



Chancellor's Update

The Gift of Reconciliation

In September's Update, we discussed why a bishop must be *The Good Shepherd*. This month we quote from Metropolitan Simeon, beloved arch-pastor of the Holy Bulgarian Orthodox Church, a Prelate of our Order, and friend of His Holiness Pope John Paul II ([photo archives of our Order and pictures in the book show the two working together on ecumenical issues](#)). In his book, GOD'S GRACE in the Spiritual Life of the Church Shepherd, Metropolitan Simeon gives a profound insight on the importance of the Sacrament of Penance ([Pages 171-175](#)).

"Entrusted to the shepherd in the Church are not only the preaching of the faith and of piety, not only the sacraments, which he must teach to the believers for their salvation; entrusted to him are the very souls of the members of the flock, which he must keep an eye on and lead to salvation. In this respect he is a shepherd of the souls, he is leading them to God; but most of all he is a judge, who must be familiar with the spiritual state of his flock, by testing them whether they are following the road of faith and of piety with dignity; he is a physician who, with the help of the blessed means, is healing the spiritual deficiencies of the sheep gone astray; and finally, a spiritual father, a tutor, a leader in the life of the believers, who not only indicates the road to salvation of his flock as a whole, but also, with his spiritual power, is leading to salvation the individual members of the flock - each one of them separately, by the hand, along the road, which is the most suitable for them.

"The shepherd in the Church is a judge, a physician and a spiritual father, he reveals in full his care for the souls in the sacrament of the confession (penitence) [\[editor's note - meaning: the quality of being penitent-sorrow for sins or faults\]](#).

"Those, who have received the holy baptism, according to the words of Simeon the New Theologian, "are already alive, kind of risen from the dead, i.e. their souls are being revived and receive anew the blessing of the Holy Spirit, as Adam received it prior to the crime. After that the ones being baptized are anointed with holy chrism and by means of it they are being anointed with Jesus Christ and they are emitting a supernatural fragrance"...

"Therefore, taking place in the sacraments of baptism and the unction with chrism is the resurrection of the man for a new divine life. The door, without which it is impossible to enter into this new way of life, is penitence.

"The need of a special sacrament of the penitence proceeds from the fact that all people, after the baptism, fall into sin (1 John 1:8-10) and do frequently yield to maladies, sometimes very serious ones, leading to spiritual death.

"The penitence, conceived in the sense of sacrament, is such a solemn act in which the shepherd in the Church, through the power of the Holy Spirit, undoes all the sins of the penitent and confessing Christian, committed by him after baptism, so that the Christian may again become innocent and sanctified, such as he had come out of the waters of baptism".

"So then penitence is a sacrament in which the one confessing his sins under a visible forgiveness on the part of the priest, receives an invisible unbinding from his sins by Jesus Christ Himself. Indicated in this definition is both the visible side of the sacrament - the confessing of the repentant one before the priest, and the manifestation of forgiveness on the part of the latter, as well as the invisible action - the actual blessed remittance of the sins by Jesus Christ Himself.

"By establishing the sacrament of penitence the Lord has manifested the entire depth of His immeasurable mercy toward the infirmities of every sinner who seeks exculpation before God after having violated the blessed union with Him, established with Him at the baptism. After the baptism, the sacrament of penitence is then the only means for the one who has joined the Church to erase the sins, committed after the baptism and for a new and blessed reconciliation and reunion with God and with the Church. That is why the sacrament of penitence is called "second baptism" and "baptism through tears"...

"The Lord Himself had started his service for the salvation of the human beings with the sermon about penitence: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt 4: 17).

"During His earthly life, while He had been healing sicknesses and forgiving human sins, Christ had everywhere been making it possible to see and feel the special love of God for the changing sinners, according to which He had instantly been forgiving the sins and had with complete readiness been returning His love. The inner process of real penitence and its power are expressed movingly by Him in the parable about the prodigal son; and in contrast to the importance of the lifeless righteousness of the pharisee - in the parable about the pharisee and the tax collector. In the end, by forgiving the

sins according to the faith and the love (Matt 9:2; Luke 7:47), the Lord promised the apostles also to grant them the power of forgiving the sins (Math 18:18), and after His resurrection actually granted them this power, saying: "As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you." And with that He breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (John 20:21- 23). With these words the Lord had laid in His Church the foundation of the power of forgiving the sins which, in both the case with the apostles themselves, and with their successors, has always remained in the Church. This power, constituting the seal of the sacrament of penitence, is not granted to every Christian but, as was mentioned above, only to the apostles and from them - by succession through the sacrament of ordination - to the shepherds in the Orthodox Church. Christ. In His capacity of Intercessor before God for the sake of the human beings, He is a Priest in the order of Melchizedek, because He has had the kindness to place the priests as intermediaries and intercessors for all those, who are seeking exculpation before God by receiving the baptism. And who else but the mediator (the shepherd), elected legally, established by sacrament by God, can satisfy the needs of the broken-hearted and repenting sinner. In the same way, since the time of the apostles, the repenting ones have been confessing their sins before their spiritual fathers. St John the Apostle writes: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

"The words "if we confess..." point undoubtedly to the confession of sins before the apostles and to the sacrament administered by the shepherds; because that confession, according to the words of the apostles, serves for the absolution of sins and for the cleansing from the injustices, and the power of forgiving the sins is granted only to the apostles and to their direct successors.

"In addition to the testimonies of the Holy Writ, the confession in the presence of the shepherd is also dealt with in the apostolic rules: "if a bishop or a presbyter does not receive the one who repents for his sins, but rejects him, let him be forsaken of his holy rank. He hurts Christ, Who has said: there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents" (Apostolic Rules, rule 52). The Holy Fathers also unanimously confirm that the repentance must be done in the presence of a clergyman, who from God has received the power to unbind and forgive.

"Just like the man, baptized by a man, is being enlightened with the grace of the Holy Spirit, so also the one, confessing in repentance his sins, shall receive absolution from them through the priest with the blessing of Jesus Christ." St. Basil the Great says: "The sins must be confessed in the presence of those, entrusted to whom is the administering of God's sacraments."

"Well-known are the memorable lines by St John Chrysostom from his treatise "On the Priesthood", where he speaks about the priesthood as follows: "For they (the priests) who inhabit the earth and make their abode there are entrusted with the administration of things which are in Heaven, and have received an authority which God has not given to angels or archangels. For it has been said to them [the angels]: "Whatsoever he shall bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven..." They who rule on earth have indeed authority to bind, but only the body: whereas this binding lays hold of the soul and penetrates the heavens; and what priests do here below God ratifies above, and the Master confirms the sentence of his servants." In another passage that same holy father says: "The Church is a spiritual bath, which through the many different means of repentance washes away the filth of the soul."

"What a great and unfathomable mystery is hidden under that invisible and so simple an action! "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" - the Savior said. Who can forgive the sins? - Only God! Granted to whom is the power to forgive the sins? - To the people, who are administering God's sacraments. No man can by himself forgive the sins, but in that sacrament a man has the power to do this - not through his efforts, but in accordance with the gift of the Savior Christ.

"The priest is apparently acting like a human being, in spite of his being aided by the grace; he receives the repentance of the sinner like a human being; he judges of the sins of the repenting one like a human being and pronounces aloud the decision to the repenting one like a human being; but he forgives the sins in accordance with the words of the performer of the sacraments Christ the Savior, like a God, through the power of the All-Holy Spirit.

"The power of that sacrament is such that no sin surpasses its might. However heavily we may sin after the baptism, we can always resort to that curative spring and we shall undoubtedly receive from it a beneficial healing of our wounds, provided that we are approaching it with sincere repentance and that we do not block the inflow of the cleansing grace with insincerity of the repentance, with heartlessness, obstinacy and fierceness."

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