

Repentance

The end of the era of the Old Testament was marked with a cry of calling to repentance from the mouth of Saint John the Baptist: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Likewise, the start of the era of the New Testament was marked with the same calling to repentance from the lips of the Lord Himself: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17).

The inauguration of the gospel of Christ the Lord with the call to repentance signifies the importance of this virtue and its necessity to stay on the path of the faith. The repetition of this word “repentance” in the prayer books is another indication as to the importance of continuous and perpetual living in repentance.

Repentance was the first demand set as a condition to baptize those seeking the Christian faith. The apostles stipulated that baptism must be preceded by repentance: “Repent and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:38). The soul which continues to feel comfortable with its sins and evil doings cannot embrace the Christian faith, as it does not yet feel the necessity of this faith in its life.

Christ came for our salvation. To save us from what? To save us from sin and, subsequently, from all of the consequences that sin produces through anxiety and from death. This indicates that salvation in Christ means we are saved from sin through our faith and its destructive penalties, which cannot happen but through repentance.

Often, repentance on the surface appears to be accompanied by sorrow, sadness, and grief, where only the action of giving up and the abandonment, which are considered to be negative sides, become apparent. These virtues in the Tradition of the Church, though, are considered to be extremely positive actions.

It must be emphasized that repentance does not mean only to desert the life of sin, but also, in addition to that, it means to live a virtuous life instead. This is why the holy Fathers, in their teaching about the virtues, clarified that a virtue is the replacement of a passion with a different passion. For example, the virtue of fidelity is the replacement of the passion of lust for the *body* with passionate love for *God* instead.

Abandoning evil deeds is a necessary condition to achieve the life of repentance, but it is insufficient by itself, as that step must be followed by adopting benevolent and good deeds. Therefore, true and genuine repentance is a fruitful, virtuous way of life, and it must bear visible fruits. Saint John the Baptist used to tell those to approach him seeking his baptism, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:8). Likewise, the Apostles made the same demand of people in most of their evangelizing sermons: “I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds” (Acts 26:20).

The word “repentance” in Greek does not mean abandoning sin, but rather it means the complete change of the mind; in other words, it indicates adopting a different logic in life and a new, different methodology that is harmonious with the ethics of the gospel and the commandments of the Lord. The reasoning of the Christian faithful must be identical to the reasoning of Christ Himself. Adopting this reasoning enables us to clearly understand how it is possible for repentance to be a perpetual strife that lasts a lifetime. As we are approaching Great Lent, we should cry out: “Open to me the doors of repentance, O Giver of life, as my soul rises early to Your holy temple, coming with my body wholly defiled. But as the compassionate One cleanse me through Your loving-kindness”¹.

¹ Hymn sung after the Gospel reading during Matins on Sundays of Great Lent.