

On Repentance

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The term "repentance" scares many people because self-reflection has become undesirable, if not irrelevant. Today's human beings do not want to see their own flaws and shortcomings. They prefer to be praised by everyone, honored in every circumstance. Hiding inside all people are illusions about themselves that they don't want to break. People convince themselves that pride provides psychological comfort, and in their stubbornness, they believe in their own goodness and that they don't make mistakes. They justify themselves by blaming others. Their attitude is, "They are the ones who are wrong," or at best, "I'm not the one who started it." They tell themselves, "I had to protect myself and put an end to their evil!" This is how people avoid self-criticism, allowing their flaws to grow deep within, escaping settings that speak about repentance or blocking their ears to such talk.

Moreover, many wrongly believe that repentance means regret, sorrow, and sadness in their quest for joy and happiness. Why would they then accept something that spoils their happiness? Why would they demand more burdens for themselves? Repentance, in their minds, is associated with misconceptions influenced by distorted upbringings, plus erroneous teachings and spirituality that are particularly evident in medieval Western Christian literature, which has spread its culture everywhere. The Christian West knows a form of repentance that is distorted, exaggerated and rigid. Thus, repentance became a horrible punishment founded on penances, depression, fear, and submission of the flesh to suffering and contempt.

In Orthodox theology, however, repentance signifies a new birth, a spiritual cleansing from within. It is a continuous self-correction, a perpetual awareness of not persisting in sin and error, a continuous rise from every fall, and a constant striving to what is better. It is a state of yearning not to be distanced from God, our beloved.

We embark on the path of repentance when realizing we are lost, estranged from our fatherly home. This is clearly illustrated in the parable of the Prodigal Son. When the rebellious son lost all his wealth and fell into bad company, poverty and destitution, he came back to himself and remembered his father's house, longing for the dignity and honor he had with his father. The world with all its pleasures is captivating, promising a sought-after happiness that is in fact ephemeral, deceptive, and shallow. The joy of this world fades quickly in the face of any difficulty or distress.

However, the hardness of the human heart – which stems from yearning for happiness that is ignorant of the joy of living with God – pushes us to sin again and seek a false consolation, instead of cultivating intimacy with God and the sweetness of His companionship. People, in general, tend to be more concerned with what is tangible and perceptible. However, God, the all-merciful, allows us to face numerous trials to realize our delusion, granting us the possibility to liberate ourselves from it so that we may know our true home, just as the Prodigal Son did.

Unless one experiences the humiliation of being away from home and the absence of peace for which he longs because of his sin, he will not return to his Father's house. Additionally, he will not experience the joy and richness of repentance.

The Apostle Paul defines Christian repentance as follows: "Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead" (Philippians 3:13). The Orthodox Church focuses, in its teaching about repentance, on the two aspects: forgetting and reaching forward. The Church moves us beyond sin and toward virtues. Perhaps the most beautiful description of repentance came from Saint John Climacus: "It is exchanging one love for another: exchanging the love of earthly things for the love of heavenly things." Therefore, we often notice that those who have known God after living far from Him have experienced deep repentance, a depth that those who are like the "elder son" inside the house in the gospel parable do not usually enjoy.

But can we forget what lies behind if we do not understand it or know any better? Hence, self-reflection (coming back to ourselves) and self-examination are the first steps in our journey of repentance. When taking these steps become constant, they generate continuous spiritual alertness and heightened awareness, allowing us to sense the negative effects of our sins whether in word, deed or thought. At that moment, we rush to discard them, replacing them with their virtuous counterparts.

This is how we ascend to true life. The life of repentance moves us up the ladder of divine ascent step by step, until we reach the fullness and abundance of life in Christ. Repentance is not an independent act with its own time frame, requirements and completion. No, it is a journey of life, or if you will, a lifestyle, sometimes requiring concentration on a specific aspect. However, it does not stop there, nor does it ever end. It is a life of wakeful, conscious, peaceful vigilance, aware of its reality, forever aspiring to transcend it. It is a life open to God, to people, to spiritual energies, and to deified humanity. It is a life not content with reality but continually elevates it. It is constantly ascending until it reaches the stature of Christ. The model for those who live a life of repentance is the following verse from the Apostle Paul: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).