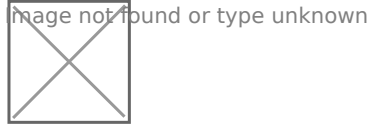


Confession: The sacrament of repentance and reconciliation (Vassilios Papavassiliou)

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Few would argue against the statement that the Sacrament of Confession is on the decline in the Greek Orthodox Church. While it is not my intention here to explain the reasons for it, one could speculate that this decline is due to the morally and spiritually lax standards of our modern society to which we have become accustomed. Perhaps sins which in the past would have given rise to a sense of regret and a desire to be forgiven no longer do so in our society. This is not to say that the Sacrament of Confession is irrelevant in modern society which is full of sinners. I am not saying that I mean by this is that the Sacrament of Confession is not needed for any 'middle-man'.



Confession is the most common term for the sacrament in question, but it is also (perhaps more correctly) known as 'The Sacrament of Repentance and Reconciliation'. I think that this better sums up the nature of Confession, and reveals something of its original purpose. The Sacrament of Confession was originally and still is a sacrament by which those who have been ex-communicated (not necessarily formerly, but have committed sins which have made it impossible to participate in Holy Communion) are reconciled to the Church and brought back into communion with the Body of Christ.

The second century Christian work, 'The Shepherd of Hermas', informs us that only one Confession was permitted after baptism: "Whoever is tempted by the devil and sins after that great and reverent calling (baptism) has one repentance. But if he should sin and repent repeatedly it is of no benefit to him". [1]

As Christians became less strict and rigid in their spiritual and moral life, Confession became more frequent. Later, the practice of spiritual counselling in the monastic life came to influence the Sacrament of Confession in our parishes also. The monk's progress in the ascetic life was aided by the continuous guidance of the spiritual father, who was usually the abbot. The spiritual father himself was not necessarily an ordained priest, [2] and so the spiritual father was not always able to provide sacramental absolution, but he would hear the monk's sins and struggles and advise him accordingly. And then, if it was deemed necessary, a monk who was an ordained priest, if the spiritual father was not one, would grant the monk sacramental absolution with the spiritual father's approval.

As a result, Confession has taken on this double character of sacramental absolution and spiritual counselling. Confession, therefore, should not be seen purely in terms of confessing sins and receiving forgiveness, but also in terms of spiritual development. We often find ourselves committing and confessing the same sins again and again, and so we need help to overcome our sins and passions, as well as advice in regards to dealing with spiritual and moral dilemmas and other difficult situations erected by our modern life-styles. It is therefore particularly beneficial for anyone who takes the spiritual life seriously to have a confessor who is capable of acting also as a spiritual father, a mentor or guide, who will help him to progress in the spiritual life. This is just as important for the clergy as it is for the laity. The clergy are often dealing with a variety of problems and challenges relating not only to their own spiritual life, but also to their ministry. It is important for a priest, however experienced or knowledgeable, to have another priest to refer to and confess to.

Of course the spiritual father of the clergy and of all his flock, including even the monasteries under his jurisdiction, is the bishop. It is worth noting however that, before the ordination of a man to the diaconate, the bishop requires a letter signed by the spiritual father (the 'symartyria') stating that the spiritual father has examined the candidate and has found him fit for ordination. This is a good indication that it is perfectly normal for priests to act as spiritual fathers under the authority of the bishop, just as in monasteries monks other than the abbot can act as spiritual fathers with the abbot's permission.

(To be continued)

1 The Shepherd of Hermas, from *The Apostolic Fathers*, translated by Bart D. Erhman. Loeb Classical Library, 2003.

2 The Orthodox Church has its spiritual mothers as well as fathers. Abbesses and other experienced nuns can act as 'spiritual fathers' not only to other women, but also to men.