

Introduction

The Mystery of Confession, one of the seven holy mysteries in the Orthodox church, is of such a great importance in the spiritual life and in our walk with God. It is multidimensional because along with its main function of granting absolution from sin, a large part of it is devoted to counseling, encouragement and guidance the success of which is directly related to and dependent on the personality of the spiritual father and the person under confession. How then can individuals with different attitudes achieve spiritual and psychological satisfaction after confession? The answer to this question involves many factors:

1. The role of the spiritual father
 - a. Negative Practices
 - b. Common mistakes
 - c. Positive Practices
2. The personality of the person confessing

The Role of the Spiritual Father

The priest has the authority to grant absolution and give advice. Spiritual fathers have to be careful not to confuse advice with manipulation or control and to assess reactions to stimulants on the light of biblical truths.

1. Negative Practices

- *Control through anger*
Trying to make individuals obey or comply through anger or the issuance of rules of "excommunication" is not acceptable. A spiritual father has to learn not to lose temper but remember that God's justice was met with His mercy and both truth and mercy were realized in the person of Jesus Christ.
- *Control through guilt feeling*
"I will love you if and only if you change....", "You must...", "It is important that you...", "you have to apologize..." etc... These are common expressions repeated by parents and sadly enough, by spiritual fathers who should know that they are called to love sinners unconditionally. Making individuals feel guilty just to procure their obedience is manipulation at its best and a form of jailing. In the long run it will enhance long-term negative self-image manifested in such expressions as "I am not good for anything." "No one likes me." "God is angry with me." Such individuals do not need an addition to their load of low self-esteem but require doses of assurance and acceptance. A proper balance should be created between leniency that gives leeway to wrong actions, and strictness that rejects the wrong and the wrong

doer. It is important to react wisely to any stubbornness; responding without manipulation because controlling people to make them pliable to one's own desire is against God's will. There is a big difference between biblical obedience and control. Strictness presented void of love is harmful and creates stubbornness and rebellion. On the other hand, love without boundaries brings up spoilt kids and a fruitless church without structure and no future. A remote servant offers neither love nor firmness whereas a responsible one "speaks the truth in love" that leads to spiritual maturity; and his services will be characterized with success and responsible individuals.

- *Control through personal interpretation to actions*

Interpretation of and reactions to actions vary depending on each individual's convictions, background knowledge and view of the world. A very vivid example from the Holy Bible is the disciples' reaction to the Lord's words to St. Peter concerning St. John which was entirely different from what the Lord had meant by his words. ""But Lord, what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "*If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me. 'Then this*

saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, 'If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?'" (John 21:21-23). Another example, if someone enters a room full of people and starts insulting them. A number of reactions would be expected depending on each person's interpretation of the incident. For instance one might have pity on the person wanting to forgive him, another might want to throw him out of the room, a third might want to call the police. A third example is Eve's reaction to the serpent's words "*You will not surely die...and will be like God*" (Genesis 3:4-5). Such words were a stimulant that activated Eve's belief that she would be like God and led her to eat from the forbidden tree. King Herod's false conviction that the Magi mocked him was his perception of the situation. In reality they did not cheat him; but they changed their route in accordance with the message they had received. In concordance with his interpretation of the situation, King Herod went ahead and killed all the children in Bethlehem. All these examples are confirmation of the truth that what determines the reaction is the impact of the action on individuals. This is important to understand in attempting to change people's

behavior and undesirable habits. We would be deluding ourselves to think that to change people's behavior we have to change their actions because we do not own the actions. What we own is the right interpretations of them based on truth. *"you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free"* (John 8:32). It is the interpretation of and conviction in an action and not the action itself that determines the outcome. Therefore what needs to be changed are not actions but convictions; biblical truths will liberate from wrong behavior. When Satan entices me to sin, my certainty of the pleasure in sin stands between the temptation and the deadly reality of sin. Therefore, what is needed here is to understand the factual biblical truth about sin in order to bypass the pleasure of sin. In the first chapter of H.H. Pope Shenouda III's book "Repentance and the life of Purity", he talks about the abhorrence of sin. It is always the Truth that delivers from the zone of sin. We as counselors, do not own the stimulant but I own the truth which is based on the word of God and which has the power of bringing about change on more than one party. An illustration of this concept is two scenarios between two parties A & B in the midst of a disagreement:

- Scenario One

A: Why are you insulting me ? (He returns an insult.)

B: You insult me? Here you go (gives him a severe blow on his face).

The fight continues, people gather, one of the two ends in the hospital.

- Scenario Two (similar to the scenario between David and Saul)

A: I am not going to return back your insult. I will pardon you just as our Lord Jesus did.

B: Oh! I am ashamed of myself. How did I dare to insult you? Please, forgive me friend.

Both scenarios had the same start but took different routes depending on the party's interpretations of the stimulants. The first scenario took a spiral itinerary deviating according to the interpretations based on emotional reactions thus assuming a tragic ending; whereas the second was linear following a biblical truth resulting in a happy ending with a healing effect.

2. Common mistakes

- Utilizing confessors to bring or report news about others
- Emotionally binding confessors with their confessional fathers
- Allotting service to certain individuals with the exclusion of others equally fit for such service
- Turning confessional sessions into a mechanical checklist instead of asking the Holy Spirit to preside and direct
- Focusing on one's ability instead of relying on God's power and plan
- Projecting one's personal problems onto the confessor thereby imposing harshness and over strictness
- Misinterpreting and misjudging behavior which normally spring from distrusting others all the way all the time; "he does this because..."; "He says this because..."
- Exaggerating or minimizing problems the former leading to despair in reaching a solution and the latter leading to negligence in finding a solution
- Losing clarity of goal in giving spiritual practices resulting in impracticality and impossibility of

implementing the practices "*Wherethere is no revelation, the people cast off restraint*" (Proverbs 29:18)

- Forcing individuals to choose what the spiritual father wants not what they want for their life

3. Positive Practices

a. *Accepting without depreciating* It is difficult for people to feel comfortable if not loved or accepted. There are some small moves that might seem trivial but are of vital importance and make the confessing person feel the fatherhood of the priest. For example:

- Calling the person by his name is an indication that he is known by name.
- Appreciating the person's time and efforts to come for confession. Answering phone calls or interrupting the flow of confession for any reason sends a negative signal that this mystery is neither of high importance nor of sanctity.
- Showing interest in the person and inquiring about matters for which he has previously expressed concern and asked for prayers (ex. health, exams, job interview).

- Allowing acceptance and sympathy to prevail regardless of how big the offense might be. Accepting the sinner does not mean condoning the sin because sin remains unacceptable in God's eyes. The best example is Jesus Christ's treatment of sinners exemplified in the Samaritan woman. He ushered in a friendly dialogue with her and ended it with complementary statements. Without insulting her feelings, brought to her attention the wrong she had been living in "*Go, call your husband, and come here.... and the one whom you now have is not your husband*" (John 4:16,18). She ended up believing, confessing, converted and converting. Another example is Zacchaeus. The Lord appreciated Zacchaeus' desire to see Him and rewarded it by going to his house and eating with him. This was beyond the scope of Zacchaeus imagination or desire and led him to repentance, restoration and restitution. The optimum example of acceptance is that of the thief on the cross to whom the Lord, albeit the atrocious pain and suffering resounding throughout His whole body and soul, proclaimed deliverance for him and entrance into the kingdom. These examples

should throw light on the degree of our tolerance and acceptance of people as St. Paul wrote to the Romans "Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God" (Romans 15:7).

- Focusing on the positive and offering an alternative. The best illustration is of a hungry person reaching out for food from a trash bin. His hunger will supersede any logical reasoning concerning the hazards in eating such stale, contaminated food; and unless he is offered an alternative meal no conviction will possibly persuade him to leave it. Likewise, in counseling, focusing on the negative side of sin or a bad relation without offering a satisfying alternative will be fruitless. Changing someone's negative behavior is much more easily done through concentrating on the positives and the satisfaction that exists in a real relationship with God. "*A satisfied soul loathes the honeycomb*" (Proverbs 27:7).
- Avoiding asking about minute details. Probing for information, just out of curiosity, concerning a sin is not favorable because every word in confession is meant to be for building and edifying not for

retrieving, fixating, anchoring and encouraging bitterness and pain. Digging for unnecessary information leads to "the remembrance of evil bearing death" (Divine Liturgy according to St. Basil). Our concern should be how to make people get rid of sin and its memory. There is a big difference between focusing on how to get rid of sin and focusing on the person of Jesus Christ. Our Lord spoke to the Samaritan woman about "the Water of Life" and did not dwell too much too long on her sinful life. Also, at Simon's house, He focused on the amount of "great love" that the sinful woman had shown.

b. Counseling not resolving

The role of the spiritual father is to assist in decision making but not make a decision. Some people want to make their spiritual father choose from two options, two jobs, two girls, two houses, etc. The role of the spiritual father is to help that person reach the right decision by himself and teach him the art of decision making. Doing otherwise is enhancing double mindedness, hesitancy and immaturity in making serious choices in life just to avoid the consequences and responsibilities therein and thereof. Counseling entails helping individuals

to become mature people capable of being responsible for their own decisions. Advice means casting light on the pros and cons of choices, and desires. Spiritual guidance helps direct thoughts in the right direction that ultimately leads to self-respect and that of others including the spiritual father. God respects our freedom of will even our wrong choices. In the Old Testament the two ways of good and evil and the consequences of choices are pronounced clearly. *"See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess"* (Deuteronomy 30:15-16). In the New Testament two biblical examples are given: the rich man and Judas the Iscariot. God explained to the rich man the way to perfection but left him to make his own decision. Likewise, God left Judas to continue with his wrong deeds warning him once *"woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed!"* (Mark 14:21), and admonishing him another time. *"Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?"* (Luke 22:48).

c. *The Core Not the form*

The internal and not the external value of things is the most important concern. The essence of confession is that the individual departs having repented, received absolution, enlightenment and determination to see change take place in attitude and growth in the knowledge of God. For example, the need to pray should not be just to build a habit of reciting learned prayers, but to form a relation with God. The essence of reading the Holy Bible is not to fulfill a requirement but to seek the life that exists in it. The importance of receiving the Holy Mystery of Communion regularly is union with Jesus Christ and not just being one in a long line of people. The value of fasting is not in the change of food but in the change of heart and discipline in self-control. Seeing the importance of the core value of spiritual practices should direct the goal of counseling and shed light on what spiritual fathers need to focus on during confessional sessions and that is focusing on the core through the form. The Lord's response to the young man's quest to have Jesus Christ ask his brother to share their father's inheritance with him was a good lesson about the importance of dealing with the essence of matters. He could have easily acted on the surface level and divided the

inheritance equally between the two brothers; but that would have not uprooted the problem. Because Christ was more concerned with what was behind the problem, the spiritual ailment of covetousness, He said to them, "*who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you? And He said to them, 'Take heed and beware of covetousness'*" (Luke 12:14). implying the underlying problem of the two brothers. The essence of the fight was greed. Thus our Lord addressed the problem. Our Lord wrapped that lesson up by the parable of the irrational rich man who thought of building more and bigger storage for his riches only to hear a voice telling him that his soul would be taken that night. Leaving problems pending, dismissing them with a wishful thinking for a solution and a short prayer will not solve them. Without reaching the core of problems, practices will avail to nothing but will lead to hypocrisy and hurt more than anything else. Likening the Pharisees to a fruitless fig tree yet full of foliage our Lord Jesus Christ rebuked the Pharisees and scribes because of their hypocrisy and futile religious practices. "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence*" (Matthew 23:25).

d. *Rationing not burdening*

When dispensing spiritual practices, it is important to take into consideration the individual's spiritual level of maturity in order not to burden them with teachings that are beyond their capacity. St. Paul stated this concept clearly in his verse "*I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able*" (1 Corinthians 3:2). The aim in counseling here is growth in virtues and not just in knowledge. Giving the right amount of advice requires understanding the type of the individual's personality; and the degree of its success stands proportional to the individual's faith in the means of and results of the advice.

e. *Faith in the means of and results of counseling*

- *Strong conviction in the results but weak conviction in the means*

This is the case with someone who believes in the results of a certain behavior (for example stopping smoking would be advantageously life changing). However, his will is not strong enough to help him achieve the good results he strongly believes in. Such a person needs small doses of spiritual practices with continuous encouragement.

Gradual success in those practices will strengthen faith in the means.

- *Weak conviction in the results but strong conviction in the means*

An example is someone who believes in the efficacy of prayer as a means of solving problems; but is not having enough faith-generating patience nor confidence to wait for the means to work in his life. Such an individual needs in-depth search for the reason for the lack of faith in the results of the means (prayer in this case). Perhaps this individual does not know how to pray the right prayer in the right way; or pray that 'his will' be done. Such a person requires correction of the right concept of prayer and revision of belief in the assertion of the will of God to be done on earth. The best example of the establishment of God's will is Christ's willing submission to die on the cross. *"Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: 'Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come—in the volume*

of the book it is written of Me—to do Your will, O God." (Hebrews 10:5-7).

- *Weak conviction in both means and results*
This is true for someone suffering from depression feeling that nothing would work to make him happy. Counseling and following up need to be done through gradual spiritual practices to improve the individual's faith in the success of both the means and the results.

Conclusion

Compared to all the church mysteries, the Mystery of Confession is unique in that it holds so much for individuals and it is a great responsibility, the cornerstone on which the eternal future of individuals depends and whereby they receive absolution, reconciliation with God, chastisement (when needed) and support. God's verdict concerning the spiritual wellbeing of people is spelled out in his words "*his blood I will require at your hand*" (Ezekiel 33:8). Confession can only be conducted before a priest whereas counseling can be carried out by servants and deacons; as this wisdom-related ministry is spoken about in the bible in both the old and new testaments. In the Mystery of Confession the priest disappears behind the person of Jesus Christ who came to fulfill the prophesy "*The*

Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified" (Isaiah 61:1-3). This Old Testament prophecy about the Lord Jesus Christ is the very exact one that our Lord read when He entered the temple and was given the scroll to read. It outlined His first ministry and highlighted its essence.

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