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PROPER CONFESSION

Wishing to help our parishioners to more consciously participate in the mystical, liturgical life of the Church, in this issue of Parish Life we offer our readers discussions by two eminent spiritual directors on the subject of proper confession. The first article is an excerpt from a talk by Bishop Panteleimon (Shatov) of Orekhovo-Zuyevo. The second includes opinions about confession expressed by Greek Elder Paisios of Mt Athos. We hope that these two talks will help our parishioners get a fresh insight into the importance and profound depth of the Mystery of Confession.

COMMENTARY BY BISHOP PANTELEIMON

Sometimes, people coming to Confession begin to tell me approximately the following: "Yesterday I came home and was met by my husband, who as usual was drunk. I criticized him and he began to shout at me. I became angry and slapped his face. I of course was wrong to do so, but what else could I have done?..." That is not a confession. Confession has to be [a statement of] repentance, and not a story about your life, much less an attempt to justify your sins.

Although there are people who, in their simplicity, do not know how to repent in any other way – and of course their spiritual director will accept that kind of Confession from them – it would nonetheless be more proper to put it this way: "I am evil and very irritable, and when my husband acted improperly, I became angry, and struck him in the face. I very much regret doing so, and repent of it. I asked his forgiveness, and I promise God that I will never act in this manner in the future." That, in my opinion, is what a proper confession would sound like.

Often people write down too much in their notes. They go into excessive detail about something or other, which is not quite proper. There is another, also improper, extreme, in which someone simply recites his sins in single terms, e.g. "I sinned through vanity, despondency, irritation..." "I did not observe the fast, and had bad thoughts..." A child might say "I behaved badly..." What does "through vanity" mean? What does "being irritated" mean? What is the meaning of "bad thoughts?" What does it mean "to behave badly?" One should not speak in generalities about a passion that affects you – for it affects everyone – but rather about how a passion manifests itself in you. For example, it would be more correct to say "I belittled my daughter, swore at her with bad words, and struck her..." rather than saying "I became irritated with my daughter." Another example would be pride... How does your pride manifest itself? You belittled others, you looked down at everyone, or you were rude to someone, wanting to belittle him. That is to say, Confession should not be a detailed story relating all of the circumstances surrounding a given action, but rather a statement of repentance for specific sins; on the other hand, those sins should not be reduced to generalities/single words.

Some of our contemporaries have a tendency to find specific and exact names for their sins, while others show a pathological curiosity and seek to discover sins that exist but with which they are not familiar. Some people, for example ask [to be given the specific definitions of little used/archaic terms that express fine shades of distinction between various sins]. It seems to me that this is improper. One should call sins by words that exist in contemporary usage. When we pray, when we read the Morning and Evening Prayer Rules, we use words spoken by the Holy Fathers, we borrow their imagery, and that is proper, for we are learning the language of the Saints, learning the proper attitude toward God. However, it seems to me that when repenting, we should use our own

words. For example, you should not say that you sinned through greed, but that, for example, that you tried to ingratiate yourself to someone in hopes of getting money [from him], or you did something good in hopes of getting the same in return. ...

We know that there are eight passions, and that there are Commandments. It is of our submissions to those passions, and of all violations of those Commandments, that we should repent.

You need to express your repentance of various sins in various different ways. There are some sins that are so unclean and vile, that in expressing your repentance, you should not go into detail. However, you should make the priest understand what has happened to you, for often such sins are described in generalities, hiding behind [those generalities] awful distortions in relations between a man and a woman. You cannot simply say, "I have an adulterous passion." You must clarify the manner in which it manifests itself. You need not call to mind the details of these vile sins, but it is essential that you relate them in such a way that the priest understands the extent of that sin. Having repented, it is necessary to remember that you have that evil passion within you, and you should avoid situations in which it may be manifested, but you must drive away from yourself recollections of the sins committed. However, it is essential not only to remember sins of foolish pride, vanity, theft, belittling of others you have committed, but even to call them to mind, especially whenever vainglorious thoughts arise within us.

FROM THE TALK BY ELDER PAISIOS OF MT ATHOS

- Why do we sometimes fail to engage in the battle needed to correct ourselves, despite the fact that our conscience accuses us?

- This can happen because of some kind of spiritual breakdown. If a person is seized with panic because of some temptation that befalls him, he wants to take up a spiritual struggle, but has neither the necessary disposition nor the spiritual powers to do so. In such a case, he needs to internally put himself in order with the help of Confession. With the help of Confession, one receives consolation, bolsters his powers, and through the grace of God, once again finds the determination to do battle. If one does not appropriately put himself in order, some other temptation may come crashing down upon him. As a result, finding himself in such a sorrowfully oppressed condition, he breaks down even more, is smothered by ideas, becomes despondent, and cannot take up the struggle at all. Moreover, in Confession, try to be specific. It is not enough to list your sins during confession – e.g. "I envy, become angry," etc. In order to receive help, you need to confess your specific failings. In failing to make a concrete/specific confession, one laughs at Christ. If one does not confess the truth to his spiritual director, does not reveal his sin to him so that the spiritual director might be able to help him, he does himself serious harm, like unto a sick person who does his health great harm by hiding his illness from his physician. Moreover, one who has acted unjustly toward someone else, or by his behavior has wounded someone, must first of all go to the one he has offended and humbly ask his forgiveness, be reconciled with him, and afterwards must confess before his spiritual director in order to receive absolution. In this way, God's grace comes to him. If one should confess such a sin to his spiritual director without first having asked forgiveness of the one he has wounded, it will be impossible for his soul to be at peace, for in such a case the [sinner] does not humble himself.

- Geronda [title of respect], if you have committed some grave sin, is it permissible to put off confessing it until later?

- You need to go as soon as possible. If we have an open wound, should we wait for a month, and only then treat it? No. In such a case, one should not wait for a moment when the spiritual director will have more time or a better opportunity to devote more attention to us. It does not take a lot of time to describe our condition to the

spiritual director. If the conscience is working properly, one can describe his condition in a few words. However, if there is interior turmoil, he can say many words and yet not give the spiritual director an impression of his state.

- Geronda if during Confession, the penitent does not feel the pain he experienced while committing the sin, does it mean that he is not actually repentant?

- If some time has passed since he committed that sin, the wound begins to close, and that is why he does not feel such great pain. But here is what one should be careful to keep in mind: in Confession, one should not seek to justify himself. Someone who during Confession indulges in self-justification does not receive internal consolation, no matter how much he might trample upon his conscience. The self-justifications with which he hides himself during Confession become a burden lying upon his conscience.

- Geronda, I read somewhere that in the life to come, the demons will torment us for even one evil thought that we have not confessed.

- Look, when someone confesses without the intent to hide anything, and tells his spiritual director what he remembers, the subject is closed, and demons have no power over him. However, if he consciously fails to confess some of his sins, he will be tormented for those sins in the life to come.

- Geronda, if someone has confessed the sins of his youth, but again thinks about them and is tormented by them, is his attitude toward them correct?

- If, having felt great compunction over the sins of his youth, someone has confessed them, there is no reason to agonize over them, for from the moment he has told of his sins during his Confession, God has forgiven him. After that, there is no need to pick open his old sins, especially his sins of the flesh; in doing so, he may cause himself harm.