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CONFESSION – THE MYSTERY OF REINTEGRATION INTO HOLINESS

Rezumat: *Spovedania este actul de ascensiune a omului din starea sa de păcătoșenie și este absolut necesară pentru mântuirea sufletului omului, deoarece, prin ea, el dobândește iertarea păcatelor sale prin pocăință adevărată. Mântuitorul nostru Iisus Hristos, prin Sfânta Taină a Spovedaniei, însoțită de starea de pocăință, reintegrează omul într-o dimensiune și stare diferite, și anume cea a Fiului lui Dumnezeu, și din acel moment, singurul scop al existenței omului ar trebui să fie perfecțiunea și sfințenia, și anume de a fi „morți față de păcat și vii pentru Dumnezeu, prin Iisus Hristos, Domnul nostru“. În Sfânta Taină a Spovedaniei, creștinul își dezvăluie sanctuarele sufletului său, în aspectele lor cele mai vulnerabile, pentru a scăpa de slăbiciunile sale refractare și de a se deschide spre comuniunea cu Dumnezeu, spre sfințenie și îndumnezeire.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *Hristos, Spovedanie, duhovnic, sfințenie, păcat.*

For the Orthodox Christian, the goal of life is to attain perfection or the unification with God through Jesus Christ. This perfection is at the same time a target and an ascent with no boundary. In the Eastern theology and spirituality, this unification with God has been called deification (θέωσις) or participation to the divine life. This culminating state of man's spiritual life, namely the sacramental unification of the soul with God is reached only through long endeavors and permanent efforts of purification with the help of the Holy Spirit. When attained, man has reached the resemblance with God.

Our Savior Jesus Christ, the Light of the world (John 8:12) invited man in a different dimension and state, namely that of God's son and, therefore, the Christians should have holiness as the goal of their ex-

istence, namely to be *“dead to sin, but alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord”* (Romans 6:11).

The Confession is the act of man’s ascension out of his condition of sinfulness and is absolutely necessary for the salvation of his soul, as, through it, he partakes of the grace of forgiveness and of the reconciliation with God, namely the Confession is the reintegration into holiness of the Christian who confesses his sins truly and with a broken heart in front of the confessor priest. In the Holy Mystery of Confession, the Christian reveals his soul’s sanctuaries in their most vulnerable aspects, to get rid of his resilient weaknesses and to open himself to the communion with God.¹

On the ladder of our spiritual life, God intervenes with His rays of divine grace to save and support man’s life. We need to make ourselves spiritually available, in order to be able to feel the rays of His light coming from Heaven, and we need to mortify our sinful passions, turning them into virtues, to make room for the divine grace (Saint Gregory of Nyssa).

The Holy Mystery of Confession is deeply marked by an eschatological climate. It certainly is a means able to “destroy death”, the spiritual death that has been the consequence of sin, as the Kingdom of God is the Kingdom of the holiness, where there is no room for sin, not even for the slightest shade of a sin². As Saint Paul writes to the Corinthians: *“Do you not know that the unrighteous and the wrongdoers will not inherit or have any share in the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived (misled): neither the impure and immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor those who participate in homosexuality, nor cheats (swindlers and thieves), nor greedy graspers, nor drunkards, nor foul-mouthed revilers and slanderers, nor extortioners and robbers will inherit or have any share in the kingdom of God”* (I Cor. 6:9-10). All these do nothing else except to enumerate the sins specific to the pagans, sins that the Corinthians had had until then, and because of which no one practicing them may hope to enter the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

1. Bălan Dragoș-Corneliu, *Har și libertate în mântuirea omului*, Ed. Reîntregirea, Alba-Iulia, Constanța, 2012, p. 239.

2. Viorel Sava, *Taina Mărturisirii în riturile liturgice actuale*, PhD thesis under the guidance made pr. prof. dr. Nicolae D. Necula, Ed. Trinitas, Iași, 1999, p. 33.

In the Old Testament, the prophets were subjected to sin, too, like the pagans and like "all man born on Earth". Certainly, the prophets were distinguished from the others by the hope in the promises made by God to their parents, by the faith that all God had promised would be fulfilled some day in the future. But the power to clean every man from his sins, to enter clean in the Kingdom of God had not yet been granted. It was only when Jesus Christ came on Earth that this power was given to a group of people meant to exert it efficiently and, by this, to open the gate of the Kingdom of Heaven to the people.

This power to forgive sins can only be exerted by somebody with no sins, but no man can draw close to absolute holiness. Therefore, this power is the exclusive prerogative of the Divinity. When Jesus heals the paralyzed man in Capernaum and tells him: "Man, your sins are forgiven you!" the Pharisees and the scholars, intrigued, are wondering: "Who is this Who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus tells them clearly that He has this power on Earth; this was an indirect statement of His Divinity (Luke 5:20-21). The Holy Mystery of Confession comes, as a gift, from our Lord Jesus Christ for the salvation of mankind, as it was introduced by Him for this purpose, after His Resurrection, when He breathed on the Holy Apostles and gave them this power, saying: "*Receive the Holy Spirit; if you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of anyone, they are retained*" (John 20:22-23). The fact that this power was given to the Apostles after the Resurrection proves that it refers to the Kingdom of God, and has been given only to be used for its perspective. This power is the equivalent of "the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven", when Jesus tells Peter and the apostles: "*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Anything you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. Anything you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven*" (Matthew 16:19).

It means that all the acts that the Apostles consider as moral in the Church, compatible with the Kingdom of God, "they shall loosen", and all the acts they will find as incompatible, immoral, they shall "fasten", they shall forbid. The meaning of these words is that all those who breach the things "fastened" shall be forgiven; those who do not repent and persist in their misdeed shall be "fastened" away from the

pre-tasting of the Kingdom of God, which takes place in the Church, and far from the Kingdom itself, where they shall never enter, either. The forgiveness of sins must be regarded as the opening of the gates of the Kingdom for the one who repents; it is the way of entering a state of cleanness that does not belong to this world, but only to the future one. This is why those who make the same mistakes are more severely punished, as they are those who have already “tasted” the joy of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, but have proved themselves unworthy of it³.

The Achiever of the Holy Mystery of Confession. According to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, the Achiever of all the Holy Mysteries of the Church is Christ Himself, the Head of the Church, in the Holy Spirit, through the bishops and the priests of the Church, as seen organs of the Great Archbishop – Jesus Christ. Therefore, the true Achiever of each Holy Mystery is not the bishop or the priest, but Christ himself. The bishop or the priest are only instruments in the hand of Christ; they carry out visibly what Christ Himself carries out, unseen, in each Holy Mystery. “The priest is the visible organ by means of whom Christ in the Church invisibly works in the Holy Mysteries or gives grace to those to whom the Holy Mysteries are administered. Christ, become invisible through His Ascension, to achieve His action on those who want to get united with Him and grow in Him by entering and growing spiritually in the Church, also uses a personal visible organ. [...] The gestures of the priest regarding the person who receives the Holy Mystery... make the efficiency of the Holy Mystery become more profound in the being of the person who receives the Holy Mystery”⁴.

Therefore, the true healer of souls, He Who truly sets man free of any sins, is Jesus Christ. Through the priest, it is Jesus Christ Himself who is operating and the priest has that conscience of the fact that the power that has been given to him is completely foreign to his earthy essence, because he says to the one who comes to confess his sins: “Look, son, Jesus Christ is here unseen, receiving your humble Confession. So, do not feel ashamed or afraid, and do not hide any sins from

3. Adrian Niculcea, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă comparată*, Ed. Arhetip, București, 2001, p. 340 sqq.

4. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, 2nd edition, Ed. I.B.M.B.O.R, București, 1997, vol. 3, p. 27-28.

me, but confess all that you have done, with no fear, to receive forgiveness from our Lord Jesus Christ. And I am only a witness, to confess before Him all that you will tell me.” But the prominent role of Jesus Christ appears not only in this mini-speech preparing him who comes for Confession, but also in the absolution prayer: “May God our Lord Jesus Christ... forgive you, son... and loosen all your sins”. In contrast, the priest states, in this act, his personal humility and humbleness, and only acknowledges the power he has been entrusted as a representative of the clergy, since he adds: “And I, the unworthy, priest and confessor, with the power given to me, forgive your sins and set you free from them...”.

He who has the power to forgive sins and, thus, to open the Kingdom’s gates for the repentant is firstly the bishop and, in solidarity with him, the priest. They have this power as they announce the drawing close of the Kingdom of Heavens to the world and prove this through their exerting such a power that does not pertain to this world. The exerting of this power is, therefore, the sign that the present has been invaded by the eschaton, that through the absolution obtained from the bishop or from the priest, we can pre-taste the holiness, the purity, the light of Jesus Christ’s Kingdom. Through the Holy Mystery of Confession, the sinner who repents leaves the kingdom of darkness and death and victoriously steps into the kingdom of light and eternal life.

The receiver of the Holy Mystery of Repentance is any Christian who comes to confess his sins, respecting certain conditions: 1) the Confession should be made based on the believer’s free will, namely with all his heart, not forced by anybody or out of constraint, or out of fear or other ordinary reasons, but only out of personal faith; 2) the Confession should be complete, namely it should include all the sins done from the last Confession and should not hide anything; just as when we see a doctor we must show him all the disease we suffer from, so that he may know the medicine he should prescribe to us, similarly we must open our souls to the confessor, for him to know what spiritual medicine he should prescribe for our improvement; we must not hide anything from him, or else we desecrate the Holy Mystery. And nothing is hidden from God. It is not possible for us

to cheat the All-knowing God. The responsibility is ours. It may be noticed that the confessor's answers to some of our problems is not correct. The confessor's answer depends on the intention and the disposition of the one who asked. If the person confessing his sins is honest and has a good disposition God shall enlighten the confessor.⁵ 3) the Confession should be honest and objective, namely the believer should accuse himself and show his sins without trying to hide or diminish their gravity; 4) the Confession should be made with deep regret for the sins committed, with the honest desire of not repeating them, just like the repentance of the prodigal son or of the publican; 5) then, the believer should express his clear determination not to sin again. The simple enumeration or narration of sins, without true repentance, namely without the determination and desire to set things right and with no fasting and prayer has no effect on the believer's soul and does not contribute at all to his purification and improvement⁶.

Saint Nicodemus of Mount Athos, referring to the Holy Mystery of Confession, in his book *Confession Guide* shows us the way we can participate to it fully and consciously: "The Confession is the willing spoken disclosure of one's sly acts, words and thoughts, freely and with a broken heart for the committed sins; it is clear, made with no shame, with determination, in front of a confessor ordained by canon".

These spiritual "steps" need to be followed by unhesitatingly confessing all one's sins and receiving the canonic loosening from the priest. The formal effect of this procedure is the actual forgiveness of sins, the restoring of the communion with God, the liberation from any punishment for sins and the obtaining of the hope of eternal life. I have said "formal", as after each Confession a visible effect should follow, namely the strong emotion of the person who feels forgiven and allowed again in the Kingdom of God, who really feels the presence of this Kingdom whose gates have been opened by the forgiveness of his sins.

5. Nectarie Antonopoulos, *Spovedania – calea învierii sufletești*, translated by Cristian Spătăreanu, Ed. Egumenița, Galați 2004, p. 67-70.

6. P. Procopovici, *Spovedania, mijloc de educație religios-morală*, in "Mitropolia Ardealului", III (1958), nr. 7-8, p. 563.

The canon or epitimia that the repentant sometimes receives after the Confession, especially in the case of some serious sins, is not at all a punishment, as the Roman-Catholics believe. Its role is exclusively pedagogical, namely meant to help the penitent to gradually leave his vice. This is why they are never the same for all, but each person is entrusted a different trajectory of repentance. There are, of course, the canons foreseeing standard epitimias for some sins. Yet, they are wisely applied for each case in turn, through what is called “the economy of the Church”.

Pursuing the pedagogical goal of curing the disease of sin, of consolidating the penitent into good and of protecting him against new falls into sin, the epitimia depends not only on the nature of the sin or of the bad thing being cured but also on the psychological individuality of the repentant. Thus, the epitimia may be applied usefully only depending on the spiritual condition of the repentant.

In this regard, Saint Gregory of Naziansus gives us classic advice: “Just as not all the bodies are prescribed the same medicine or diet, but one or another, according to the degree and nature of the disease, similarly, the cures and procedures for the healing of the souls are just as different. This is proved by the patients themselves. Some of them are cured by the word, others by the “bridle”. Those who are slow and hard to push towards what is good, need to be stirred by the whip of the word, just as those who are too hasty and have unquenchable desires, who are like the race horses that run beyond the target, need to be corrected with soft words, meant to slow down their impetus”.

“For some people, it is praise that is efficient, for others it is scolding, certainly if provided in due time; otherwise, such actions bring harm if they do not come in due time and reasonably. Some people are corrected by advice, others by scolding... For others, it is better to overlook some things here and there, or as a proverb says «you should see and should not see, you should hear and should not hear», lest the heavy burden of reproaches should drive them to despair or make them lose respect for the teachings received and, finally drive them to shamelessness. For others, their natural inclinations require that you should get angry, without getting angry, ne-

glect without neglecting, lose hope without losing it. Others may be corrected slowly and gently by the fact that you know how to awaken their hope, too”.⁷

For confessors, it is absolutely necessary to know “which wounds they ought to burn, which they ought to amputate and which they ought to apply a plaster on”, and moreover, “they should know for which kind of people they should use wine and fire and for which they should use ointment and gentleness”.⁸

As a matter of fact, in human medicine, as well, if a remedy has re-established the health of the body, before the end of the time prescribed for the consuming of the entire dose, the doctor suspends the continuation of the application of the treatment or medicine, which becomes useless or even damaging for the intended goal. In spiritual medicine, the same principle is valid. “Doctors prescribe many cures for the patients”, says Saint John Chrysostom, “but who is the wise man who does not take into account that the patient has done this or that thing, and the result of his actions?”⁹.

A first criterion in establishing the canon is the nature of the sin, the kind of sin made. Saint James shows that “*we all often stumble and fall and offend in many things*” (James 3:2), and the Apostle John explains that “*There is a sin [that leads] to death; (...) and there is sin which does not [involve] death [that may be repented of and forgiven]*” (I John 5:16-17). The Orthodox teaching shows that the sins that lead to death include the seven deadly sins, of which six are against the Holy Spirit and five are crying to heaven. These sins shall be more severely punished than the ordinary daily sins.

The Confession or Repentance is the second baptism: the baptism of tears. Saint Symeon the New Theologian tells us in his Catecheses: “Without tears, since the beginning of times nobody ever heard about a soul (who had sinned after Baptism) cleaned of the defilement brought by sin”.

7. Corneliu Sârbu, *Duhovnicul cunoscător de suflete*, in “Mitropolia Olteniei”, IX (1957), nr. 3-4, p. 145-146.

8. Ion Irimia, *Însemnări cu privire la Sfânta Taină a Spovedaniei*, in “Glasul Bisericii”, XIX (1960), nr. 5-6, p. 463.

9. Petre Vintilescu, *Spovedania și Duhovnicia*, Ed. Alba Iulia, 1995, p. 274-275.

The Confession is a personal reporting to God, as sin is a breach of the communion with God; we get sick of non-deification. The Confession is an expression of man's "repentance of the heart" in front of God for the sins committed. This Holy Mystery has meant, from the very beginning of the Church, the Confession of one's sins to the priests, repentance for them and forgiveness granted by God by means of the priest.

In the Holy Mystery of Confession, the Christian discloses the sanctuaries of his soul with their vulnerabilities, to get rid of the resilient weaknesses and to open himself to the communion with God. The Confessor appears as speaking on behalf of God. This is the Confession done under normal conditions.

For what we have mentioned, this Holy Mystery has received different names. It is called *repentance* because he who receives it must regret his sins sincerely; *penitence*, which derives from the Latin *paena*, which means the act through which man is punished for the sins he has committed or, according to others, it represents a sorrow of his heart for the sins committed; *Confession*, because the Christian confesses his sins in front of the priest. It is also called *the second Baptism*, because, through it, sins can be washed away as through the Holy Mystery of Baptism; *forgiveness* or *absolution* because, through it, the sinner is forgiven and set free from the ties of sin; it is also called *reconciliation* because it reconciles us with God; it is like a life board after a shipwreck because it offers us the possibility of turning from the state of sin to that of virtue; "it is like a shelter in the very safe port of the divine help"¹⁰.

Repentance is God's voice in man's soul, calling him to stand up and get out of the mud of sins and go towards the light-filled peaks of the divine ideal; it is the strongest invitation made to man, to come back to God, the spring of his existence and happiness. Thus, according to the Orthodox dogma, the goal of man's existence is holiness and deification through the grace and sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit, in

10. Sfântul Ioan Casian, *Scrieri alese*, collection "Părinți și scriitori bisericești", translated by de Vasile Cojocaru și David Popescu, vol. 57, Ed. I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1990, p. 701.

order to acquire eternal happiness. To achieve this goal, the sense and calling of the Church is to graft man, by means of the Holy Mysteries, on the Body of Jesus Christ, the One raised from the dead and glorified. Incorporated into the sacramental Body of the Lord through the Holy Mysteries, man becomes the God's collaborator in God's action meant to perfect man's being.

Nowadays, the Confession *is not related to a certain time* or deadlines throughout the year. We can run to our confessor whenever and as often as we feel the need to relieve our souls of the burden of sins, or to receive the comfort of divine grace and the hope of forgiveness. The more often we confess, the better it is.

Yet, usually the Confession is related to the four fasting periods of the year. That is why the fourth commandment of the Church teaches us to confess our sins four times a year, namely during the four fasting periods, as follows: the Lent, the Advent, the two-week fasting period before the Assumption of Virgin Mary, and the fasting period before the celebration of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul. The devout more advanced in religiousness and piety may confess monthly, and the others should confess at least once a year, namely during the Lent.

The Confession has the goal of re-acquiring the divine grace and peace of mind. In order to reach this goal, numerous means have been devised, some being sacramental in nature (like the reading of the prayers for forgiveness or special prayers (*molitve*). By means of these prayers, the priest invokes the grace of the heavenly mercifulness and forgiveness to come over the repentant who kneels, and who is dominated by the hope of being forgiven of sins. Such prayers contain dogmata and expressions meant to introduce the repentant into the propitious atmosphere of Confession, representing a necessary moment before this act.¹¹

The repentant comes to confess as one who has fallen into sin and is guilty for his acts and asks for forgiveness in front of the priest, who is truly his father and master, in the Confession chair, but he is, espe-

11. Ioan Bunea, *Cum să spovedim*, in "Biserica Ortodoxă Română", CIV (1986), p. 50-51.

cially, above all, the judge of his conduct, as witness and representative of God.

The Confession or the disclosure of one's sins in front of the confessor is the main part of the Holy Mystery of Repentance, through which the Christian receives from God Himself forgiveness of the sins committed after Baptism and reconciliation with God. It is a second baptism, though the difference between Baptism and Confession is fundamental.

By means of the Holy Mystery of Baptism, man obtains the grace of being forgiven of his sins and the reconciliation with God, namely he re-enters the communion man had with God before falling into the ancestral sin and becomes a member of Christ's Church. The Confession is the sacrament of re-birth through grace and of restoration of the connection with the Church, which had been interrupted or weakened by sin.

If it has been done in a valid way, the Holy Mystery of Baptism is never repeated, whereas the Confession may be resumed by the Christian whenever he feels his conscience burdened by sins, being a repeatable Holy Mystery.¹²

The need for repentance or Confession is deduced from the universality of sin: *"For we all often stumble and fall and offend in many things"* (James 3:2) and from the fact that moral mistakes have not become impossible for the Christians after the cancellation of the original sin within the Holy Mystery of Baptism. Temptations do not spare anybody in their earthly life and hence our being led astray from the way indicated by our Savior's teaching.

Salvation from the slavery of sin means freedom. As long as he hides his sins in the depths of his conscience, any Christian is deserted and troubled by torments and by a burden similar to the ties of death and which may drive him to madness. The peace that he displays, sometimes, cannot cheat the insightful eye of the experienced confessor. It is an apparent peace, as actually in the depths of his soul there is storm, sometimes despair and torment, at other times chaos and disorder, wrecking his entire spiritual life. Sinners "cannot enjoy peace

12. P. Procopoviciu, *Spovedania, mijloc de educație religioasă-morală*, p. 560.

until they confess their sins". The conscience is not only burdened by the remorse for the sins committed, but it also has the nostalgia for the lost innocence. The Christian looks for forgiveness, but in the depths of his soul, he hopes for evil to be annihilated and it is precisely this much-desired annihilation that requires forgiveness and sacramental absolution.

"Do not hide your sin in your soul! This is a mortal disease. Confess everything that defiles your conscience!"¹³ Thus, the Confession appears as the providential cure for the hardest bitterness and despair of the soul. It reflects the remorse that is shaking our conscience.

A subject of great interest today – which could represent a starting point for the necessity of the Holy Mystery of Confession – is sin and isolation. In fact, isolation "gives birth to demons", through our conscience that is stabbing us, and our imagination that is tormenting us. Isolation is the expression of the absence of communication, the absence of a partner for conversation, the absence of the other beside you. Thus, the thirst for communication, for word, for Confession – just like the thirst for knowledge – is a natural drive, an existential necessity. Our soul has always felt the need to start a dialogue with God.¹⁴

Before the actual Confession, a stage of the Holy Mystery of Repentance is the *examination of one's conscience*. So important is the investigation of one's conscience, that the confessor is obliged to ask the repentant, from the very beginning, whether he has done it or not. The investigation of one's conscience has to be done with sorrow and with the determination to stop sinning. It is essential for us to realize that we are suffering "from the disease of sins" since the first and the greatest sin is that of not realizing and not admitting that we sin against God and against our neighbor by some of our thoughts, words and acts, either by doing what we should not do or by not doing what we should do.

The examination of our conscience is "the confession in its inner form, a deeply moving act that amplifies our repentance in our soul,

13. Serafim Alexiev, *Leacul uitat*, Ed. Sofia, București, 2003, p. 63-64.

14. Constantin Eugen Jurcă, *Taina Mărturisirii*, in "Ortodoxia", XXI (1971), nr. 3-4, p. 100.

awakening our regret and disgust at the sins committed, the determination not to sin again and the desire to get cured".¹⁵

It is time to highlight that the examination of our conscience is not a goal in itself: "It is not reduced to a simple summing up of our successive sins and mistakes or a chronology of our behavior". This preparation for Confession does not consist in squeezing our conscience under the obsessive and exclusive idea of not missing the slightest detail. Important and essential in this self-investigation is repentance, the sorrow for the sins committed in the past and the determination not to repeat them in the future.

Before appearing in front of the confessor, it is advisable that the repentant should talk to himself, meditate on his acts and weigh their severity himself.

The Decalogue and the commandments of the Church are the mirror in which the repentant needs to examine his conscience thoroughly. After having understood the essence of the commandments, the Christian will be able to realize whether or not he has respected them.¹⁶

Before the Confession, Christians are attacked by the two great enemies of this Holy Mystery: shame and fear. The shame of being despised and the fear of being exposed. The confessor priest must be a part of the category of friends, so that the repentant should not feel any difficulty in confessing his sins. In this way, the Confession appears as a natural moving on from a more private conversation with the Christian towards subjects that are closer and closer to the content of a disclosure of sins, during the proper Confession.¹⁷

When we go to confess our sins we enter Jesus Christ's medical centre. Here, God Himself is the Doctor because it is only Him Who can take our life and make us alive, punish us and have mercy on us, scold us and forgive us. The priest is just a witness of God. This is why we are physically in front of the confessor, and invisibly in front of Jesus Christ.

15. Sânică T. Palade, *Taina Sfintei Spovedanii – mijloc de pastorație individuală*, Ed. Sf. Mina, Iași, 2002, p. 93-94.

16. Ioan Bunea, *Cum să spovedim*, p. 49.

17. Nicodim Belea, *Funcțiunea soteriologică și educativă a Tainei Spovedaniei*, in "Biserica Ortodoxă Română", C (1982), nr. 5-6, p. 484-485.

The priest listens to our Confession and God will receive it; the priest consults our soul, and God will cure it; the priest prescribes the medicine, and God will accomplish the miracle of our spiritual re-birth.

“It is true, it is not easy to reveal your sins to the confessor, when in front of people you show yourself as a good person. You are ashamed to confess your sins. But how will you be healed if you hide your disease? You defeat your shame when going to the doctor for consultation and so you heal your body. Then, why feel ashamed when going to the confessor to cure your soul? So, forget about shame and arm yourself with boldness. God tied shame to sin, and boldness to Confession”.¹⁸

In the Confession chair, the confessor’s role is overwhelming. He needs to be, in turn, “a father, a doctor and a judge”.¹⁹ The kindness of a spiritual father needs to appear even more evidently during the Confession, when he needs to avoid any sign of impatience, any sign of boredom, of amazement or rejection, in a word, any act able to frighten or humiliate the repentant and able to prevent him from continuing his Confession, out of fear or shame

In judging the severity of the repentant’s sins and guilt, in the past, the confessors were recommended to show not a harshness of implacable judge, which very often hardens the sinner and makes him worse instead of correcting him, but sympathy, kindness and love, that is the attitude of a parent really saddened by the sins committed by his children.²⁰

A true confessor does not provide a shallow Confession, dealing with the key issues superficially; he asks questions moving on with no shyness or timidity to the thorough investigation of the repentant’s acts and life. In the dialogue with the repentant, the confessor needs to follow the evolution of the spiritual disease in all its stages, studying sin, starting from the first sparkle of the sinful thought up to its translation into word and act or up to the most advanced stage, when it has become “a second nature” or a vice. “The disease of sin is not simple, but of many kinds and types and develops many branches

18. Serafim Alexiev, *Leacul uitat*, p. 57-59.

19. Petre Vintilescu, *Spovedania și Duhovnicia*, passim.

20. Ene Braniște, *Din înțelepciunea și experiența duhovnicilor de odinioară*, in “Biserica Ortodoxă Română”, LXXVIII (1960), nr. 1-2, p. 146.

of perdition”, says the definition of Canon 102 of the Council in Trullo (691-692). “Therefore – the instructions of the canon go on – a wise doctor of the soul, needs to first investigate the disposition of he who has sinned and whether he tends towards health, or on the contrary, through his morals he causes his own disease; a wise doctor should watch over the way how the penitent takes care in time of his return and see if he is not opposed to the doctor, increasing the wound of his soul through the use of the medicines recommended for it, and only so should the doctor weigh his mercy, according to worthiness”.²¹

The Confession of sins does not hurt man’s dignity. The Confession is the key point in the therapy of the soul. Just like the doctor who knows the circumstances favoring and even producing the disease, similarly the confessor needs to know the occasions giving birth to sin, especially when it comes to children who received immoral influences.

It is extremely important for the Confession to “bring to light, in the repentant’s conscience, the absurdity of sin compared to Christ’s delivering significance”.²²

The Confession is such a strong cure that it immediately annihilates any poison of the mortal or forgivable sin, which constitutes a boundless badness; the Confession annihilates any unseen disease, bringing again the previous health and the divine grace in the soul. It is such a wonderful cure, that it changes the sinner, immediately, into an angel with a beautiful appearance, from what he had been changed into by committing the sin. Briefly, it turns the sinner from a condemned person into a free man, from a slave of his own body into a member of God’s family, from a slave of the devil into a son of God and from a man worthy of eternal punishment into an heir of the heavenly Kingdom.²³

Through repentance, the repentant judges himself / herself and is judged, but with the love of the Heavenly Father, “*Who does not want the sinners’ death, but wants them to turn from their wicked ways so they can live*” (Ezekiel 33:11).

21. Apud Ioan N. Floca, *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe*, 1991.

22. Constantin Eugen Jurcă, *Taina Mărturisirii*, p. 110.

23. Sfântul Nicodim Aghioritul, *Carte folositoare de suflet*, Ed. Bunavestire, Bacău, 2001, p. 108.

The forgiveness the confessor gives from the Confession chair is the forgiveness given by Jesus Christ, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, in His Church. In this respect, Saint Polycarp recommends to the priests to be just and kind in their judgment and ready “to forgive” just as they hope to be forgiven by the Lord.

Thus, forgiveness is given to us by an order indicated by God Himself, Who set an order, a measure and a law in the area of spiritual life. Consequently, the advice and recommendations that precede the prayer of absolution of sins must be personal, namely be fit for the individual characteristics of the repentant.²⁴

The deep regret, the bitter repentance, the sincere sorrow, and even the tears of sorrow for the sins committed are an essential condition for the forgiveness of these sins, an essential condition for the repentant’s absolution.

The good Lord has mercy on us through the confessor’s function, giving – in the Holy Mystery of Confession – forgiveness to the repentant, only if he “washes” his sins in the tears of repentance, only if he confesses sincerely and from the bottom of his heart, that he regrets the sins he has committed and wishes to be cleansed of them. In the balance of divine forgiveness there is nothing as weighty as the deep sorrow that does not give the Christian any peace, any satisfaction, or any rest until he has gotten the forgiveness that his soul has been longing for.²⁵

The confessor must bring the repentant into the active condition of sincere repentance for his mistakes. Everything must be aimed at the major goal of this act: purification from sins and spiritual salvation.

The confessor will get to know each Christian and what each Christian is lacking. The experienced confessor can determine – psychologically – the human religious typology of his parish. He knows how the young and the old (re)act; he determines the spiritual coordinates of the Christian, being able to take them into consideration when he

24. Tita Michael, *Temeiurile doctrine ale Tainei Pocăinței*, in „Ortodoxia”, XXXVIII (1986), nr. 3, p. 114.

25. Spiridon Căndea, *Taina Sfintei Mărturisiri ca mijloc de pastorație individuală*, in “Mitropolia Olteniei”, VIII (1956), nr. 6-7, p. 321.

gives the spiritual treatment; he reads in the acts of his parishioners and realizes immediately if they are on the good road of salvation.²⁶

A good and sincere Confession, full of regret and followed by repentance, protects the Christian from the danger of self-deception and contributes to a good moral self-knowledge, from a Christian moral perspective.

It often constitutes the beginning of a new Christian moral life, opening one's spiritual eyes to a better understanding, assimilation and deepening of the Christian moral principles.

Nevertheless, in the Holy Mystery of Confession, the Christians are advised to subject their thoughts, words and acts to a severe moral test and go up to their source, which shall clarify the phenomena of their inner life and the way they should behave in relation to them. The confessor only has the duty to identify the root of vice and destroy it, thus giving the repentant once more peace of mind and the joy of the spiritual life.²⁷

The Confession proves to be a *spiritual therapy*, from several perspectives and on several levels. Above all, the Confession of sins itself makes one free from the power of evil. By the meeting with the confessor in this Holy Mystery, the repentant finds a good opportunity of breaking the silence and getting out of his morbid isolation which does nothing else except to increase his bad condition. Talking about what troubles him, he reveals the disease torturing him invisibly on the inside.

The simple coming towards the other, the courage to open one's heart in front of the confessor with humbleness, defeating one's shame, the un pitying self-blaming for the committed sins in front of the other, the defeating of one's pride, all these represent an important step already, leading man out of the universe haunted by the disease of sin.

Therefore, we all, lay people and monks, clergy, priests and archbishops, ought to confess our sins and none of us should get away from this because we all have made mistakes and have sinned. Let us

26. Petru Rezuș, *Duhovnicie și Psihologie*, in "Glasul Bisericii", XX (1959), nr. 1-2, p. 46.

27. Orest Bucevschi, *Despre Sfânta Taină a Mărturisirii*, in "Studii teologice", XI (1959), nr. 3-4, p. 136.

not forget that our Savior and Judge is coming; accordingly, the Apostle Paul says: “We should give up the acts of darkness and take up the arms of light” and the Apostle James himself emphasizes that everybody needs to confess his sins or repent, saying: “*Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed*” (James 5:14-15).

The confessor’s act is an act of inner curing. There is no doctor above the experienced confessor, who inspires confidence through his holiness, who drives away the thoughts brought by the devil from the sensitive beings of God, who heals souls and bodies without medicine, only by the grace of God.

During the Confession, both the repentant confessing his sins and the confessor are judged, the former for the sins he confesses, and the latter for the decision he makes.

It is particularly this stage of the Confession when the confessor gives abundantly his spiritual advice that clarifies why the Holy Tradition sees the confessor as a doctor and his words as a cure for the soul. Indeed, at this moment he shows the means of cure that he uses to heal the diseases revealed to him or that he himself has discovered. Therefore, it is desirable that the confessor should know well the repentant and follow the evolution of his inner state carefully, to be able to judge correctly the situation of the repentant, and the good or bad evolution of his disease. For this reason, the Christians are advised to always confess their sins to the same priest. Essentially this advice allows every Christian to re-gain a correct thinking and living, in harmony with the will of God, reminds him of the spiritual goal he must aim at, the image of perfection that all the Christians are invited to reach, but through this advice he is also shown the ways by which he can reach it. These recommendations, essentially pragmatic, teach the Christian, for example, how to fight against a sinful tendency, how to get rid of an inclination to evil, how to defeat the sinful passion he suffers from, how to develop a certain virtue, how to overcome a certain hardship that he usually comes across or which may turn up in a circumstance or the other.

For the person who has not been christened or who, after Baptism, fell again into the disease of sin, faith is the first condition of healing.

The diseased needs not just to turn again towards Jesus Christ but also to believe in Him with all his might. Through faith, the repentant admits Him as the only doctor who can really heal his diseases and suffering: by faith, he calls Him to his rescue, by faith he has the certainty that he will receive from Him the cure of his disease and salvation.

Only by completely renouncing to sin, by renouncing to his sinful passions and by living in virtue, according to the will of God, can man show his true repentance; therefore, Saint John of the Ladder calls repentance the “reconciliation with God by tears and working the good things that are contrary to[one’s previous] sins”.²⁸

The Confession helps many people to avoid sinning; a wise confessor helps the souls to get saved. A wise confessor helps the believers, by his advice, to avoid the occasions of committing sin, to mend the damage caused, to find answers to different questions, to chase away spiritual depression and, finally, to cure and ease all the pains of the soul.

To conclude, the Holy Mystery of Confession is one of the many proofs of God’s love and kindness, since, without it, the Christians’ life would go through innumerable moral failures. It is the Holy Mystery by which, in front of the confessor, the repentant can reveal, with no reticence, the whole inside of his soul and can receive forgiveness, spiritual relief, comfort and the long desired moral reinforcement, becoming able to restore his life of grace. Because “*if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (I John 1:8-9).

Like all the other Sacraments, the Holy Mystery of Repentance offers the Christian a partial tasting of the goods of the times to come. The Holy Mystery of Repentance has in its own essence an eschatological character. Yet, we must mention that the correct meaning of this eschatology is that the mystery of the times to come does not remain only something pertaining to the future, but becomes partially present in the Church, sanctifying the Church and the world and preparing them for their final accomplishment.

28. Jean-Claude Larchet, *Terapeutica bolilor spirituale*, Ed. Sofia, București, 2001, p. 262-293.

The Confession creates an image of the angelic life and restores the innocence and freedom from sinful passion, it is the icon of the way of living in paradise and an anticipation of the eternal life in which God's chosen ones will be like the "angels" of God and, therefore, we must confess our sins, each time, with maximum responsibility, as if it were the last time.