

REPENTANCE: Some Questions and Thoughts

Based on the book, *The Path to Salvation*, by Saint Theophan the Recluse

The first two Sundays of *The Triodion*, which precede Great Lent, the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee and the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, both emphasize the theme of repentance. This is to help us get in the proper frame of mind and spiritually prepare for the work of purifying our souls and bodies during the Fast.

What is the Triodion? *The Triodion* is the service book that we use beginning three weeks before Great Lent and ending with the Midnight Service right before the Paschal Matins. Its name is derived from the fact that on weekdays during Great Lent the canon in Matins has only three odes instead of eight.

Great Lent has been likened to a hospital where we come to be cured of our spiritual illnesses. Unfortunately, during most of the year, especially if we are physically well, we tend to forget that we have spiritual illnesses that need curing. If we don't constantly examine ourselves and frequently confess and receive the Holy Mysteries (which are our spiritual medicine), we begin to feel self-satisfied, or we just push the niggling feeling that things are not quite right into the back of our minds and continue to live as before.

Great Lent reminds us that in order to meet our Saviour's glorious Resurrection in a holy manner, we must begin to draw close to Him again, to purify ourselves, and to attempt to make lasting changes in our lives.

How do we do this when we feel we have been in a spiritual rut for a long time? St. Theophan says we must resolve to abandon sin and begin a life pleasing to God. There is no time to lose, so stand up, make the sign of the Cross, and say, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." Then make a prostration, and with fervor and sincerity, tell our Saviour of your resolve, and, because we are weak and can do nothing on our own, ask for His help. We ourselves are nothing. Our sins come from our yielding to the temptations of the evil one, and anything good comes through the grace of God. Without Him we can do nothing good. In this effort we are about to undertake, our Saviour is our partner.

The next thing is to discuss our resolve with our spiritual father and to follow his advice. We can ask him if what we have in mind is a good idea, and he will likely agree, but let us be sure to do nothing contrary to what he thinks is best for us.

Now we are ready to begin. In order to abandon sin, we must first recognize our own sinfulness. Many people outside the Church, especially Protestants and those with no faith at all, have no concept of sin. God has given them a conscience, and they may follow certain natural laws, but beyond these they feel that what they do is fine. At least those of us in the Church know what sin is.

But what do we do if we think that we're doing OK? This is when we should worry. We know we are supposed to call ourselves sinful people and to ask for God's mercy, but why? The root of all sin is self-love, and this is a result of the Fall. In most aspects of our lives we do what we want to do and what pleases us, and the evil one encourages this way of living. But God tells

us to be perfect, and in this regard there is a huge gulf between Him and us. If we think of it in this way, we begin to realize that we are sinful people, who fall terribly short of what God wants for us, but because sin coarsens our heart, we can coldly observe our own sinfulness without recognizing our sins and the depth of them.

How do we recognize our sins? St. John of the Ladder says that our sins are more numerous than the sands of the sea, and those holy men of God who have abandoned all thought of self and in whom God lives, still say that they are the worst of sinners. St. Theophan says that sin hides itself under many coverings, *i.e.*, self-deception, carelessness, worldly cares, scattered thoughts, and the needs of the body. We must ask for God's grace in tearing aside these coverings, and we can begin with the last. We can refuse to indulge the delights of the body, and this is where the fast is a great help to us. Then we must get rid of worldly cares as much as possible—simplify our life, if we can, by omitting entertainments, worldly gatherings, unnecessary commitments, etc. But when cares are gone, there is still a whirlwind of thoughts in our head, so endeavor to calm them by seeking solitude; stop being careless, and pray that your spiritual blindness toward your sins will be lifted.

Begin to critically review your life with strict and impartial judgment. Consider not only deeds done, but those that should have been done; look at your motivations as well as your feelings and thoughts. Place the law of God on one side and your life on the other and compare. Recall all of your obligations towards God, your neighbor, and yourself, and examine your life with regard to these. Go through the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes and consider all their applications, and compare them with how you lead your life. Or read the chapters in the Gospel of St. Matthew where our Saviour sets down the law of the Christian life; also the Epistle of the Apostle James, what St. Paul has to say in Chapter 12 of the Epistle to the Romans and Chapter 4 of the Epistle to the Ephesians. The spirit of the Christian life is also strongly expressed in the first epistle of St. John the Theologian. Finally, read the prayers before Communion and check your own behavior according to how a Christian should act as expressed there.

After this, when you have collected a multitude of sins and made a list, take time also to consider the disposition of heart that lies behind your deeds, feelings, and thoughts. In this way you will discover the sinful tendencies in your character and the nature of your heart.

What do I do next, and how do I avoid discouragement? Refuse to be discouraged, for this is pride. Know that all things are possible with God, and He is eager to help now that you have taken this step. In fact, in response to your one small step, He will take ten great steps to help you.

So now you have a list, and the next thing to do is to arouse in yourself a sincere feeling of repentance. When we are far from God, this does not always come of itself. The best way is through self-reproach. Place yourself alone with your conscience before God and take each thing on the list separately. Reveal that you knew you shouldn't have done that thing or had that thought, but you did it anyway because you wanted to. Do this with every item on the list. If you find you are attempting to justify yourself, repent of that also. Do not listen when your sinful heart makes excuses. Reproach yourself for each wrong thing, and as you do this, you will begin to feel the weight of your sins. You will view them not only from without, but from within, and, as you call yourself miserable and sinful, repentance will be born in you. Feelings of shame,

regret, distress, fear, and pain are good, for they are the foundation of our future correction. In this frame of mind you will find yourself resolving to begin again and lead a life pleasing to God.

The Mystery of Confession. You are now prepared to confess all the sins you have discovered, to receive forgiveness for them, and to open the door within yourself to grace. This is where the drowning man reaches for the Cross as a lifeline to save himself from perishing. For through the power of our Saviour's death on the Cross, all our sins have been destroyed, and this happens over and over again in the Mystery of Confession and absolution. Tell everything to your confessor without holding anything back, and make a commitment not to repeat these sins. Let the shame come, for it is good. And afterwards, as the priest pronounces the absolution, the Comforter will come to you. Streams of grace will pour into your heart and fill it with joy. All that remains now is to fall down before God in thanksgiving. Kiss the Cross, the Gospel, or the icon as a sign of your promise not to sin again. Then, in the future, endeavor to maintain a spirit of contrition and constant repentance.

Until Holy Communion. Holy Communion is the medicine you need to carry out your resolve to refrain from sin. Between confession and Communion it is important to preserve the frame of mind that you had after confession. Keep your attention undistracted and your heart undisturbed, and approach with fear, trembling, and love.