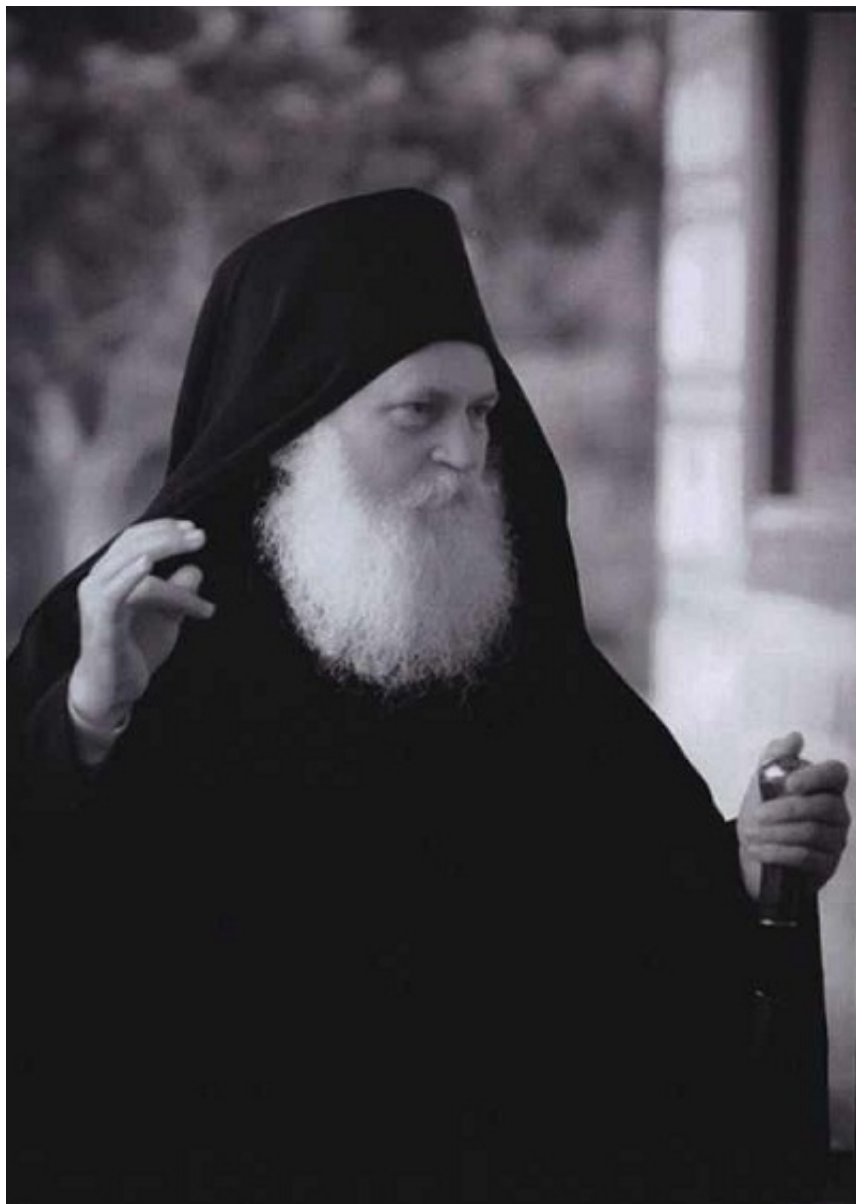




Repentance According to Saint Gregory Palamas

As we all know, Saint Gregory Palamas is a great luminary of the Orthodox Church, who with the whole of his theology – the fruit of his life in Christ – managed, in his day, to revive Orthodox theology in all its profundity. It is said on the Holy Mountain that Saint Gregory Palamas' theology covered all the gaps from the past and the future.



Abbot Ephraim of Vatopedi

The Athonite saint began his life on the Mountain at the monastery of his “repentance,” i.e. where he was tonsured, the Great Monastery of Vatopaidi, being taught the tasks of the spirit and the ascetic life by Saint Nikodimos the Hesychast the Vatopaidan. Illumined by the uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit, Saint Gregory acquired spiritual wisdom and became an outstanding teacher of the virtues and of the life



according to God.

Following in the pure Patristic tradition, he did not accept a moralist view of the spiritual life, which some people were attempting to bring from the West and to project onto the sphere of Orthodoxy.

Throughout the whole of the Patristic tradition it is emphasized that repentance is not exhausted by certain objective improvements in behaviour, nor in external formalities and patterns, but rather that it has to do with a more profound and more general change within a person. It is not a passing feeling of being crushed by the awareness of having committed some sin or other, but rather a permanent spiritual state, which means that the person turns steadfastly to God and has an enduring readiness for reform, cure and engagement in the spiritual struggle. Repentance is a new outlook, a new, correct spiritual direction which should accompany people until the time of their death. Repentance is the dynamic progression from the unnatural state of the passions and sin into the area of naturalness and virtue, it is the total rejection of sin and the road of return to God.

Saint Gregory Palamas repeatedly points out this truth. “Repentance,” he says, “is to hate sin and love virtue, to abjure evil and to do good.” It is perfectly clear from this definition that the Holy Father was unable to see repentance as a formal, mechanical change, since he defines it as an ontological renewal of the person. For precisely this reason, the fact of repentance cannot be objectivised within the dimensions of an impersonal recipe or tactic, but is always a contingent personal revelation. “A person who repents from the soul reaches God by good intentions and avoidance of sin” (Homily 3, *PG* 151, 44B).

For Palamas and all the Holy Fathers in general, this personal nature of repentance precludes any of the shades of piety that the West has wanted to give to repentance, and, in consequence, to the whole of the spiritual life. The holy Hesychast stressed that: “Godliness is not in our words but in our actions” (To Filotheos 6, *Writings II*, p. 521).

But since repentance is the beginning and the end of the life in Christ and since it is the aim of that life, it follows that everything will be seen through it and will acquire merit or demerit. Even “faith is beneficial if people lives their lives in good conscience and re-purify themselves through confession and repentance” (Homily 30, *PG* 151, 185A). This in any case is given as a promise and agreement at the moment of Holy Baptism.

A fundamental stage, which precedes repentance, is the recognition and awareness of sins “which is the great cause for propitiation,” as the Holy Archbishop of Thessaloniki put it (Homily 28, *P.G.* 151, 361C). According to Palamas, for people to come to repentance it is sufficient that they first arrive at recognition “of their own transgressions” and show remorse before God, to Whom they have recourse “with a contrite heart.” They cast themselves upon the sea of His mercy and believe, like the Prodigal Son, that they are unworthy of God’s clemency and to be called His children. And when with recognition and awareness of their sinfulness they draw upon themselves the mercy of God, they obtain complete release through self-censure and confession.

In his efforts to define all the stages of repentance, the wise Father said this: “Recognition of one’s own sins is followed by self-condemnation; this is the sorrow for one’s sins which Paul declared to be Godly.” He tells us that this sorrow is followed by confession to God with a contrite heart, by supplication and by the promise to avoid evil in future. And this is repentance.



As a new condition in people's lives, repentance is accompanied by certain consequences which, in Biblical and Patristic language, are called "the fruits of repentance." The first of this is highlighted by Saint Gregory as being confession, since, through this, the cure and purification of the soul of the believer is gained and the new life inaugurated: "For the confession of sins is the beginning of this cultivation, that is to say, repentance and the preparation for people to receive within themselves the seed of salvation, that is the Word of God" (Homily 56).

Confession is not, however, the only fruit of repentance. In calling people to repentance through his preaching, Saint John the Baptist urged people to embrace charity, justice, humility, love and truth, as well as confession, because these are the attributes of the transforming power of the truth.

In his Homily 23, the saintly Athonite hierarch emphasizes that people who really live their repentance do not return to their former sins, nor attach themselves to people and things of corruption, nor engage in doubtful pleasures, but rather they scorn the present, look to the future, struggle against the passions, pursue the virtues, are vigilant in prayer, do not seek unfair profits, are lenient to those who have done them harm, compassionate towards those who plead, and willing to help, with words, deeds or even sacrifices those who have need. And when Saint Gregory urges Christians to acquire works of repentance, he particularly stresses a humble outlook, compunction and spiritual grief. Summarizing all the attributes of those Christians who live their repentance, he says that they are serene and calm, full of mercy and sympathy towards others, they desire justice, seek purity, have peace and bring it, suffer pain and trouble patiently and feel joy and satisfaction in persecutions, insults and slander, losses and anything else they suffer for the sake of justice and truth (Homily 31, *PG*, 151, 392C).

The path of correction through repentance, of escape from enslavement to the passions and of asceticism in order to follow the divine commandments, is that of holy beings who have been glorified. Starting with this truth, Saint Gregory emphasizes the following: "If not all Christians can equal the Saints and the great and wonderful achievements which characterize their lives and are, as a whole, inimitable, they can and should emulate and follow them on their path towards repentance." Because on an everyday basis, "they are unwittingly at fault in many things" and the sole hope of salvation for all of us remains, according to Saint Gregory, the embracing and experiencing of "abiding repentance" (Homily 28, *PG*, 151, 361C).

Remorse as a condition for asceticism

A fundamental condition for the escape from the bonds of the passions and, at the same time, for the beginning and source of repentance is Godly remorse, what the Fathers call "mourning." In his texts, Saint Gregory refers very frequently to this "mourning" and to the painful but also joyful condition through which Christians have to pass if they want to live the real life. This is why he does not hesitate to call Great Lent the supreme period of mourning and spiritual struggle, as a symbol of the present age and a pre-condition for resurrection for the lives of the faithful.

Saint Gregory, who really did live Godly repentance and who said that his deep sighs "illuminated my darkness," rightly could not see how anyone could pass from the life of sin into "real life" without remorse and repentance. He said that when the faculty of direct perception, the "*nous*," is liberated from every perceptible thing, it rises above the maelstrom of earthly things and can see the inner person, since it is able to perceive what he calls the "hateful mask" which the soul has acquired through its vagrancy among worldly things. At this point it hastens to scour the defilement with tears of repentance (Discourse on Peter

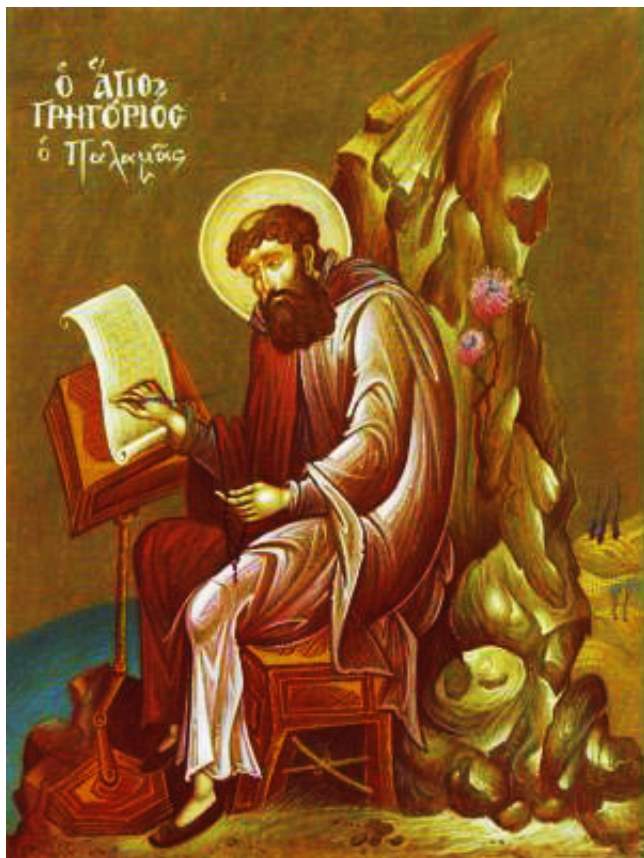


the Athonite, *PG*, 150). The more people distance themselves from worldly cares and return to themselves, the more receptive they become as regards divine mercy. Christ commended those who mourn for their sins and for the loss of their salvation, which is caused by sin. This is, in any case, the reason why this remorse is called “blessed.”

While, according to the Patristic and ascetic tradition, mourning is a fruit of God, it still presupposes the co-operation of people themselves, and this requires humility, self-censure, mortification, fasting, vigilance, and, above all, prayer. And this persistence in cultivating the virtues and striving to achieve Godly remorse is reinforced by the experience of hesychasm, which testifies that this “mourning” does not cause debility and hopelessness, but creates in people the conditions to experience spiritual gladdening, comfort, and, according to Palamas “the procurement of sweet joyfulness” (To Xeni, *PG*, 150). And when it assists the *nous* to lift the veil of the passions, it softly introduces it into the true treasures of the soul and habituates it in the prayer “in secret” to the Father.

There are many reasons which should cause the faithful to mourn. Just as the Lord’s disciples were saddened when they were deprived of the “truly good teacher, Christ,” so we, who experience the same deprivation and absence of Christ from our lives, ought to have within us and cultivate this same sorrow (Homily 29, *PG*, 151). But there is also another reason to mourn: the ejection from the realm of truth in paradise to that of pain and passions. This fall is so painful because it contains the whole drama of the banishment from God, the withdrawal of the “person to person” discourse with Him, of eternal life and co-glorification with the angels. Saint Gregory asks: who has ever completely realized the deprivation of all these things and not mourned? And he urges all the faithful who live “in awareness of this deprivation” to mourn and to wash away with Godly remorse “the stains of sins” (Homily 29, *PG* 151). This exhortation on the part of the saint is completely in accord with the exhortation and experience of the Church, which, in the hymnography for the Sunday of Cheese-Week calls upon Christians, on the eve of the Great Fast, to remember their banishment from forfeited Paradise and to mourn this loss.

According to Saint Gregory, mourning is the most natural and spontaneous expression of the soul wounded by sin and coming to repentance. The saint uses a wonderful simile to prove that it is people’s wounds that cause the pain, not the fact of repentance itself, which brings only joy and comfort to the soul. Just as, if someone’s tongue has suffered damage, honey might seem tart to them and they need to be cured in order to taste the sweetness, the same is true of the fear of God: in souls where it is engendered, on hearing the message of the Gospels, it causes sorrow, since these souls are still surrounded by the wounds of their sins; but as soon as they cast these off, through repentance, they feel the joy of the good news (Homily 29 *PG* 151, 396B). This is, in any case, why Godly sadness is also called “joyous.”



St. Gregory Palamas

Investing the Lord's second beatitude, which refers to mourning, Palamas justifies Christ's placing of it immediately after the beatitude about spiritual poverty by the fact that mourning co-exists with spiritual poverty.

A typical attribute of those who mourn in a Godly way is the refusal to transfer or pass off the responsibility for their sins onto other people. It is a basic principle which Palamas sets out, in discussing Godly remorse, that we should flay ourselves for our sins and avoid transferring the responsibility for them onto others (Homily 29, *PG* 151, 369C). In any case, it was Adam and Eve's transfer of the responsibility for ignoring God's commandment that deprived them of the salvation of penitential mourning (*Gen.* 3, 12-13). Because, since God gave Adam and Eve self-determination and they received, according to Palamas, "the imperial office over the passions within the realm of their souls" and "there was nothing withheld from or imposed upon them" (Homily 29, *PG*, 151, 369C), then through self-censure and Godly sorrow they would have been able to regain what they had lost by their refusal to accept responsibility for their sin. This is why Saint Gregory, in an effort to give a definition of mourning says: "for this is Godly sadness for our salvation, to find the reason in ourselves and not in any of the things which other people have done inadequately. And we should be sad ourselves and, through the confession of our sins and sorrowful contrition over them, conciliate God" (Homily 29, *PG*, 151, 369C).

Self-censure is an integral state for the soul where there is humility. Initially, it leads to fear of Hell. It brings to mind the dreadful punishments, as described by the Lord in the Gospel, which become even more



terrifying by the eternal dimension they acquire. So people who mourn their sins here and censure themselves because of them, avoid the useless, comfortless and endless mourning engendered in those who come to recognition of their sins through punishment. There, with no hope of redemption or salvation, the pain of mourning is increased by the unwanted reprimands of the conscience. And this permanent and abiding mourning, since it has no end, causes more mourning and dreadful darkness and searing heat, with no respite, and this leads to the inexpressible depth of dejection (To Xeni, *PG*, 150, 1076D-1077A). In contrast to Adam and Eve, Palamas refers to Lamech as an example of someone who came to self-censure and contrition for his sins (Homily 29, *PG*151, 369D).

It should be especially emphasized that, within Orthodox Christian tradition, asceticism is completely interwoven with grief. The pain of the fall and the joy of the resurrection are experienced by monks with joyful mourning. With bodily poverty and humility, which is hunger, thirst, hardship and affliction of the body, means by which the sensations of the body are brought under rational control, not only is mourning engendered, but also tears begin to flow. Saint Gregory gives a clear explanation for this spiritual state in his letter to the nun Xeni. He says that, just as bodily ease, relaxation and pleasure cause callousness, insensitivity and a hard heart, so plain, meagre fare, eaten with restraint, brings a broken and contrite heart. Through these, the activities of evil are thwarted, and inexpressible and sweetest joy are given to the soul. Without a contrite heart, no one can be liberated from the passions. And the heart comes to contrition only through restraint as regards sleep, food and bodily comforts. When the soul is liberated from the passions and the bitterness of sin through contrition, it then receives spiritual delight (To Xeni *PG* 150, 1076 BC). This is the comfort which the Lord says will be the portion of those who mourn. Only in this way can we explain how the alteration of sorrow into joy, about which the Lord spoke to His disciples, becomes an experience with which the monk is acquainted on a daily basis. Mourning becomes joyful and blessed because it brings to fruition in people the pledge of eternal joy.

Self-censure and the sense of sinfulness are the conditions which prepare the soul for mourning. For a long time, says Saint Gregory, like an intelligible weight on the scrutinizing part of the soul, they press down and crush in such a way that the saving wine “that gladdens people’s hearts” is distilled. This wine is contrition, which, thanks to mourning and the active part of the soul, also crushes the passionate aspect. And once it liberates it from the dark weight of the passions, it fills the soul with blessed joy (To Xeni *PG* 150, 1077 B).

However painful this mourning may be in the initial stages, because it exists alongside the fear of God, so much greater, with the passage of time and as the soul prospers spiritually, does it become joyful, because people really do see blessed, sweet fruits. The longer mourning lingers in the soul, the more the love of God increases and, in a manner beyond conceiving, is united to it. When the soul experiences mourning profoundly, it tastes the consolation of the benevolence of the Comforter. For the soul, this is such a sacred, sweet and mystical experience that those who have no personal taste of it cannot even suspect its existence (To Xeni *PG* 150, 1077 B).

A fundamental view in the theology of mourning is that it is not only the soul that participates but also the body. And the “consolation” which the Lord said would be a blessing for those who mourn is a fruit which not only the soul but, as Saint Gregory says, “the body also receives in a variety of ways” (On the Hesychasts 1, 3, 33). The clearest proof of this reality, he says, is “the sad tears with which they mourn their sins” (Ibid).



Another fruit of Godly remorse is that people become steadfast in virtue, since, as the Apostle Paul says: “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret” (*II Cor. 7, 10*). Because, according to Palamas, people can become poor in a Godly manner and be humbled, but unless they also acquire remorse, their disposition alters easily – they may well return to the inappropriate and sinful actions they have abandoned and, once more, transgress against God’s commandments, given that a desire and appetite for a sinful life will again arise within them. But if they remain in the poverty that the Lord declared blessed, and cultivate spiritual mourning within themselves, then they become steadfast and secure in the spiritual life, thus expelling the danger of returning to the point where they began. (To Xeni *PG 150, 1085C*).

So this Godly mourning does not merely draw down consolation and God’s forgiveness, offering the pledge of eternal rejoicing, but, at the same time, guards the virtues the soul has, since, according to Saint Gregory, the soul that has learned to mourn is much less likely to be moved to evil (To Xeni *PG 150, 1085D*).

Finally, the Athonite hesychast and Archbishop of Thessaloniki, in his essay on the passions and the virtues, which, to a great extent, is dedicated to mourning, uses a most expressive example to demonstrate the path people follow towards remorse. He compares the beginning of mourning with the return of the Prodigal Son, which is why the remorseful person is cheerless and is brought to repeating the words: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight.” And then again, he pictures its end with the imperative and wide-open embrace of God the Father “in which by the richness of the incomparable poverty he had suffered, and having acquired great joy and frankness through it, kissed and was kissed and, on entering, sat down to eat with the Father, both enjoying heavenly bliss” (To Xeni *PG 150, 1085C*). This is why the term “bright sorrow,” which is commonly used by ascetics to describe the experience of eschatological transcendence of pain, is perhaps the most expressive symbol of the whole of their ascetic life, a life mostly of tears and mourning (See G. Mandzaridis, “*I peri theoseos didaskalia*” in *Palamika* 1973, p. 215).

In this brief and, one might say, rough presentation of the positions of Palamas on repentance, we see that Saint Gregory, as the outstanding person of the inner life, was interested not only in us correcting our external shortcomings, but in our inner repentance, with mourning and tears. Saint Gregory was himself a man of repentance and also a true preacher of it.

Now that the period of Great Lent is approaching we humbly pray that, in what is, according to Saint Gregory, the principal period of repentance, we may “fall down and weep before our God” so that we may taste the blessedness of His kingdom. Let us not forget that correction of ourselves, and, indeed, of society as a whole, begins and is founded upon the personal repentance of each of us. In any case, “enduring repentance” is, as Saint Gregory emphasizes, the spirit of Athonite monasticism. Amen.

[Source](#)