

THE ORTHODOX EXPERIENCE OF REPENTANCE

This life has been given you for repentance. Do not waste it on other things.

St Isaac the Syrian

Repentance is a great understanding.

The Shepherd of Hermas

The starting point of the Good News

St John the Baptist and our Lord Jesus Christ both begin their preaching with exactly the same words: “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 3:2; 4:17). Such is the starting point of the Good News—repentance. Without repentance there can be no new life, no salvation, no entry into the Kingdom.

Turning from Scripture to the Fathers, we find exactly the same truth heavily underlined. Asked what he is doing in the desert, Abba Milesius replies: “I came here to weep for my sins.”¹ And this repentance is not just a preliminary stage but lifelong. As Abba Sisoës lies on his deathbed, surrounded by his disciples, he is seen to be talking with someone. “Who are you talking to, father?” the disciples ask. “See,” he replies, “the angels have come to take me and I am asking for a little more time—more time to repent.” “You have no need to repent,” say the disciples. “Truly,” the old man replies, “I am not sure whether I have even begun to repent.”² St Mark the Monk insists:

¹ *AP (The Sayings of the Desert Fathers)*, alphabetical collection, Milesius 2 (*PG* 65:297B); tr. Ward, *Sayings*, 147.

² *AP*, alphabetical collection, Sisoës 14 (396B); tr. Ward, *Sayings*, 215.

No one is so good and merciful as God, but even He does not forgive the unrepentant. . . All the wide variety of God's commandments can be reduced to the single principle of repentance. . . We are not condemned for the multitude of our transgressions, but for our refusal to repent. . . For great and small alike, repentance remains incomplete until the moment of death.³

"Our Lord Jesus Christ," states Abba Isaias of Scetis, "commanded us to go on repenting until our last breath. For if there were no repentance, nobody would be saved."⁴ And St Isaac the Syrian teaches: "During every moment of the four and twenty hours of the day we stand in need of repentance."⁵

Spiritual guides in more recent times assign an equally decisive role to repentance. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, St John of Kronstadt wrote his spiritual diary *My Life in Christ*, "Our prayer consists principally in penitence."⁶ And Father Seraphim Papakostas, head of the *Zoe* movement in Greece during the years 1927-54, begins the best known of his many works with these words:

In every age, and above all in this present deeply uneasy, tired and restless age, nothing is more essential than repentance. Often there is nothing for which we long more profoundly, but we have no clear idea what we really want.⁷

It is noteworthy that the Jesus Prayer—so much more widely practiced today than was the case fifty years ago—is specifically (although not exclusively) a prayer of repentance, especially when used in its expanded form: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner."

Bearing in mind this constant insistence on repentance, we would do well to reflect carefully on the way in which we present Orthodoxy in the contemporary West. There is a tendency to draw attention to only one aspect. We speak about the glory of the divine light at Christ's Transfiguration, about the sense of Resurrection triumph at Easter midnight; we talk of the joy of the Kingdom, of the spiritual beauty of icons, of the Divine Liturgy as an inauguration of the Age to come. And we are right to

3 *On those who think they are made righteous by works* 71 (PG 65:940D); *On repentance* 1 (964B), 6 (973C), 11 (980D).

4 *Homily* 16.12: ed. Avgoustinos, 100.

5 *Homily* 70(73): tr. Wensinck, 337; tr. Miller, 340.

6 W. Jardine Grisbrooke (ed.), *Spiritual Counsels of Father John of Kronstadt* (London: James Clarke, 1967), 118.

7 *Repentance* (Athens: Zoe Brotherhood of Theologians, 1995), 9.

emphasize these things. But let us take care not to be one-sided. The Transfiguration and the Resurrection are integrally linked with the Crucifixion. As Christians we are indeed witnesses to the "exceedingly great joy" (Mt 2:10) of the Gospel; but we must not overlook the words "*Through the Cross* joy has come to all the world" (Sunday Matins). Cosmic transfiguration can only be realized through self-denial and ascetic fasting.⁸

"A great understanding"

But what in fact is meant by repentance? It is normally regarded as sorrow for sin, a feeling of guilt, a sense of grief and horror at the wounds we have inflicted on others and on ourselves. Yet such a view is dangerously incomplete. Grief and horror are indeed frequently present in the experience of repentance, but they are not the whole of it, nor even the most important part. We come closer to the heart of the matter if we reflect on the literal sense of the Greek term for repentance, *metanoia*. This means "change of mind": not just regret for the past, but a fundamental transformation of our outlook, a new way of looking at ourselves, at others and at God—in the words of *The Shepherd* of Hermas, "a great understanding."⁹ A great understanding—but not necessarily an emotional crisis. Repentance is not a paroxysm of remorse and self-pity, but conversion, the recentering of our life upon the Holy Trinity.

As a "new mind," conversion, recentering, repentance is positive, not negative. In the words of St John Climacus, "Repentance is the daughter of hope and the denial of despair."¹⁰ It is not despondency but eager expectation; it is not to feel that one has reached an *impasse*, but to take the way out. It is not self-hatred but the affirmation of my true self as made in God's image. To repent is to look, not downward at my own shortcomings, but upward at God's love; not backward with self-reproach, but forward with trustfulness. It is to see, not what I have failed to be, but what by the grace of Christ I can yet become.

8 This point is well made by Archimandrite Lev Gillet, "Looking unto the Crucified Lord," *Sobornost* 3:13 (1953), 24-33. His words of caution are as timely now as when they were written nearly half a century ago.

9 *Mandate* 4.2.2; cf. Thomas Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996), 17.

10 *Ladder* 5 (PG 88:764B); tr. Luibheid and Russell, 121.

When interpreted in this positive sense, repentance is seen to be not just a single act but a continuing attitude. In the personal experience of each person there are decisive moments of conversion, but throughout this present life the work of repenting remains always incomplete. The turning or recentering must be constantly renewed; up to the moment of death, as Abba Sisoës realized, the “change of mind” must become always more radical, the “great understanding” always more profound. In the words of St Theophan the Recluse, “Repentance is the starting point and foundation stone of our new life in Christ; and it must be present not only at the beginning but throughout our growth in this life, increasing as we advance.”¹¹

The positive character of repentance is clearly apparent if we consider what comes just before the words of Christ already quoted, “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.” In the preceding verse the Evangelist cites Isaiah 9:2, “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them has the light shone.” Such is the immediate context of our Lord’s command to repent: it is directly preceded by a reference to “great light” shining on those in darkness, and directly followed by a reference to the imminence of the Kingdom. Repentance, then, is an illumination, a transition from darkness to light; to repent is to open our eyes to the divine radiance—not to sit dolefully in the twilight but to greet the dawn. And repentance is also eschatological, an openness to the Last Things that are not merely in the future but already present; to repent is to recognize that the Kingdom of heaven is in our midst, at work among us, and that if we will only accept the coming of this Kingdom all things will be made new for us.

The connection between repentance and the advent of the great light is particularly significant. Until we have seen the light of Christ, we cannot really see our sins. So long as a room is in darkness, observes St Theophan the Recluse, we do not notice the dirt; but when we bring a powerful light into the room—when, that is, we stand before the Lord in our heart—we can distinguish every speck of dust.¹² So it is with the room

11 Quoted in Ighumen Chariton of Valamo (ed.), *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology* (London: Faber, 1966), 226.

12 See Ighumen Chariton, *The Art of Prayer*, 182.

of our soul. The sequence is not to repent first, and then to become aware of Christ; for it is only when the light of Christ has already in some measure entered our life that we begin truly to understand our sinfulness. To repent, says St John of Kronstadt, is to know that there is a lie in our heart;¹³ but how can we detect the presence of a lie unless we have already some sense of the truth? In the words of E. I. Watkin, “Sin...is the shadow cast by the light of God intercepted by any attachment of the will which prevents it illuminating the soul. Thus knowledge of God gives rise to the sense of sin, not vice versa.”¹⁴ As the Desert Fathers observe, “The closer we come to God, the more we see that we are sinners.”¹⁵ And they cite Isaiah as an example of this: first he sees the Lord on His throne and hears the seraphim crying “Holy, holy, holy;” and it is only after this vision that he exclaims, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips” (Is 6:1-5).

Such, then, is the beginning of repentance: a vision of beauty, not of ugliness; an awareness of God’s glory, not of my own squalor. “Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Mt 5:4): repentance signifies not merely mourning for our sins, but the “comfort” or “consolation” (*paraklesis*) that comes from the assurance of God’s forgiveness. The “great understanding” or “change of mind” signified by repentance consists precisely in this: in recognizing that the light shines in the darkness, and that the darkness does not swallow it up (Jn 1:5). To repent, in other words, is to recognize that there is good as well as evil, love as well as hatred; and it is to affirm that the good is stronger, to believe in the final victory of love. The repentant person is the one who accepts the miracle that God does indeed have power to forgive sins. And, once we accept this miracle, for us the past is then no longer an intolerable burden, for we no longer see the past as irreversible. Divine forgiveness breaks the chain of cause and effect, and unties the knots in our hearts which by ourselves we are not able to unloose.

There are many who feel sorrow for their past acts, but who say in their despair, “I cannot forgive myself for what I have done.” Unable to

13 See Grisbrooke, *Spiritual Counsels*, 116.

14 “The Mysticism of St. Augustine,” in M. C. D’Arcy et al., *A Monument to St. Augustine* (New York: Lincoln MacVeagh, Dial Press, 1930), 108.

15 AP, alphabetical collection, Matoes 2 (289c); tr. Ward, *Sayings*, 143.

forgive themselves, they are equally incapable of believing that they are forgiven by God, and likewise by other human beings. Such people, despite the intensity of their anguish, have not yet properly repented. They have not yet attained the “great understanding” whereby a person knows that love is ultimately victorious. They have not yet undergone the “change of mind” that consists in saying: I am accepted by God; and what is asked of me is *to accept the fact that I am accepted*. That is the essence of repentance.

The Lenten springtime

The true nature of repentance will become clearer if we consider three characteristic expressions of repentance in the Church’s life: first, and very briefly, the liturgical expression of repentance in the season of Lent; then, in more detail, its sacramental expression in Confession; and finally its personal expression in the gift of tears. In all three cases the positive, light-giving nature of repentance is strongly evident.

First, with regard to Lent, let us note the time of year in which it occurs: not in autumn, amidst the fog and falling leaves; not in winter, when the earth is dead and frozen; but in spring, when the frosts are ending, the days are growing longer, and the whole countryside returns to life. In the words of the *Triodion*:

The springtime of the Fast has dawned, the flower of repentance has begun to open. O brethren, let us cleanse ourselves from all impurity, and sing to the Giver of Light: Glory be to Thee, who alone lovest mankind.¹⁶

The Lenten season of repentance is a time of gladness, not of despondency: the Fast is a spiritual springtime, repentance is an opening flower, and Christ is made known to us in Lent as “Giver of light.” The sorrow that we feel in Lent is a “joy-creating sorrow,” to use the phrase of St John Climacus.¹⁷

16 *Sticheron* at Vespers, Wednesday in the Week before Lent (“Cheese Week”). For further discussion of the spiritual significance of the Lenten fast, see Kallistos Ware, introduction to *The Lenten Triodion*, 13-28; and also, by the same author, “Lent and the Consumer Society,” in Andrew Walker and Costa Carras (eds.), *Living Orthodoxy* (London: SPCK, 1996), 64-84.

17 *Charopoion penthos, charmolype. Ladder 7* (PG 88:801C, 804B); tr. Luibheid and Russell, 137.

The sacrament of repentance

The experience of repentance is felt with especial force in the sacrament of Confession. The meaning of this “mystery” may be found summed up in the short exhortation addressed by the priest to the penitent in the Russian rite (the italics are my own):

Behold, my child, *Christ stands here invisibly and receives your confession*: therefore, do not be ashamed or afraid, and hide nothing from me; but tell me without hesitation all the things that you have done, *and so you will have pardon from our Lord Jesus Christ*. See, His holy icon is before us; and *I am only a witness*, bearing testimony before Him of all the things you have to say to me. But if you hide anything from me, you will have greater sin. Take care, then, lest *having come to the physician’s* you depart unhealed.¹⁸

Paraphrasing this exhortation, St Tikhon of Zadonsk writes (once more, my own italics):

When giving instruction on the sacrament of Repentance, the priest should speak to the penitent in this manner: My child, you are confessing to God, who is displeased at any sin; and I, His servant, am the unworthy witness of your repentance. Do not conceal anything, do not be ashamed or afraid, *for there are only three of us here, you and I and God*. It is before God that you have sinned, and He knows all your sins and how they were committed. God is everywhere, and wherever you said, thought, or did anything evil, He was there and knew all about it; and He is here with us now, and is waiting for your words of repentance and confession. You too know all your sins: do not be ashamed to speak of all that you have committed. And *I who am here, am a sinner just like you*; so then, do not be ashamed to confess your sins in my presence.¹⁹

“Having come to the physician’s,” says the priest; alternatively, we might use the translation, “having come to the house of the Physician.” In Confession, that is to say, we are to see Christ the Judge lifting from us the

18 For the Orthodox order of Confession, both Greek and Russian, see *A Manual of Eastern Orthodox Prayers*, published for the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius (London: SPCK, 1945), 51-60; the passage cited occurs on 58-59. Compare *The Great Book of Needs*, vol. I (South Canaan, PA: St Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 1998), 127; Paul N. Harrilchak, *Confession with Examination of Conscience and Common Prayers* (Reston, VA: Holy Trinity Church, 1996), 163. For a helpful introductory discussion of the sacrament of Confession, see John Chrysavgis, *Repentance and Confession in the Orthodox Church* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1990).

19 Cited in Nadejda Gorodetzky, *Saint Tikhon Zadonsky* (London: SPCK, 1951), 126-27.

sentence of condemnation; but also, and more fundamentally, we are to see Christ the Physician, restoring what is broken and renewing life. The sacrament is to be envisaged not primarily in juridical but in therapeutic terms. Above all it is a *sacrament of healing*. It is significant that in some of the Byzantine liturgical commentaries Confession and the Anointing of the Sick are treated not as two distinct sacraments but as complementary aspects of a single “mystery” of healing. What we seek in Confession is much more than an external, forensic absolution; above all we desire noetic medicine for our chronic spiritual wounds. Indeed, what we bring before Christ is not just specific sins but also the fact of deep sinfulness within us—the profound corruption that cannot be fully expressed in words, that seems to elude our conscious brain and will. It is of this, above all else, that we ask to be cured. And as a sacrament of healing, Confession is not simply a painful necessity, a discipline imposed on us by church authority, but an action full of joy and saving grace. Through Confession we learn that God is in full reality “the hope of the hopeless” (The Liturgy of St Basil).

“There are only three of us here”—priest, penitent and Christ the Physician. What does each of these three do, and whose action is the most important? Many people tend to put the greatest emphasis on what the *priest* does, on his words of counsel and encouragement; and if the priest fails to say anything eloquent or unexpected, they tend to assume that little or nothing has been achieved. Or else they overstress the second aspect, what *they themselves* are doing. They imagine that they must be deeply stirred on an emotional level—even though, as we have said, repentance is not primarily a matter of the emotions. And because they put the main emphasis on their own efforts, they are in danger of regarding Confession in bleak and discouraging terms, as something to be got over and done with, necessary yet disagreeable, like a cold bath. But in reality the most important action is not that of penitent or priest, but that of *God*. While the penitent is required to prepare himself by self-examination and to conduct a searching scrutiny of his conscience, in the last resort he comes to Confession empty-handed, helpless, not claiming to be able to heal himself, but asking for healing from another. And this other whose help he invokes is not the priest but God. The priest is simply a witness, bearing testimony before God of what we have to say. To vary the

analogy, he is no more than “God’s usher,” introducing us into the divine Presence; he is merely the receptionist in the hospital waiting room or the attendant in the operating theatre, whereas the surgeon is Christ Himself. It is to Christ, not to the priest, that the confession is made (“Christ stands here invisibly and receives your confession”); and it is from Christ, not from the priest, that the forgiveness comes (“so you will have pardon from our Lord Jesus Christ”).

Once we regard Confession as fundamentally Christ’s action rather than our own, then we shall begin to understand the sacrament of repentance in a far more positive way. It is an experience of God’s healing love and pardon, not merely of our own disintegration and weakness. We are to see, not just the prodigal son, plodding slowly and painfully upon the long road home, but also the father, catching sight of him when he is still a long way off and running out to meet him (Lk 15:20).²⁰ As Tito Colliander puts it, “If we take one step toward the Lord, He takes ten toward us.”²¹ That is precisely what we experience in Confession. In common with all the sacraments, Confession involves a joint divine-human action, in which there is found a convergence and “cooperation” (*synergeia*) between God’s grace and our free will. Both are necessary; but what God does is incomparably the more important.

Repentance and confession, then, are not just something that we do by ourselves or with the help of the priest, but above all something that God is doing with and in both of us. In the words of St John Chrysostom, “Let us apply to ourselves the saving remedy (*pharmakon*) of repentance; let us accept from God the repentance that heals us. For it is not we who offer it to Him, but He who bestows it upon us.”²² It should be remembered that in Greek the same word *exomologesis* means both confession of sins and thanksgiving for gifts received.

What, more specifically, is the part of the priest in this shared action? From one point of view his power is very wide-ranging. All who have experienced the blessing of having as their confessor one imbued with the

²⁰ See also Lk 15:28, where the father once more goes out, this time to speak to the elder brother who will not come into the feast. This double going out of the father is one of the most important points in the parable.

²¹ *The Way of the Ascetics* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960), 74.

²² *On repentance* 7.3 (PG 49:327).

grace of true spiritual fatherhood (*starchestvo*) will testify to the importance of the priest's role. Nor is his function simply to give advice. There is nothing automatic about the absolution which he pronounces. He can bind as well as loose. He can withhold absolution—although this is very rare—or he can impose a penance (*epitimion*), forbidding the penitent to receive Communion for a time or requiring the fulfillment of some task. This, again, is not very common in contemporary Orthodox practice, but it is important to remember that the priest possesses this right.

In the ancient Church penances were often severe. For fornication (*porneia*, i.e., sexual intercourse between unmarried persons) St Basil the Great enjoins seven years of exclusion from Holy Communion, and St Gregory of Nyssa nine years; in the later canonical legislation attributed to St John the Faster, this is reduced to two years, with rigorous fasting. For adultery (*moicheia*) the penances are more severe. For involuntary manslaughter—for instance (to give a contemporary example), killing someone in a car accident—Basil prescribes ten or eleven years' deprivation of Communion, Gregory of Nyssa nine years; if the penitent fasts strictly, John the Faster allows this to be reduced to three years. Parents who allow their child to die unbaptized are deprived of Communion for three years.

Even in early times there existed, of course, the possibility for the bishop or confessor-priest to modify these penances, applying "economy" (*oikonomia*) or pastoral flexibility according to the particular situation of each person. Today it would be altogether exceptional for the canons to be enforced in their full rigor; a broad measure of "economy" is normal. But in principle the confessor-priest still retains the power to decide how he should act; he is responsible before God for the manner in which he administers the sacrament, and he can at his own discretion impose a penance, involving if need be a lengthy period of exclusion from Holy Communion.

Not that the penance should be regarded as a punishment; still less should it be viewed as a way of expiating an offence. Salvation is a free gift of grace. By our own efforts we can never wipe out our guilt; Christ the one mediator is our only atonement, and either we are freely forgiven by Him, or else we are not forgiven at all. We do not acquire "merit" by fulfilling a penance, for in our relation to God we can never claim any merit of our own. Here, as always, we should think primarily in therapeutic rather than juridical terms. A penance is not a punishment, nor yet a

form of expiation, but a means of healing. It is a *pharmakon* or medicine. If the actual Confession is like an operation, the penance is the tonic that restores the patient to health during his convalescence. The penance, therefore, in common with the whole act of Confession, is essentially positive in its purpose; it does not set up a barrier between the sinner and God, but serves as a bridge between the two. "Behold the goodness and the severity of God" (Rom 11:22); the penance is an expression not of divine severity alone but equally of divine love.

Entrusted with authority to bind and to loose, to withhold or to confer absolution, enjoying wide discretion as to the advice that he gives and the healing penance that he chooses, the confessor-priest has laid upon him a heavy responsibility. And yet his role is also limited. The confession, as we have already insisted, is made to God, not to the priest; and it is God who grants forgiveness. "I am only a witness," says the priest; and, still more explicitly in St Tikhon's paraphrase, "I am a sinner just like you." If at the moment of absolution, when laying his hand on the penitent's head, the priest stands to a certain degree in God's place, yet during the earlier part of the sacramental action he stands at the penitent's side, as himself a fellow-penitent, "a sinner just like you," who also needs divine forgiveness. There is, indeed, a two-way relationship between the priest and the one who is making the confession; the spiritual father is helped by his children, as well as they by him. The confessor-priest has also to go in his turn to Confession; and, when he does so, it is usual for him to remove the priestly cross from round his neck.

The priest's role as witness and fellow-penitent is clearly indicated in the outward setting of the sacrament. In some parts of the Orthodox Church, as in the Roman Catholic and Anglican practice, the priest sits while the penitent kneels. But most Orthodox confessor-priests prefer to avoid such an arrangement, for it might seem to suggest that the priest is judge rather than witness. More commonly in the Orthodox Church, during the opening prayers at the start of Confession, the penitent stands facing the icon of Christ or the Book of the Gospels, while the priest stands to one side. Then, for the actual confession of sins, they may both sit (Greek practice) or both remain standing (Russian practice): in either case, both do the same and are placed as it were on an equal footing. If, as occasionally happens, the penitent kneels and the priest remains standing, the priest will

need to bow down in order to hear what is said; and this gesture also has its own significance. During the concluding absolution the penitent bows his head, or else kneels—not, however, in the direction of the priest but before the icon or the Book of the Gospels, symbolizing the invisible presence of Christ, who alone has power to remit sins. The prayer of absolution makes it clear beyond all doubt that it is Christ, not the priest, who confers forgiveness. In the more ancient form, still employed by the Greeks,²³ the priest does not say “I forgive you” but “May God forgive you.” In the seventeenth century, under Roman Catholic influence, this was changed in the Slavonic books to the first person, “I, an unworthy priest, through the power given to me by Him, forgive you. . .”; however, this should be seen as an unfortunate distortion, for in no other sacrament of the Orthodox Church does the celebrant use the personal pronoun “I” in the act of administration. The older tradition is reflected in the custom of mutual forgiveness still observed by the Russians and by other Orthodox before receiving Communion. One member of the laity—or the clergy—says to another, “Forgive me,” and the other replies, “God will forgive.”

The healing that we experience through the sacrament of Confession takes the more specific form of *reconciliation*. This is stressed in several of the prayers of absolution: “Do not separate him [her] from Thy Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, but unite him [her] to the pure flock of Thy sheep” (Greek use); “Reconcile and unite him [her] to Thy Holy Church” (Russian use). Sin, as we learn from the parable of the prodigal son, is exile, alienation, exclusion from the family—more exactly, self-exclusion; in the words of Alexis Khomiakov, “When any one of us falls, he falls alone.”²⁴ Repentance is to come back home, to return from isolation to fellowship, to be reintegrated in the family, to share once more in the life of the community.

23 There is in fact a variety of absolution prayers in the Greek *Euchologion*, the priest being left free to use one or more at his discretion.

24 “The Church is One,” in Birkbeck (ed.), *Russia and the English Church*, 216. But, from a different viewpoint, there are of course no private sins; when we fall we always drag others down with us.

The gift of tears

The gift of tears, prominent in the contemporary charismatic movement, has also an important place in the spiritual tradition of the Christian East.²⁵ The “theology of tears” plays a particularly significant role in the teaching of St John Climacus, St Isaac the Syrian, and St Symeon the New Theologian. For Climacus, tears represent a renewal of the grace of Baptism:

The fountain of tears after Baptism is greater than Baptism itself, although this may seem a bold thing to say. . . Our first Baptism we received as babies, but we have all polluted it; through tears we regain the purity of our first Baptism.²⁶

St Isaac regards tears as the crucial boundary between the “bodily” and the “spiritual state,” as the point of transition between the present age and the Age to come, which may be entered by anticipation even in this life. The newborn child weeps as it is born into the world; similarly, the Christian weeps as he is reborn into the age to come.²⁷ St Symeon insists that we should never receive Communion without shedding tears.²⁸ And according to Symeon’s disciple, Nicetas Stethatos, tears can even restore lost virginity.²⁹

What has this gift of tears to teach us about the meaning of repentance? There are many kinds of tears, and it is important to discriminate between them. The crucial distinction lies between sensual or natural tears and spiritual tears (there is also a third possibility: tears may be demonic). Sensual tears are emotional; spiritual tears are ascetic. In the case of sensual tears the face is often contorted and flushed, and the whole body may shake with uncontrollable sobbing; but in the case of spiritual weeping the tears flow

25 The basic modern study on the subject is still Irénée Hausherr, *Penthos. La doctrine de la componction dans l’Orient chrétien*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 132 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1944); English translation, *Penthos. The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East*, *Cistercian Studies Series* 53 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1982). See also M. Lot-Borodine, “Le mystère du don des larmes dans l’Orient chrétien,” *La Vie Spirituelle* (supplement for September 1936), reprinted in Olivier Clément and others, *La douloureuse joie*, *Spiritualité orientale* 14 (Bégrolles: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1974), 131-95; Lev Gillet, “The Gift of Tears,” *Sobornost* n.s. 12 (1937), 5-10; G. A. Maloney, *The Mystic of Fire and Light: St. Symeon the New Theologian* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1975), 129-37.

26 *Ladder* 7 (PG 88:804AB); tr. Luijheid and Russell, 137.

27 *Homilies* 14 and 35(37); tr. Wensinck, 85-86, 164-65; Miller, 82-83, 174-75. Quoted in Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (revised edition, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 101.

28 *Discourse* 4; ed. Krivochéine, 1:314; tr. deCatanzaro, 70.

29 *Century* 2.50 (PG 120:924B); tr. *Philokalia*, 4:120-1.

gently and peacefully, without facial contortion or bodily shuddering. Sensual tears are usually bound up with the passions; they are often the result of anger, frustration, envy, self-pity, or simply nervous excitement. Spiritual tears, as their name indicates, are a gift of grace from God the Holy Spirit, not just the result of our own efforts, and they are closely linked to our prayer. Sensual tears express our earthly sadness, living as we do in a fallen world of corruption that is moving relentlessly towards death; spiritual tears lead us to the new life of the Resurrection.

It would be misleading, however, to make a radical and clear-cut division between these two types of tears. Natural or sensual tears may sometimes have a positive and purifying effect, as when we weep out of loving compassion for the suffering of others, or when we mourn for the dead.³⁰ Grace cooperates with nature and builds upon it; and so natural tears, when purged of sinful self-centeredness and of disordered emotionalism, can lead us to the threshold of spiritual weeping. Moreover, because grace often works within us in a secret and unnoticed manner, we ourselves may not always be aware whether our tears are natural or spiritual. To keep us in simplicity God may hide our spiritual progress from us, and it is not for us to measure ourselves. Nonetheless there is in principle an important distinction to be made between the levels of sensual and of grace-given weeping, even if in practice the two may sometimes overlap.

Spiritual tears, so the Fathers teach, are of two main types. On the lower level they are bitter; on the higher level, sweet. On the lower level they are a form of purification; on the higher level, of illumination. On the lower level they express contrition, sorrow for sin, grief at our separation from God—Adam lamenting outside the gates of Paradise;³¹ on the higher level they express joy at God's love, thanksgiving at our undeserved restoration to sonship. The lower level is exemplified by the prodigal, still in exile, weeping for his lost homeland; the higher level, by the prodigal weeping for joy at the feast in the father's house. On the lower level tears are like "blood from the wounds in our soul," to use a phrase of St Greg-

30 On the value of tears shed for the departed and the danger of repressing our grief, see above, 32.

31 See the *kontakion* and *ikos* for the Sunday of Forgiveness (the Sunday before Lent), in *The Lenten Triodion*, 175; also the moving prose-poem by St Silouan, in Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite* (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1991), 448-56.

ory of Nyssa;³² on the higher level, they signify the spiritualizing of the senses, and form an aspect of the total transfiguration of the human person by deifying grace.

Yet, as with the distinction between natural and spiritual weeping, so here with the two levels of spiritual tears, we must be on our guard against making too emphatic a contrast. The one level of spiritual tears leads gradually into the other. What begin as tears of sorrow for sin are changed by degrees into tears of gratitude and gladness. And so, in this gift of tears, we see illustrated yet again the point on which we have constantly insisted: that repentance is not negative but positive, not destructive but life-giving, not despondent but full of hope.

Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing

Such, then, is our experience of the "great understanding" or "change of mind" designated by the word repentance. Filled with grief yet at the same time filled with joy, repentance expresses the creative tension found at all times in the Christian life on this earth, and described with such vividness by St Paul: "...always carrying in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body...dying, and behold we live...sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor 4:10; 6:9-10). As a life of continual repentance, our Christian discipleship is a sharing at one and the same time in Gethsemane and the Transfiguration, in the Cross and the Resurrection. St John Climacus sums the matter up by saying: "If you put on blessed and grace-filled mourning as a wedding robe, you will know the spiritual laughter of the soul."³³

32 *Funeral Oration on the Empress Flacilla*: ed. Spira, 477.

33 *Ladder 7* (PG 88:809A); tr. Luiheid and Russell, 140.