

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

We heard in this morning's Gospel that when Jesus heard that John had been arrested he left Nazareth and went to Capernaum which is on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus began to preach saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

What did Jesus mean when he said "repent"?

St. Theophan the Recluse wrote:

"Repentance is a radical change for the better, the sudden change of will, the turning away from sin towards God, a rekindling of the fire of fervent desire for the exceptional pleasing of God with the denial of self and all other things. Most of all it is characterized by a painful change of will.

"A man is accustomed to what is evil; now he must tear himself away from sin. He has offended God; now he must burn in the fire of the incorruptible and impartial judgment of his conscience."

[The Church Fathers say that our conscience is the voice of God within us. Therefore, we cannot bribe this judge or escape His pronouncements on our behavior.]

"In the feelings of his heart, he touches to a certain extent the punishments of hell. The lamenting spirit of repentance was sent to the earth by the Lord to pierce those who accepted it "to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow" (Hebrews 4:12)."

"This same spirit was sent in order to destroy our old self and lay the foundation for making a new man within us. Within the repenting man there is sometimes a sense of fear, sometimes a slight hope, sometimes a keen sense of his own deep pain, sometimes a slight feeling of consolation. Sometimes he experiences the terrors of near despair; sometimes he feels the gentle breezes of joy and consolation evoking the mercy of God."

St. John Chrysostom said:

"Repentance opens the heavens, takes us to Paradise, overcomes the devil. Have you sinned? Do not despair! If you sin every day, then offer repentance every day! When there are rotten parts in old houses, we replace the parts with new ones, and we do not stop caring for the houses. In the same way, you should reason for yourself: If today you have defiled yourself with sin, immediately cleanse yourself with repentance."

St. Isaac of Syria said:

"Repentance is fitting at all times and for all persons, for sinners as well as for the righteous who look for salvation. There are no bounds to perfection, for even the perfection of the most perfect is nothing but imperfection. Hence, until the moment of death, neither the time nor the works of perfection can ever be complete."

Perhaps the most misunderstood sacrament of the Orthodox Church is the Sacrament of Confession also known as the Sacrament of Repentance.

Concerning our sins, God's Word gives a wonderful promise: "If we confess sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The faithful are to bring their sins to God in repentance and receive cleansing and forgiveness.

The early Christian community had a specific practice in this regard. People would stand and confess their sins to God in the presence of the whole congregation. Had not Jesus encouraged His followers to walk in the light together, to confront problems corporately, to "tell it to the church" (Matt 18:17)? Thus, St. James writes, "Confess your trespasses to one another" (James 5:16). But as time went on and the Church grew in numbers, strangers came to visit and public confession became more difficult.

Out of mercy, priests began to witness confessions of sin privately on behalf of the Church. Jesus gave His disciples the authority to forgive sin. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:23); see also Matt 16:19).

From the beginning, Christians understood that the grace of ordination endowed the shepherd of the flock with the discernment and compassion to speak the words of remission, on behalf of Christ, regarding the sins of those who confess and turn from sin. "You did not choose Me," Jesus told the Twelve, "but I chose you and appointed or [ordained] you." (John 15:16). To these same disciples Jesus promised, "It is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11). Whom God calls, He equips. Paul writes to Timothy, "Stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Tim. 1:6). It is the grace of the Holy Spirit that enables the priest to serve God and the people. Thus, the Church has encouraged her faithful: If you know you have committed a specific sin, do not hide it but confess it before coming to the Holy Eucharist.

St. Paul wrote, "Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor. 11:28), and "If we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged" (1 Cor. 11:31). King David learned a lesson regarding his sin. For about a year, he had hidden his sins of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband (2 Sam. 11:1–12:13). Then, confronted by Nathan the prophet, David repented from his heart and confessed his sin in a psalm that is used for general confession to this day (Ps 50). The joy of salvation was restored to him.

The Kingdom of Heaven is Christ and it is also the life of virtue. We are called to live as Christ taught, a life of continual repentance. When we fall short of living a life of virtue we must repent. No person, other than Jesus, has lived a life without sin, thus we must all repent for our failures to live the life of Christ. We who have been baptized, live in the Kingdom of Heaven, for Christ is within us. Would we continue to sin if we fully understood that we are temples of the Holy Spirit, that we are in the Kingdom of Heaven. I'm not saying that it would be impossible for us to sin, but that our eyes would be open and we would see how destructive sinning is.

We must live as angels on earth. The word Angel means messenger. We must be messengers of God to the world telling of God's love for us, whether by word or actions. For when someone lives as an angel on earth, is he not heavenly? So the kingdom of heaven is within each one of us and we live as angels.

People ask, "Can't I confess to God privately?" Certainly, though there is no clear biblical basis for it. Even general confession occurs in the Church. In His mercy, God provides the sacrament of repentance or confession to give us deliverance from sin. It is easy to pray in isolation yet never come clean. It is far more effective to confess aloud to God before a priest and benefit from his guidance and help. Thus, we come before the holy icon of Christ, to whom we confess, and are guided by the priest, our spiritual father, in a cleansing Inventory of our lives. When we tell God all, naming our sins and failures, we hear those glorious words of freedom which announce Christ's promise of forgiveness of all our sins. We resolve to "go and sin no more" (John 8:11).

The Apostle John warns us not to deceive ourselves: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins" (1 John 1:8, 9). The Hebrew verb *chata'*, "to sin," like the Greek word *hamartia*, simply means straying off the path, getting lost, missing the mark. Sin, going off course, can be intentional or unintentional. It is not uncommon that we want certain actions to remain secret, not because of modesty, but because there is an unarguable sense of having violated a law more basic than that in any law book—the "law written in [our] hearts" to which St. Paul refers (Romans 2:15). It isn't simply that we fear punishment. It is that we don't want to be thought of by others as a person who commits such deeds. One of the main obstacles to going to confession is dismay that someone else will know what I want no one to know.

A sense of guilt—the painful awareness of having committed sins—can be life-renewing. Guilt provides a foothold for contrition, which in turn can motivate confession and repentance. Without guilt, there is no remorse; without remorse, there is no possibility of becoming free of habitual sins. Yet there are forms of guilt that are dead-end streets. If I feel guilty that I have not managed to become the ideal person I occasionally want to be, or that I imagine others want me to be, that is guilt without a divine reference point. It is simply an irritated me contemplating an irritating me.

Christianity is not centered on performance, laws, principles, or the achievement of flawless behavior, but on Christ Himself and on participation in God's transforming love. When Christ says, "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48), He's not speaking of getting a perfect score on a test, but of being whole, being in a state of communion, participating fully in God's love. A blessed guilt is the pain we feel when we realize we have cut ourselves off from that divine communion that irradiates all creation. It is impossible to live in a Godless universe, but easy to be unaware of God's presence or even to resent it. It's a common delusion that one's sins are private or affect only a few other people. To think our sins, however hidden, don't affect others is like imagining that a stone thrown into the water won't generate ripples. As Bishop Kallistos Ware has observed: "There are no entirely private sins. All sins are sins against my neighbor, as well as against God and against myself. Even my most secret thoughts are, in fact, making it more difficult for those around me to follow Christ."

Repentance, on the other hand, is the recognition that I cannot live any more as I have been living, because in living that way I wall myself apart from others and from God. Repentance is a

change in direction. Repentance is the door of communion. It is also what is necessary for forgiveness. Absolution is impossible where there is no repentance.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Through the prayers of the holy Fathers, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us. Amen.