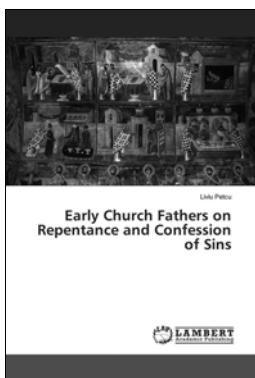


Liviu Petcu, *Early Church Fathers on Repentance and Confession of Sins*, Lambert Academic Publishing, Saarbrücken, Germany, 2017.



The author, Rev. Fr. Liviu Petcu, Ph. D. in philosophy and Orthodox Theology, a classicist and a journalist, scientific researcher and an assistant professor at „Dumitru Stăniloae” Faculty of Orthodox Theology, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University in Iași, is published well-known for his many works in Romania and abroad. His main fields of interest are the most relevant matters associated with the history of early Christianity, the important aspects related to the thinking and the

writings of the Christian authors of this period, particularly of those from Cappadocia, of the Holy Three Hierarchs and of the Fathers of the *Paterikon*. For these reasons, we may state that this book bears the mark of a remarkable specialist in these fields and for this reason we recommend it, being convinced that its readers will find in it genuine Christian dogma and that they will nourish their minds and hearts with profound teachings and thoughts that elevate and exalt the soul.

Forgiveness of sins and the necessity to live a holy life have always been essential components of the Christian message. Throughout Christian history, the rite of repentance has not been a ‘private’ event but an ‘ecclesiastic’ one. There has always been a connection between confession/penance and the Eucharist, the central point of the Orthodox Christian life that is emphasized in this book. As sin is primarily the alienation of man from God, a forgiving God, penance, as a remedy or cure for sins is the state of spiritual sufferance for a dark and importunate past, the return of man to God and reconciliation with God, as well as the strong determination to change and to improve, are the beginning of a new life and the recovery of man from death of the spirit. Yet, to unite with Christ through faith, to reach deification and perfection, man does not only need to cleanse his soul, but his body should be nourished to be prepared to achieve eternal life with

'the food of immortality.' As man, a bipartite being since the beginning of the world, consisting of body and soul brought together, needs spiritual nurture through faith and, at the same time, concrete nourishment filled with the Holy Spirit, this being the reason why the Saviour instituted the Eucharist to offer us the opportunity to partake of His body ascended to the heavenly realm, those who want to be redeemed must stay in communion with the Guide of life both with their bodies and their souls. However, in order to receive the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist, it is absolutely necessary to repent and to cleanse our souls of sins and passions.

With regard to repentance, both as a Mystery of the Church and as a virtue that is continuously fulfilled in men's lives – it is written in Holy Scripture that nobody is blameless and without sin – this book approaches topics, ideas and teachings that have not been looked at or discussed to a satisfactory extent in theology.

Moreover, this book is an intention to return to the existential values of the Fathers, taking into consideration the fact that for them repentance represented a way of life and one of the most important goals of their earthly lives. We are sure that by reading this book, the reader will grow in faith and repentance, will discover healing remedies for the wounds caused by sins and passions, will get a better understanding of how virtues, that are so necessary for living an authentic life in Christ, can be fulfilled, will convey in a better way the topicality and the constant echoes of the patristic message, and will strengthen the will and improve the intense preparations for more frequent Eucharistic communion with the Source of real life, our God.

As the author stated in the *Foreword*, Christian spirituality acknowledges that, whenever a believer considers himself or herself responsible for certain wrong-doings and admits to having committed sins, he or she will be absolved of guilt by God. The Creator will not chasten the penitent. He will take pity on the latter if he or she repents sincerely, if there is compunction ($\pi\acute{e}v\thetao\varsigma$) in one's heart and honest regret for the sins committed. All this proves that the penitent is returning to obedience and love for Him. Those who repent were called in patristic literature 'the blameless guilty'; 'guilty' because they separated themselves

from God by disobeying His will and ‘blameless’ because by repentance they received God’s forgiveness for the sins they have committed (p. 9).

After an extensive *Foreword*, the author minutely and competently develops eleven chapters. In Chapter 1, „The Topicality and the Utility of the Teachings of the Holy Fathers”, the author introduces the *Fathers of the Church*, *Church Fathers* or *Holy Fathers* as our „contemporaries” emphasizing their Great Love for Christ and highlighting the fact that Patristic Literature is the guarantee of an accurate theology and the cornerstone of the spiritual edification of Christians. Then, the author communicates his conviction that re-establishing vivid contact with the Church Fathers’ writings of Patristic Literature has many benefits for our lives.

In Chapter 2, the author reveals the fact that the multitude of man’s sins does not preponderate God’s love for him. This chapter is divided into a series of subchapters: Through His Incarnation, the Son of God reveals to us the true value of man; The Cross – the key to the mystery of Christ’s love; God loves each of us equally: The multiple revelation of Christ’s love for us; God’s ultimate goal is man’s benefit; The multitude of man’s sins does not preponderate God’s love for him; Love for God and love for one’s neighbour; The Spiritual life is a life of partaking in love, in God; The Church Fathers on the Soteriological significance of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’s descent into hell; Christ the Saviour’s descent into hell.

In Chapter 3, the author approaches the matter of repentance in the pastoral epistles of St. Clement of Rome, after treating the topic of repentance and confession of sins during the first three Christian centuries.

„Saint Gregory the Wonderworker on the four forms of gradual penitence” is the title of Chapter 4, in which the author talks about the steps of repentance, the primacy of condescension and economy (*oikonomia*), reconciliation and the unification of the sinner with the entire Church and then the fact that the priest is the witness of the believer’s repentance.

The next Chapter, „Saint Basil the Great on confessing sins and the severity of penitence”, introduces the topic related to the periods of penitence – their intensity and duration, the need to

confess sins verbally, then the fact that the confessors are spiritual advisers on the path to redemption, and „the moment when the Priest ascertains the fervour of the penitent's repentance, the former could shorten the epitimia”.

Chapter 6, „Saint Gregory of Nyssa on repentance, confession and inner change of man”, begins with a brief *Introduction*, followed by a description of the penitential and Eucharistic dimension of the Christian life and then continues with an academic, minute and convincing presentation of the teachings of Saint Gregory of Nyssa concerning repentance.

The next two chapters examine, on the basis of the works of the same author, St. Gregory of Nyssa, the topic of the light ($\Phi\bar{\omega}\varsigma$) or the return from false reality toward God: $\grave{\alpha}\pi\acute{\alpha}\theta\acute{\epsilon}\iota\alpha$ and $\pi\alpha\rho\rho\eta\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha$ in St. Gregory of Nyssa and $\sigma\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\sigma\acute{\iota}\varsigma\; \grave{\epsilon}\grave{\sigma}\grave{\tau}\grave{\iota}\grave{\iota}\;\kappa\acute{a}\;\kappa\acute{\iota}\eta\eta\varsigma\acute{\iota}\varsigma$. The mobile stability and the stable mobility of man's ascent toward God according to St. Gregory of Nyssa. We are described, in detail, the stages of the knowledge of God and the ascent toward Him: the Light ($\Phi\bar{\omega}\varsigma$), the Cloud ($N\acute{e}\phi\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\eta$) and the Darkness ($\Gamma\nu\acute{o}\phi\varsigma$), the light ($\Phi\bar{\omega}\varsigma$) or the return from false reality to God: $\grave{\alpha}\pi\acute{\alpha}\theta\acute{\epsilon}\iota\alpha$ and $\pi\alpha\rho\rho\eta\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha$ and a few aspects of man's ascent toward union with God and, at the end, „ $\Pi\acute{e}\rho\acute{i}\;\tau\acute{e}\lambda\acute{e}\iota\acute{w}\acute{\tau}\eta\eta\varsigma\acute{\iota}\varsigma$. While reaching perfection, there is a continuous dynamism.”

In Chapter 9, the author writes about the confession of sins as a re-establishment of man's communion with God in the teachings of St. John Chrysostom; begins by presenting public and private repentance in the times of St. John Chrysostom, then, starting from the works of St. John, he mentions that there is no sin that can conquer the generosity of the Master, the role of the priest in absolving the sinner, canonical discipline and prescriptions of St. John Chrysostom, which does not force anyone to publicly confess but considers private confession of utter importance. Then, our souls are being presented with the conviction that real and active confession is accompanied by sincere repentance and change of the mind, and repentance is authentic through its fruit, and immediately after come models of true repentance in the Holy Scriptures. This Chapter finally introduces a series of conclusions that are most welcome.

Chapter 10, „From the Fathers of the Paterikon concerning short periods of penitence, while in accordance with the gravity of the specific sin”, approaches topics of interest that we concatenate hereinafter: „Penitence in ancient times and the present”; „But I trust in God that if such a man does penance with his whole heart, God will receive him, even in three days”; „Short periods of penitence, but profound in their intensity, according to the gravity of the sin”; „God’s Love and forgiveness – grounds for intense penitence”; „Penitence as recommended by St. Basil the Great is to all appearances stricter than that practiced by the Desert Fathers”; „Intense penitence does not lead to despair or discouragement, but to heavenly peace and divine rejoicing”; „The weeping that brings rejoicing” and some conclusions.

In Chapter 11, Rev. Fr. Assistant Professor Ph. D. Liviu Petcu approaches the topic of „Penance (*μετάνοια*) and renewal in Romanian hesychastic spirituality”, then he perorates, at the beginning about sin and penance in Orthodox Spirituality and then he provides details about the renewal in Romanian hesychastic spirituality, adding distinctive features of Romanian hesychasm.

As the author highlights (pp. 9-10), the saints express their belief that intense repentance does not cause discouragement or despondency, but, paradoxically, for some of those living today, it leads to heavenly rejoicing. What characterizes the Fathers of the Church is condemning sins, abandoning them and embracing repentance as a complete return to God or as a compensation for and cultivation of virtues that are contrary to the sins committed. Weeping for sins and confessing them in front of one’s spiritual Father are intensely recommended by pious, devout and zealous Christians of all times, as this provides spiritual relief and comfort that are so necessary for the souls of those who truly repent. This volume has been written with the intention to provide the readers with valuable spiritual advice and explanations on the topic and to supply rich material that may be effectively used for sermons.

The great benefit of carefully reading this book will become obvious to the reader who, the more attentively he or she reads it, the more aware they will be of the treasures hidden in it, while they

will discover herein an unspeakable richness, as the structure of the book is based on instances taken from life and on the teachings of the holiest of the Fathers of the Church.

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