sup> Council in Trullo, Canon 102. *The Rudder*, (D. CUMMINGS, ed.), Chicago, 1957, p. 409.

exercise to apply with discernment the rules to a concrete situation for the salvation of the person. Therefore, the confessor has to take as a model the Only Physician of our souls and bodies — Christ our Saviour, and to imitate His compassion and condescension.

### ***Confession and psychotherapy***

The question of confession as a therapy raises the question of its relation with psychotherapy. There is an obvious analogy between psychoanalysis and the manifestation of thoughts and confession. The therapeutic aspect of the Church and of confession has been emphasised recently in Greece by the writings of Bishop Hierotheos of Nafpaktos<sup>23</sup>. It has also been discussed in a recent book published by the French Orthodox theologian, Jean-Claude Larchet, who has written many books on the question of mental and spiritual illnesses<sup>24</sup>. As he explains, there is presently a debate in the Orthodox Church between, on the one hand, those who think that psychotherapies have an equivalent status to other branches of medicine, and therefore, are completely autonomous with regards to spiritual direction, and, on the other hand, those who consider the Orthodox ascetic tradition and the practice of spiritual direction in the Orthodox Church as capable to heal all psychic troubles, and therefore, reject the possibility to use psychotherapy<sup>25</sup>. Such debates do not appear among Roman Catholics and Protestants who have introduced psychotherapy since the 1960's and who have not such an elaborated tradition of spiritual direction such as in the Orthodox Church. By the way, it is interesting to notice that psychotherapy had a wider development in countries of Protestant tradition (Germany, Scandinavian countries, Great-Britain, USA) where confession did not exist, than in countries of Roman Catholic tradition.

With regards to the relation of confession and psychotherapy, J.-C. Larchet makes four very important remarks:

1) Psychic illnesses have to be distinguished from spiritual illnesses. Their nature is different, since there are three distinguished levels in the human being: corporal (body), psychological (*psyche*) and spiritual (*pneuma*).

2) Some psychological illnesses are linked and often rooted in spiritual illnesses, in the same way as some psychic illnesses are linked to physical diseases (so called psycho-

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<sup>23</sup> BISHOP HIROTHEOS OF NAFPAKTOS, *Orthodox Psychotherapy. The science of the Fathers*. Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, Leviaia, 1994 ; ID., *The illness and cure of the soul in the Orthodox Tradition*, Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, Leviaia, 1993.

<sup>24</sup> JEAN-CLAUDE LARCHET, *L'inconscient spirituel*, Paris, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

somatic illnesses). Therefore, very often, the healing of psychological illnesses is depending on the healing of spiritual illnesses.

3) People suffering from psychic illnesses are not necessarily more sinners than others.

4) Spiritual therapy has to be distinguished from psychotherapy: the aim of spiritual therapy is to heal spiritual illnesses as the aim of psychotherapy is to heal psychological illnesses<sup>26</sup>.

Having this anthropological approach in mind, considering the three levels of human activity — physiological, psychological and spiritual, it is sometimes necessary to associate a spiritual therapy with a psychotherapy, as well as with a medical treatment, where medication is taking care of the corporal (physiological) dimension<sup>27</sup>. But here arises the question of compatibility of psychotherapy with spiritual therapy, since we find today various schools and methods of psychotherapy.

Since the psychological level is closely linked with the spiritual one, only a psychotherapy based on Christian anthropology can be beneficial for the healing of the ill person<sup>28</sup>. For instance, there are similar aspects between Freudian psychoanalysis and Patristic cure of the soul, since both are based on platonic anthropology<sup>29</sup>. Nevertheless, there is a major difference between them. Christian anthropology is built on the relation between man and God. On the other hand, Freudian anthropology considers human development independently, even in opposition to God, since Freud considered the relation of man with God as pathological<sup>30</sup>. For Freud, as it appears in his book entitled *The Future of an illusion*, God is an « empty concept », and religion appears like a narcotic, an illusion, or even a collective neurosis<sup>31</sup>. From this, it appears clearly that Freudian anthropology is materialistic and atheistic, and opposed to Christian anthropology. Freudian anthropology ignores that it deals with man who is in a fallen state (*para physin* — against nature) and seeking for the restoration of his initial state (*kata physin* — in conformity with nature). This clearly appears in the basic Freudian concept of libido. For Freud, human energy is originally sexual, oriented towards a sexual purpose, but this sexual energy can be sublimated towards other activities. The Christian anthropology, developed by the Fathers, says the contrary. Man's original

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13-20, 255.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31-32.

<sup>29</sup> Cf.: *Ibid.*, p. 34-36.

<sup>30</sup> Look for references in : *Ibid.*, p. 36, note 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37-38.

energy or desire was oriented towards God, and due to sin, this spiritual energy was « desublimated » into sexual energy<sup>32</sup>. This explains the hedonistic approach of Freudian anthropology on the one hand, and the ascetic approach of Christian anthropology on the other hand. Having said this, we can understand that using without any precaution a psychotherapy based on the Freudian school can be not only problematic, but also bring some disastrous consequences for the Christian and his spiritual life. Therefore, it is very important, when a confessor has to refer his spiritual child to a psychotherapist, that he make sure that the psychotherapist is a Christian believer and that his therapy is based on a Christian anthropology.

As J.-C. Larchet writes, a genuine, experienced spiritual father is capable to heal not only spiritual diseases, but also psychological ones. Nevertheless, charismatic spiritual fathers having the gift of discernment are very rare in our days, and therefore, referring to psychotherapy for the healing of psychological illnesses can appear necessary for us. But in this case, this psychotherapy has to be compatible with Christian anthropology. The psychotherapist has to recognise the implication of spiritual factors in many psychological disorders and this has to guide their practice. The psychotherapist has to make a clear distinction between the psychological and the spiritual, between his psychotherapy and the spiritual therapy, between his role and the role of the spiritual father. His therapy has to be in harmony and conformity with the principles of spiritual therapy<sup>33</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Having said all this, how should the ancient mystery of confession be approached in our modern world? This question, of course, remains an open question. Nevertheless, it seems to us that there are three very important principles that have to be taken into consideration.

1. Confession deals with sin. It is essential that our practice of confession recall to the mind of modern people the existence of sin, a spiritual reality which is rejected or hidden by our modern world. Sin has to be considered not in a moralistic approach dealing with the categories of good or bad, permitted and forbidden, but in an existential approach: our relation with God and our progress on the path towards deification.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38-40.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255-257.

2. Having said this, confession should be approached in a therapeutic way. Confession is a Mystery of healing, which leads us to wholeness and restores our relationship with God. As one has to go to the hospital, to see a physician, when he is ill, one should approach confession to be healed from all his spiritual illness, from sin.

3. The attitude of the confessor should be one of a mediator between man and God. He should not be preoccupied by what to say, but apply himself to listen. While listening, the confessor should be praying for the penitent. The confessor should be therefore an intercessor for the penitent before God. This is the only way how he could appear to be the channel of divine grace, and this happens also the only way to be inspired to say something pertinent for the spiritual life and spiritual healing of the penitent.

# CONFESSION AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

ARCHIMANDRITE JOB (GETCHA)

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**Absolution prayer written by St. Peter Mohyla.** [*Trebnyk of Peter Mohyla*, Kiev, 1646, p. 356-357.]

« May our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, through the grace and bounties of His love toward mankind, forgive you, my child (name), all your transgressions. *And I, an unworthy priest, through His power given to me* (cf. Mt 16:19 and Jn 20:23), *do forgive and absolve you from all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen* ».

**Absolution prayer in Pre-Mohylian Slavonic Euchologia.** [*Trebnik*, P. 1, Moscow, 1991, p. 127-128.]

« O Lord our God, who have granted remission [of sins] to Peter and to the sinful woman because of their tears, and have justified the publican having recognised his own sins. Receive the confession of your servant (name), and if he has committed a sin willingly or unwillingly, in word, or in deed, or in thought, since You are good, ignore it, *since You are the only One who has the power to remit sins* (cf. Mt 9:6, Mk 2:10 and Lk 5:24). For You are the God of mercy, compassion and love for mankind, and to You we ascribe glory, to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, both now and ever and to the ages of ages. Amen ».

**Council in Trullo (in 692), Canon 102.** [*The Rudder*, (D. CUMMINGS, ed.), Chicago, 1957, p. 409.]

« Those who have received from God authority to bind and loose (Mt 16:19) must take into consideration the quality of the sin and the willingness and readiness of the sinner to return, and thus offer a *treatment* suited to the sin in question, lest by employing an immoderate adjustment in one direction or the other, they fail in compassing the salvation of the one *ailing*. For the *diseases* called sin are not simple affairs, but on the contrary, various and complex, and they produce many offshoots of the *injury*, as a result whereof the evil becomes widely diffused, and it progresses until it is checked by the power of the one *treating* it. So that a person who is professing the science of treating *ailments* as a *spiritual physician* ought first to examine the disposition of the sinner and ascertain whether he tends to *health*, or on the contrary, provokes the *illness* to attack him by his own actions; at the same time bearing in mind that he must provide against any reversion, and considering whether the patient is struggling against the *physician*, and whether the *ulcer* of the soul is being aggravated by the application of the *remedy*; and accordingly to mete out mercy in due proportion to the merits of the case. For all that matters to God and to the person undertaking pastoral leadership consists in the *recovery* of the straying sheep, and in *healing* the one *wounded* by the serpent (cf. Gn 3,13). Accordingly, he ought not to drive the *patient* to the verge of despair, nor give him rein to dissoluteness and contempt of life, but, on the contrary, in at least one way at any rate, either by resorting to extreme and stringent *remedies*, or to gentler and milder ones, to curb the *disease*, and to put up a fight to *heal* the *ulcer* for the one tasting the fruits of repentance, and wisely helping him on the way to the splendid rehabilitation to which the man is being invited. We must therefore be versed in both, that is both the requirements of accuracy and the requirements of custom. In the case of those who are obstinately opposed to extremities, we must follow the formula handed down to us, just as sacred Basil teaches us outright ».