

3. Repentance

- 780 Christ, the Good Shepherd, who came to find the "lost sheep," calls all to repentance: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (4:17). Without repentance, there can be neither salvation nor new life. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Christ reveals the essence of repentance as a return to the Father and the acceptance of his gift of forgiveness. In repentance, we come to know God as a loving and merciful Father. He accepts repentant sinners and rejoices at their conversion "for he is good and loves mankind."⁴⁹¹
- 781 Repentance allows a Christian not only to experience God as a merciful Father, but to rediscover oneself in God's embrace—to see oneself as the son who returned from the foreign land of sin to the Father's home of righteousness. On the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, the Church sings: As the Prodigal Son I come to you, merciful God. I have wasted my whole life in a foreign land; I have scattered the wealth which you gave me, O Father. Receive me in repentance, O God, and have mercy on me."⁴⁹²
- 782 Repentance forms the foundation of Christian spirituality, since all movement toward God, inaugurated by him and suggested by his grace, is characterized by repentance. "The beginning of this movement is a fundamental interior change (conversion) which brings about a new way of seeing oneself; others, and the Lord God. The goal of this movement is liberation from sin and a return to the fullness of life in God, During Matins on the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee we sing: "Open to me the doors of repentance, O Giver of life. As we worship in your temple this morning, teach us how to purify the temples of our bodies, and in your compassion, purify me by the goodness of your mercies."⁴⁹³
- 783 Repentance has a positive character—it is liberating and life-creating rather than demeaning. It is the force of renewal and rebirth, the fruit of hope, and the negation of despair. This is so because repentance is not looking down at one's own faults but looking up towards the Lord's love; not backwards with self-reproach, but forward with faith. One must focus not on what one has failed to achieve, but on that which, with the mercy of Christ, one may still become. Repentance is a continuous path toward personal healing and growth. Saint John Climacus teaches:

⁴⁹¹ Liturgicon, "The Divine Liturgy of our Holy Father John Chrysostom, Dismissal.

⁴⁹² Lenten Triodion, Sunday of the Prodigal Son, Vespers, Stichera at Psalm 140.

⁴⁹³ Lenten Triodion, Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee, Matins, Penitential Stichera after Psalm 50.

the person turning away from the world in order to shake off the burden of his or her sins should imitate those who sit outside the tombs in the city. Let this person not desist from ardent raging tears, from the wordless moans of the heart, until this person sees Jesus himself, coming to roll back the rock of hardness off them.⁴⁹⁴

It is precisely for this kind of constant transfiguring of our lives in repentance that we pray during divine services: "that we may spend the rest of our lives in peace and repentance, let us ask the Lord."⁴⁹⁵

784 Thus, repentance is enlightenment, the crossing from darkness to light. Until we see the light of Christ, we will not be able to recognize our own sins. The closer we come to God, the more clearly we see how sinful we are. The light of Christ illumines us and leads us to repentance, to a vision of beauty rather than deformity, to an awareness of God's glory rather than of our own destitution.

D. Spiritual Combat in the Life of the Christian

785 From the moment of one's Baptism, every Christian enters into spiritual combat. There we die to sin, in order to live for God. This battle, as the apostle Paul teaches, is not about wrestling "... against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). The Christian engages in spiritual warfare by being armed with prayer, fasting, and almsgiving; we thus cleanse our thoughts and achieving dispassion. Saint John Cassian teaches that spiritual combat helps a person achieve perfection: "This battle is in accordance with the will of God. It serves human good and awakens in a person ardent striving for greater perfection."⁴⁹⁶

1. Fasting and Almsgiving

786 Christians have fasted since ancient times. It was and is a way of imitating the forty-day fast of Christ during which he fought the devil's temptations and overcame them. Fasting as a means of spiritual combat was further developed by monastics, who saw it as a means of achieving purity of heart. Fasting takes hold of the entire being: the body through restraint in food and drink, and the soul through restraint of the passions. Saint John Chrysostom teaches: "Do you not eat flesh? Feed not

⁴⁹⁴ JOHN CLIMACUS, the Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 1: PG 88, 633.

⁴⁹⁵ Liturgicon, The Divine Liturgy of our Holy Father John Chrysostom, Litany of Supplication.

⁴⁹⁶ JOHN CASSIAN, Conferences, 18, 13.