The Sacrament of Confession, Part Three

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

"The task of the spiritual father is to lead his disciple into the presence of God, and then to disappear." – Fr. Nicholas Afanasiev

The repentant person understands the necessity to "put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (Colossians 3:9-10).

For people to reach true repentance, they need a knowledgeable and experienced father who can lead them to the new life. A priest can help in this field by his advice, instruction, and his sympathy with a penitent. People need to know that repentance is not mere compunction and sorrow, but it is joy and happiness, it is a new condition. Confession is not just a mention of sins, but is consolation and forgiveness. It is, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead" (Philippians 3:13).

In the process of restoring passions to their original state, we enter the heart of the healing process. The priest helps people restore their passions to their original state, as they were before the Fall. In this area, Orthodoxy can offer Christians unique assistance. Human beings do not live without passions, but rather, they correct and return them to their proper state. This work requires great experience. Saint John Climacus says, "He is pure who expels love with love and who has extinguished the material fire by the immaterial fire" (step 15:2).

This requires a joint effort between God and humanity. It is important for the priest to understand that the healing of passions is an act of God's grace, not merely a matter of the priest's personal understanding and offering advice and guidance.

We have said previously that true confession is accomplished through cooperation between God and the human person, with the help of the priest. The believer receives divine grace through the holy sacraments of the Church. The purification of the human person—that is, his healing—takes place through divine grace, which is available within the totality of the spiritual life that the

Christian lives in the Church. The role of the human person lies in continuing his spiritual struggle and striving to purify and cleanse himself.

Here, the priest can offer great help to penitents through guidance. When he reminds them of their dominant passion, he draws their attention to hidden passions, teaching them how to confront temptations, and directing them toward the worship and love of God. It goes without saying that the priest himself must practice confession; otherwise, he will not be able to heal those who confess to him. One of the daughters of his parish once said to Metropolitan Anthony Bloom: “It seems that you have committed all the sins, because you describe them to us exactly as we commit them.” He replied: “Of course, my daughter, for I too am a great sinner!”

Spiritual experience teaches us that the more we advance in life with God, the deeper our awareness of sin becomes. The spiritual father is not a person belonging to a separate or distinct race; rather, he is a human being like any other, endowed with a lofty calling—to restore the image of God in himself and in his flock. This is what Metropolitan Anthony always taught.

It is therefore necessary that the relationship between the penitent and the spiritual father be voluntary, and that it include assistance for the one seeking spiritual guidance, provided that he himself continues his personal journey toward encountering God. Those who refrain from confession on the pretext of faults they perceive in the priest, or attribute to him, have not yet understood repentance or the depth of sin within themselves.

It is very important for the priest to convey a sense of repentance to those who confess to him in a spontaneous way, because he himself lives repentance and strives for it on his personal level. Hence the necessity for a confessor himself to have a spiritual father, to whom he opens his heart, who helps him move forward on the path of repentance and healing. His personal repentance helps him guide those who confess to him and encourages them to live their own repentance.

To be continued.