

The Confession of Sins as a Re-Establishment of Man's Communion with God in the Teachings of Saint John Chrysostom

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Abstract:

Although St. John Chrysostom did not exhaustively describe the Sacrament of Confession and has not listed all its conditions either, what he did clearly elucidate were those elements that solidify the authority of the Priest to hear confessions and absolve sins. The great Archbishop of Constantinople emphasizes not only the responsibility of the Priest to give counsel, but also to prescribe an appropriate canon. In his vision, just as worldly leaders have the power to judge and decide in reference to his vassals, Priests judge, decide, forgive, and set canons, which means that they have power and responsibility for the souls of believers over whom they have jurisdiction. This decision of theirs is received by God, Who Himself forgives and consecrates, using Priests as His instruments.

True repentance must be made in secret before the Bishop or Priest who administers the redeeming grace. It must be accompanied by good works such as humility, repentance, fasting, alms and prayer. It must be sincere, complete and on-going, just as sin is repetitive.

Keywords: *confession, sins, penance, St. John Chrysostom, communion, remission, priest.*

Introduction

In the 4th century we witness in the East a development in penitential discipline and in the rites of reintegration of sinners back into the Church. This took place in parallel with the development of the stages of the catechumenate within the Church marking their gradual return to

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the Church. The public discipline and the penitential ritual were not intended to burden or discourage penitents. The emphasis in the Eastern Church was on spiritual direction, on the healing function of the Church's servants and privacy as the way of taking responsibility for one's own sins which contributed to the Church's passing from ecclesial repentance to private confession, without losing its ecclesial meaning.

Even though we don't have any written account of a ritual up until the 4th century, only hints concerning the development of the penitential institution, such an institution existed in all the churches. Informal correction, a general confession, and community intercession made those guilty of mild sins to experience Divine Mercy within the community gathered there for the celebration of the Liturgy. Others, whose sins were more severe, had to demonstrate their repentance in an outward, public manner, for a long period of time, in order to give proof of the depth and honesty of their repentance. Also, the intent of those wanting to convert to Christianity had to be tested in the same manner. Ceremonial reconciliation followed, having as a model the initiation of catechumens.

All the members of the community shared responsibility for the penitents; as for catechumens, the leaders of the community had greater responsibility. The whole community had the task of correcting and interceding, watching over and sustaining the penitents in their effort to renew their Christian life, and also that of receiving joyfully, as brothers and sisters, those who had shown genuine repentance.

Saint John Chrysostom (349-407) is the most important representative of the catechetical school of Antioch, the greatest artist with words of his time and the most brilliant preacher that the Church of the first centuries has produced (Coman 1999: 136). The spiritual depth of his writings and also the wealth of authentic Christian teaching make his work a pearl of patristic literature. That is why he remains one of the greatest and most often quoted writers of the Christian church. The corpus and the shape of his writings are still today of peeked interest, not just historically and culturally, but socially and morally as well.

1. Public and private penitence

The name of ‘father of repentance’ which the eastern tradition has given to St. John Chrysostom is owed to the recurrence of the topic of confession of sins in his works, insisting unceasingly upon private confession (κατ’ ἰδίαν) before the Priest (St. John Chrysostom, *De sacerdotio*, PG 48, 644C). Of great importance for the end of the 4th century is the observation of the Byzantine historian, Socrates, concerning the existence in the capital of the Eastern Roman empire of a Priest who was a confessor – πρεσβύτερον ἐπί της μετανοίας (PG 67, 613-616), a notation which proves the existence of the practice of individual confession. This information is very valuable, even though the stages of the passage from a public form of penitence to an individual one are not fully clear to us now.

Saint John Chrysostom followed Nectarios (†398) to the Patriarchal Throne of Constantinople, and during his tenure lead a reform having direct consequences upon the passage from a public to an individual form of confession. Socrates, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* (PG 67, 613 AC) and after him Sozomen, in a work entitled *Historia Ecclesiastica* (PG 67, 1457B) as well, presents the scandal that arose within the Church of Constantinople in the time of Patriarch Nectarios. An important lady confessed before her spiritual father (Felea 1939: 163-164) who recommended prayer, fasting and good works to her. Following that, the woman publicly confessed having a love relationship with a Deacon, causing a scandal in the Byzantine capital. The population was scandalized, the guilty Deacon was relieved of his position, but the Priests were sworn to secrecy. Consequently, taking the advice of a Priest originally from Alexandria, named Evdemon, patriarch Nectarios abrogated the office of Confessor. The matter of the scrutiny of their consciences and of approaching the Holy Communion was in the hands of the believers themselves.

Information from Socrates regarding the reform that had taken place during Patriarch Nectarios was hidden. How could the patriarch have a change of the rite of Confession with such far-reaching consequences? Theologians ask themselves this question: Has patriarch Nectarios eliminated confession? And all of them provide a negative answer. What

is certain is that neither repentance as a sacrament prior to Holy Eucharist, nor Priests as Confessors disappeared. We can eventually conclude that public confession was abolished by Nectarios, but at the same time we share the conviction that this Patriarch never touched individual and private Confession. We reach this conclusion if we read only a few passages from the works of his successor to the Patriarchal Throne, St. John Chrysostom, who preached intensively about repentance, as a preparative stage for receiving the Holy Eucharist, without suggesting the fact that he had undergone a restoration of Confession after the reform of Nectarios. In other words, his predecessor hadn't abolished repentance as a doctrine, but only its disciplinary aspect. From that time forward, public penitence had been abolished, penitential discipline becoming milder in the form of private confession. It would seem that Nectarios' reform facilitated the passage from the public form of Confession to the eastern practice we know today. (Porneală 2009: 38).

Public penitence didn't survive for long following the actions of Patriarch Nectarios of Constantinople, who abolished the service and the functions of the Priest with regard to penitence (around 391). Saint John Chrysostom provides us with the proof that in Antioch, before this event, those guilty of foul deeds would obey penitential discipline. With the vigour characteristic of him, St. John protested fiercely against the evil represented by swearing and perjury. He would eventually threaten these hardened sinners with the penitence ordained for reprobates, adulterers and murderers: "And if I see you persisting, I will forbid you in the future to set foot on this sacred threshold, and partake of the Immortal Mysteries; as we do fornicators and adulterers, and persons charged with murder" (St. John Chrysostom, *Homilia in Matthæum* 17, PG 57: 264). In this reference to the exclusion from church and participation to sacraments, we can hint the lowest degree, of the ones who cry outside the doors of the church. Therefore, Saint John the Chrysostom threatens the incorrigible sinners with the discipline of gradual penitence. In this reference to their exclusion from the Church and participation in the Sacraments, we can see them in the lowest degree, the ones who cry outside the doors of the Church. Therefore, St. John Chrysostom threatens the incorrigible sinners with the discipline of gradual penitence. In order to complete a trio, he could have mentioned apostates, but the period of

persecution being in the past, the reference would have been less significant. Regardless, this severe penitential discipline wasn't the one usually used for those guilty of swearing and perjury. And since we are convinced that St. John Chrysostom considered these sins as being at least as severe, we reach the conclusion that these were confessed and absolved sacramentally in a discipline other than public penitence.

2. There is no sin that can conquer the generosity of the Master

With Chrysostom, no capital sin can be placed outside the mercy that the Lord has for His earthly Church. This mercy is unlimited. The older practice of the Church, derived from *The Shepherd of Hermas*, allowed for only one instance of repentance in life. The teaching of St. John Chrysostom found mercy for the sinner who relapsed, without limiting Divine Mercy, rather insisting upon the therapeutic needs of the sinner: "there is no malady which prevaieth over His goodness" (St. John Chrysostom, *Homilia in Joannem* 62, PG 59: 341).

In order to encourage the sinner, he talks about Divine Mercy and supports this idea by invoking the richness of forgiveness which opens the gates of Heaven. No matter how multitudinous the sins, man has to firmly condemn them and confess them, for this is the beginning of redemption. It does not matter how much he sinned or that he is in danger of falling again, generosity or Divine Grace compensates for the multitude of human errors. In the view of St. John, there is no such sin that can conquer the generosity of the Master. Even if someone is reprobate or adulterous, homosexual, a prostitute, abductor, greedy, drunk, even if he is an idolater, the power of Grace and the love of God for people is so great that He makes them all disappear and shows the one who proves himself worthy by true repentance that he will become brighter than the rays of the sun. Thus, understanding the overwhelming gift of God's love for mankind, Chrysostom launches the exhortation toward the abandoning of misdeeds and replacing them with good works, reminding us of the advice of the Prophet David who said: "beware of the evil and do the good" (St. John Chrysostom, *In Catechesis Primam et Secundam Illuminatos*, PG 49: 224).

3. The role of the priest in absolving the sinner

The great Archbishop John places great importance on the priestly prerogatives (Coman 1940: 148-168) and the role of the Priest in absolving the sinner. The treatise *On the Priesthood* (St. John Chrysostom, *De Sacerdotio*, PG 48: 623-692), which St. John wrote in Antioch, is a hymn in the honour of the Priest, the one who has the right to forgive sins. When he recommends with great assertiveness the practice of confession, we must understand that he guides sinners to address their Priests. In more than one passage he emphasizes the dignity of the Priest as administrator of repentance, the following excerpt being a classic:

For they who inhabit the earth and make their abode there are entrusted with the administration of things which are in Heaven, and have received an authority which God has not given to Angels or Archangels. For it has not been said to them, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven" (Mt. 18:18). They who rule on earth have indeed authority to bind, but only the body: whereas this binding lays hold of the soul and penetrates the heavens; and what Priests do here below God ratifies above, and the Master confirms the pronouncements of his servants. For indeed what is it but all manner of heavenly authority which He has given them when He says, "Whose sins ye remit they are remitted, and whose sins ye retain they are retained?" (Jn. 20, 23). ... but he who has received from God an authority as much greater as Heaven is more precious than earth, and souls more precious than bodies, seems to some to have received so small an honor that they are actually able to imagine that one of those who have been entrusted with these things will despise the gift. Away with such madness! For transparent madness it is to despise so great a dignity, without which it is not possible to obtain either our own salvation, or the good things which have been promised to us.... These verily are they who are entrusted with the pangs of spiritual travail and the birth which comes through Baptism: by their means we put on Christ, and are buried with the Son of God, and become members of that blessed Head. For not only at the time of regeneration, but afterwards also, they have authority to forgive sins (St. John Chrysostom, *De Sacerdotio*, PG 48: 643, 645).

As the Lord Jesus Christ gave the power to forgive and loose people from their sins to the Priests, confession is made only in front of them. The grace of God is not transmitted "magically or mechanically, but sacramentally" (Vlachos 2005: 45). The great hierarch justifies the necessity of man to present himself before a confessor (Bryant 1986: 568-

570). In his vision, there are two reasons, yea three, why our judgement isn't enough: 1.): even though we think ourselves guilty of nothing, we still need a divinely-inspired inquirer, who can examine us as to our sins; 2.): we don't clearly remember many of the things we do but they stay hidden inside our mind; and 3.): many of the things other people do seem right to us, when in fact they might not be right, our seeing them in that manner stemming from tainted judgement (St. John Chrysostom, *Epistolae Primae Corinthios* 11, PG 61: 87-94).

The mission of the spiritual father is a three-fold one: a.) to advise, b.) to encourage (*παραίνεσις*), and c.) to criticise (*έλεγχος*). He uses a therapy based on words (communication, contact and dialogue) and three models: a.) the human body; b.) the doctor and c.) the parents (the mother and the father as *αμφιθυμία*). The model of birth (*τοκετός*) is sometimes used excessively, uniting the Divine factor and the human in a process of spiritual birth by a spiritual father.

The spiritual paternity is not interpreted by Chrysostom only in the narrow sense of granting forgiveness (*άφεσις*), but in the larger sense of spiritual counselling and care-giving. The spiritual father is not a judge but a 'womb' offered freely for the process of repentance of those who have sinned and want to reform themselves in Christ. For Chrysostom, spiritual paternity is an instrument in the service of repentance and redemption for his spiritual sons (Burnish 1982: 558-564).

Such a spiritual act cannot be accomplished outside the Church as a divine-human organism, for only the Church was granted the authority of bringing man to God, and offering him forgiveness. This is why Christians who care for the redemption of their souls are obliged to run to the Church as they would run to a hospital. The Lord has taken upon Himself all the burden and decrepitude in order to give people rest. The Church by continuing the work of Christ, through the inheritance of the apostolic gift, through the power of binding and loosing, calls those burdened with sins in order to give them rest. Only the Church is capable of giving help and comfort to those burdened by sins:

Have you sinned? Come to Church and erase your sin. Every time you fall while walking you get up. Similarly, every time you sin, repent. Do not despair; do not become indifferent, so that you do not lose hope in the heavenly riches that are in store for us. Even if you sin late in life when you have grown old, repent and come to the Church. The Church is a hospital not a court. It bestows forgiveness;

it does not demand accountability for the sin. Say to God: “Against Thee only have I sinned and done this evil before Thee” (Ps. 50:6), and He will forgive you. Show Him that you repent, and He will have mercy on you. If we do our part, God will do His part (St. John Chrysostom, *De Pœnitentia*, PG 49: 285-286).

Echoes of these exhortations from the *Homilies on Repentance* can be found in other homilies of St. John:

Unless you tell the amount of debt you have, you shall not experience the abundance of Grace. “I’m not forcing you”, he says, “to come in the middle of a theatre and be surrounded by many witnesses. Tell me your sin, privately, so that I can heal your wound and free you from your pain” (St. John Chrysostom, *Ad Homilias de Lazaro* 4, 4, PG 48: 1012).

Saint John also insists upon the canons which the spiritual father has to give to those who have sinned. The juridical moment of ‘satisfaction’ is missing from the understanding of the Sacrament of Confession in Chrysostom. In his conception, the canon is not a punishment, but a medicine, and the spiritual father looks for the best remedy available for the ailing one. The purpose of the canon is to exhort the penitent to avoid the surroundings which could lead him back to sin.

Of special interest for our theme are the *Homilies on Repentance* (edited in PG 49: 277-350), which are in fact nine exhortations written by Chrysostom with the purpose of strengthening the faith of his believers, or to call them back to faith, using the Pauline model of spiritual birth (τοκετός), which can be understood as the entrance of a believer into the ecclesiastical corpus. This spiritual birth involves both ‘pedagogy’ and ‘therapy’. The Holy Father uses both the paternal and the medical model.

Homilies on Repentance seem to be not only theological texts with a kerugmatik moral character, but also pedagogical lessons, through which some psycho-therapeutic principles are established, just as they were conceived by the author, so that the spiritual sons can be modelled “after the appearance of Christ” and to help them grow in virtue, by means of an appropriate spiritual knowledge.

Therefore, the restoration “in Christ” of a believer implies: conversion (μετάνοιας), birth (κατήχησις) and rebirth (βάπτισμα). Saint John sees this spiritual relationship between the father and his spiritual sons in the light of the experience of St. Paul and the entire Christian tradition, as spiritual birth (τοκετός). Also, in these homilies we meet some sort of “sacred marriage” (ιερός γάμος) between the spiritual father

and his spiritual sons, after the model of the revelation of God in the entire history of the Divine economy (Tsitsigkos 2014: 92-93).

4. Saint John Chrysostom, canonical discipline and its prescriptions

The great Archbishop, St. John Chrysostom, insists upon the therapeutic calling of the Church, convinced that this was not a court, but a hospital (St. John Chrysostom, *Vita Phocae* 1, PG 50: 699) [1], where the human being is healed of sin, death and suffering. Saint John talks about repentance as if it were a hospital procedure which cleanses sins, a heavenly gift, a wonderful power, Grace being far superior to a legalistic approach. That is why Christ doesn't humiliate the reprobate, doesn't chase away the adulterer, doesn't turn His back to the drunkard, doesn't turn from the idolater, doesn't reject the blasphemer, but seeks to change them all. Repentance is like an furnace where sin is burned away (St. John Chrysostom, *De Pœnitentia*, PG 49: 317).

For Chrysostom ἔξομολόγησις has the sense of a confession. Even though he knows the canonical discipline and respects it, he does not always follow its prescriptions. His critics complain about his laxity in allowing a repeated repentance, citing it even when it offers healing even to the ones who repented a thousand times. Sometimes he is even more radical in the advice he gives to those not obeying the canonical discipline, suggesting that only a few days of repentance before approaching Holy Communion are enough, having as the primary condition the exposing of one's sins before God. As a Bishop who perceived himself more as a doctor than as a judge, Chrysostom knew only to loose. This means that the requirements of the canonical discipline were a difficult interpretation for many clerics, because the situation had changed a great deal compared to the time when regulations about the duration of repentance had been established. Chrysostom didn't want to keep those he shepherd far from the Holy Eucharist, but didn't want them to approach it in a state of unworthiness either. Instead of threatening, he preached repentance and penitential deeds under the blessing of a spiritual father.

The great Archbishop of Constantinople answers questions such as: How are we healed by the power of the divine-human Doctor in His

Church, which is a spiritual hospital? How do we get in contact with the transforming energies of the Holy Trinity, in order to be set free from sin and death, to be healed spiritually and grow into the Likeness with the Divine Image? Convincingly, he shows that repentance in that act of “opening” the inner cell, meaning those attitudes and destructive and poisonous deeds that smother the freedom and the joy of the Christian and set an obstacle in front of his or her open relationship with God. Though harsh and severe with vice and sin, he is concessive and even comforting with the weak. These people he guides with great affection, showing them how to approach the Judgement Seat Christ in order for them to confess their sins:

He who wants to get better faster and to heal the wounds of his soul faster, approach the Doctor broken-heartedly, banishing from himself all worldly thoughts! Shed fervent tears, show great assiduity, confess the right faith and trust the medicine of the Doctor and he shall soon be healed! Have you seen that the generosity of the Doctor resembles the love of any parent? Does He ask anything difficult or burdening from us? No! He asks for a broken heart, humble spirit, confession of sins, great assiduity, and He gives us not only healing of our wounds and cleansing of sins, but also justifies him who prior to that was saddled with thousands and thousands of burdens and sins (St. John Chrysostom, *Sermo Admonitorium sub initium sanctæ Quadragesimæ* 20, 3, PG 53: 169).

5. Saint John doesn't force anyone to publicly confess but considers private confession of utter importance

The paradigmatic Archbishop John doesn't force anyone to publicly confess his sins but considers private confession of utter importance. We notice that even from his time the general rule, still valid today in the Orthodox Church, that confession must be made in an intimate manner, was applied, and that in its process all sins, large or small, hidden or visible, must be acknowledged, just as the same great Hierarch said:

For tell me not of acts of fornication only, nor of adulteries, nor of these things that are manifest, and acknowledged amongst all men: but lay together also thy secret crafts, and thy false accusations, and thine evil speakings, and thy vain-gloryings, and thine envy, and all such things. For neither will these bring a trifling punishment (St. John Chrysostom, *Homilia in Matthæum* 41, PG 57: 450).

The guilt for sin hovers upon each person:

For who is clear from covetousness? Nay, tell me not of the quantity, but since even in a small amount we shall pay the same penalty, consider this and repent. Who is rid of all insolence? Yet this casts into hell. Who hath not secretly spoken evil of his neighbor? Yet this deprives one of the Kingdom. Who hath not been self-willed? Yet this man is more unclean than all. Who hath not looked with unchaste eyes? Yet this is a complete adulterer. Who hath not been “angry with his brother without a cause”? Yet such an one is “in danger of the council”. Who hath not sworn? Yet this thing is of the evil one. Who hath not forsworn himself? but this man is something more than of the evil one. Who hath not served mammon? but this man is fallen away from the genuine service of Christ. I have also other things greater than these to mention: but even these are enough, and able, if a man be not made of stone, nor utterly past feeling, to bring him to compunction (St. John Chrysostom, *Homilia in Matthæum* 41, PG 57: 450).

6. Real and active Confession is accompanied by sincere repentance and change of the mind

Without the breakage of the heart, confession denotes a lack of culpability for the breaking of the Godly law. Real and active confession is accompanied by sincere repentance and change of mind; only this confession brings about the fruit of redemption. In order to teach that, it is necessary that the one who wishes to confess, come before his or her spiritual father and to open his heart in order to discover his unknown and hidden depths, without embarrassment and reserve, seeking reconciliation with God, in order to heal his soul and receive absolution. Sincere repentance, with regret and tears for the sins committed, brings about the forgiveness of sins and the redemption of the soul. That is why St. John says:

Do not however despair on this account. For what if the wounds be severe? yet are they not curable; such is our Physician: only let us feel our wounds. Although we be arrived at the very extreme of wickedness, many are the ways of safety which He maps out for us. Thus, if thou forbear to be angry with thy neighbour, thine own sins shall be forgiven ... And though we owe ten thousand talents, if we fall down before God and bear no malice, all things are forgiven us. Although we have wandered away to that place whither the sheep strayed from his keeper, even thence He recovers us again: only let us be willing, beloved. For God is merciful. Wherefore both in the case of him that owed ten thousand talents, He was content with His falling down before Him; and in the case of him who had devoured his

father's goods, with his return only; and in the case of the sheep, with its willingness to be borne. Considering therefore the greatness of His Mercy, let us here make Him propitious unto us, and "let us come before His face by a full confession", (Ps. 45:2) that we may not depart hence without excuse, and have to endure the extreme punishment (St. John Chrysostom, *Epistolæ Primæ Corinthios* 23, PG 61: 192).

Only following a sincere confession does the penitent receive the forgiveness of sins:

If in this life we cleanse ourselves through confession of sins and we receive forgiveness from the Lord, we go on the other side without sins and with great boldness before God. For he who has not cleansed his sins in this life, shall not find any comfort on the other side. "For in hell, says the Scripture, who shall confess to thee? (Ps. 6, 5)" (St. John Chrysostom, *Sermo Admonitorius sub initium sanctæ Quadragesimæ* 3, 2, PG 53: 49).

Confession is made in the Church, where the Christian goes in order to be heard by the Priest, who acting in the Name of God, offers forgiveness of sins:

Are you a sinner? Do not despair. Come to the Church with repentance. Have you sinned? Say to God: "I have sinned". You find it so difficult to confess your sin? But if you do not accuse yourself first, the devil will eventually accuse you. Therefore, before he has a chance to do so, strip him of his power; because, truly, his role is to accuse us. Erase your sin before he has a chance to blame you. For you have an accuser who will not remain silent. Have you sinned? I ask nothing else from you except this: enter the Church and say to God with repentance, "I have sinned". Because it is written: "confess your sins first, so that you may be justified" (Isa. 43:26). Confess your sin so that you may erase it. This does not require any effort, or many words, or large sums of money, or any other such thing. It only takes three words: "I have sinned" (St. John Chrysostom, *De Pœnitentia* 1, PG 49: 282).

The terms 'confession' (ἰξομολόγησις) and 'acknowledgement' (ὁμολογία) do not only succeed in and of themselves, but they show the same intense process of changing one's way of thinking, intentions, disposition and full spiritual direction.

7. Models of true repentance in the Holy Scriptures

Examples illustrative of repentance are those of the Ninevites, the repentance of Manasseh, the Judean King, the publican and the prodigal son. The chrism of the repentant reprobate, the tears of St. Peter and the repentance of the thief on the cross are also among the most eloquent examples of true repentance, and also of love for God for man. Saint John cannot but wonder at the gesture of repentance to the thief on the cross, whose confession is given as an example:

have you seen complete repentance on the cross? Have you seen how with his words he cleaned his sins? Have you seen how he fulfilled that command that says: “declare thou, that thou mayest be justified”. (Is. 43:26). Nobody made him do it. Nobody blamed him. Nobody attacked him! He blamed himself. That is why he didn’t have anyone else to blame him. He went ahead of everyone and condemned himself, deposed himself (St. John Chrysostom, *In Duas Sequentes de Cruce et Latrone Homilias 2, 2*, PG 49: 409).

True repentance is the change of mind by one’s own actions, a change of moral life, a change for the better, a complete renouncement of the former life and sin, a desire to practice virtues, a perfect union of one’s own will with the Will of God. That is why repentance is the moral rebirth of man and the starting point of a new and virtuous life. A true fulfilment of God’s commandments cannot be achieved but for the sake of Christ. Discovering the Kingdom of Heaven (‘Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near’- Mt. 4:17) inside of man with the help of God and His Priests is the only impulse that can lead us towards a virtuous life of repentance.

8. Repentance is authentic through its fruit

The period of Lent is an extra reason for man to confess honestly:

How will we defend ourselves if we don’t show our Master our wounds as fast as we can, in order to receive from Him their healing? If we don’t do this now when it’s Lent, when our thoughts are so quiet, when the feasts have been chased away, when will we be able to think about the things we have done? That is why I ask you, as always, to be aware of yourselves, to vigil; to spend all our life doing this, so that through our efforts we might escape the dreadful torment and be outside of the flames of hell. And especially now, with more diligence, this must be done, now when, due to the time of Lent, you are reached out to more and more often

(St. John Chrysostom, *Sermo Admonitorius sub initium sanctæ Quadragesimæ* 20, 4, PG 53: 171).

Confession is sincere only if it is accompanied by the unwavering desire to not repeat sins ever again. Contrarily, man returns to his sins, just like the Apostle says, like “a dog returns to his own vomit and a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire” (2 Pt. 2:22). The decision and the effort of not committing the same sins must be unwavering and constant:

for, a bird that, after being caught in a chain, escaped, or a stag, who after falling into toils, managed to escape, won't let themselves be caught again easily; because for anyone, adventure is the mother of precaution. We, though, after being caught more times, fall into the same chains and we, who are adorned with discernment, don't follow the precaution and alertness of animals (St. John Chrysostom, *Homilia XXI de statutis* 15, PG 49: 157).

We are advised by the great Archbishop to, after we have cleansed ourselves of sins, keep these sins before our eyes. God, out of His love for humans, forgives sin, but the believer, for the safety of his soul, must have before his eyes the sin. He who is sad for past sins is determined not to repeat them. That is why David has said “my sin is forever before me” (Ps. 50:4). “He had before his eyes his past sins, so that he wouldn't fall into future ones” (St. John Chrysostom, *De Pœnitentia*, PG 49: 317).

Repentance is authentic through its fruit (Stăniloae 1986: 11). The advice of St. John the Baptist:

“Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance”. (Mat.3:8) resounds permanently in the preaching of St. John Chrysostom: For if thou change from inhumanity to almsgiving, thou hast stretched forth the hand that was withered. If thou withdraw from theatres and go to the church, thou hast cured the lame foot. If thou draw back thine eyes from an harlot, and from beauty not thine own, thou hast opened them when they were blind. If instead of satanical songs, thou hast learnt spiritual psalms, being dumb, thou hast spoken. These are the greatest miracles, these wonderful signs. If we go on working these signs, we shall ourselves be a great and admirable sort of person through these, and shall win over all the wicked unto virtue, and shall enjoy the life to come (St. John Chrysostom, *Homilia in Matthæum* 32, PG 57: 385).

Conclusions

The source of the Godly word of St. John Chrysostom was in his holy life and his devotion which made his life an offering pleasant to God and in the spiritual interests of the people he led. Chrysostom was a saint with the gift of preaching and united within himself the word with the deed managing through his sincere love to heal even the most hardened hearts of sinners (Irineu Slătineanu 1996: 4-5). He understands the danger of losing our souls, which must guide us to care for redemption. He who doesn't take care for redemption of his soul is threatened by two things: death and being abandoned by Grace. In both cases the harm is huge because the consequence is the death of the soul

Our rush to return and repent as fast as we can is dictated by the danger of not being able to return to God. A bad habit is capable of making us incapable of repentance and this should terrify us. The habit which results from a repetition of sin becomes in the heart of man a "normal" state, becoming so powerful that nobody is able to resist it: its power overwhelms even natural law. Therefore, when a vice rules inside us, we give ourselves to it, becoming its slaves. Free will has definitely lost its power. Man has abandoned free will and that is why the power of his will proves to be weak and incapable to fight vice, each attempt at regaining lost freedom proves vain. The fight makes this weakness even more visible. The person who is conquered by the passions, behaves and fulfils everything like a slave, like a subordinate.

Saint John Chrysostom states that repentance is of great use for redemption, but it must be cultivated permanently. It makes the soul of the Christian straighter, more loving towards his kin, rebuilding thus a new society in which altruism, honesty, honour, faith and love prevail, to the happiness of all its members. Repentance is absolutely necessary as a foundation of individual and social life (Nicolae 1966: 92) for we all are and form a single body, Head Christ.

By way of a conclusion to the teachings of St. John Chrysostom about repentance and confession of sins, we see that they are still valid today, more than 1600 years following his departure. This is due to the fact that in the world evil and good, wound and cure are eternal (Morozanu 1958: 496). From here comes the necessity to fight evil, wounds and disease, which are not God's creations, but accidents and

products of man's freedom. Just as the presence of doctors is necessary today, as back then, so is the presence of spiritual doctors, meaning Priests, spiritual fathers. "Doctors, says St. John, when facing severe diseases, use comfort and prayer to make them receive the medicine they need, in order to be cured" (St. John Chrysostom, *Homiliae XXI de status* 3, 5, PG 49: 54). The forgiveness of sins can only be achieved in the Church, through its Hierarchs, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Notes:

[1] "οὐκ ευθύνας ἀπαιτῶ ἀμαρτημάτων, ἀλλὰ τοῖς ἀσθενοῦσι φάρμακα κατασκευάζω". See also and Hierotheos, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, *The illness and cure of the soul in the Orthodox Tradition*, trans. Effie Mavromichali, Levadia, Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1997, p. 86.

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