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Saint Basil the Great on Confessing Sins and the Severity of Penitence

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Abstract

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Writing at about the middle of the 4th century, Saint Basil the Great, the bishop of Caesarea, has remained renowned for his ascetics and also for being a church canonist. He describes in detail the different categories of penitents and the type and duration of the repentance to which those who would commit sins of a sexual nature, murders or apostasies. Saint Basil does not conceive a confession in the absence of the priest, for he is the one who receives the secret confession, regulates the public one and imposes to the penitent the necessary canon in order for him to be healed of the disease that sin is. Therefore, a great role in designating the role of the penitent is played by the bishop or priest, who is described in numerous places by Saint Basil as being the “manager of repentance”. He is at the disposal of the ones he shepherds in order to listen to their confession and give them the canon they need. Saint Basil’s canon 34 imposes the secrecy of confession, as the role of the sacrament is not divulging the secrets of a man, causing a scandal or exposing him to the judgement of people. This study will introduce the reader in the teachings of Saint Basil the Great on confessing sins and the severity of penitence. The guidance which he offered in these respects remains eloquent for Christian clerics everywhere for good.

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Keywords: Basil the Great; repentance; confession of sins; spiritual father; canon.



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1. Introduction

Saint Basil the Great stands as an iconic image of the Orthodox hierarch. For this reason, it is an intricate endeavour for any author to lay out the complexity of the personality of the great Metropolitan, the greatness of his hierarchical serving, the holiness of his life, the power of his speech as a preacher, his organisational spirit and his caring for the poor and the sick. His work had a significant influence not only on his contemporaries, but also on the Christian Church in the entire world until the present day. Fortunately, his texts have survived to our time without any serious diminution along that span of time. Despite his aptitude for theoretical study, the natural inclination of his spirit apparently inclined him toward the moral side. F. Cayré considers that “from a literary point of view, St. Basil has the most classical texts of any of the Greek Church Fathers.” (Cayré, F. (1927, p. 400) Ernest Simmons considers that what made St. Basil a unique personality of his time was the spirit of leadership that he showed during those times of tension and turmoil. His books and the letters turned him into a scholar and doctor of the Universal Church, but he would still have been named *Basil the Great* even if he had not authored a single line. This “high quality education, a mixture of holiness and character, this power of authority that emanated from him seemed to elevate him above his fellows without any personal effort, and his holiness and intellectual discernment greatly aided him in approaching any task that was assigned to him.” (Simmons, 1959, p. 35)

By way of his character and his innate charismatic leadership, he exerted a crucial influence on his contemporaries. Turmoil never prevented him from taking action, failure did not demobilize him; until the end he endeavoured for truth and peace. For this very reason, the Eastern Church, which consumed his energies, placed him among its most illustrious ecumenical doctors, as he imparted knowledge to the others through his personal example and his speech (Tixeront, 1923, p. 170).

Saint Basil the Great approaches repentance in all of its essential aspects: penitence, confessing sins and negative thoughts, canons of Penitence, the confessor’s guidance and being forgiven. Further on, we intend, taking as a starting point Saint Basil the Great’s work, to approach and debate on the topic of penitence under all its generous plenitude: the periods of penitence – their intensity and continuance, the penitent’s need to confess sins verbally, the role of the Spiritual Father on the road of redemption, shortening penitence canons and periods of not taking the Holy Eucharist as established by the canons of the Church, supporting others on their way to redemption, etc.

2. Periods of Penitence – Their Intensity and Duration

As he authored his texts during the mid-4th century, St. Basil the Great, the Bishop of Caesarea of Cappadocia, became renowned through his asceticism (Papadopoulos, 2003, p. 19) and also as a canonist of the Church. He gives detailed descriptions of the various categories of penitents, as well as of the type and duration of periods of penitence for those who committed sexual sins, homicide or apostasy. Saint Basil is prominent for his three Canonical Letters (nos. 188, 199 and 217) to *Amphilochius: Patrologia Graeca* (PG) 32, col. 664-684 (the 1st Letter), col. 716-732 (the 2nd letter) and col. 793-809 (the 3rd Letter). These canonical epistles convey that the older discipline, in force since the time of Saint Gregory the Wonderworker, was still valid and applicable. The penitents were

separated from the gathering of the believers during the Divine Liturgy. In *Homilia in martyrem Iulittam* a reference is made (an important aspect for our work) where Saint Basil advises his listeners to repent for sins together with a brother who was observing a penitence canon. This paragraph confirms the fact that the penitent in Caesarea represented a visible and identifiable group in the Christian community (Basil the Great, 1857a, col. 257D).

The third *Canonical Letter* of St. Basil, beside mentioning the four degrees of penitence, is of interest as it mentions the various periods of penitence, information which is also mentioned in canon 75 (letter 217) (Basil the Great, 1857b, col. 804A): “And, after he has come to a sense of that fearful sin, let him weep for three years standing at the door of the house of prayer, and entreating the people as they go in to prayer that each and all will mercifully offer on his behalf their prayers with earnestness to the Lord. After this let him be received for another period of three years to hearing alone, and while hearing the Scriptures and the instruction, let him be expelled and not be admitted to prayer. Afterwards, if he has asked it with tears and has fallen before the Lord with contrition of heart and great humiliation, let kneeling be accorded to him during another three years. Thus, when he shall have worthily shown the fruits of repentance, let him be received in the tenth year to the prayer of the faithful without oblation; and after standing with the faithful in prayer for two years, then, and not till then, let him be held worthy of the communion of the good thing” (Basil the Great, 1894, pp. 726-727).

The next paragraph of the same letter (canon 66) represents an example of Basilian sentence: “The intentional murderer, who has afterwards repented, will be excommunicated from the sacrament for twenty years. The twenty years will be appointed for him as follows: for four he ought to weep, standing outside the door of the house of prayer, beseeching the faithful as they enter in to offer prayer on his behalf, and confessing his own sin. After four years he will be admitted among the hearers, and during five years will go out with them. During the next seven years he will go out with the kneelers, praying. During the next four years he will only stand with the faithful, and will not take part in the oblation. On the completion of this period he will be admitted to participation in the sacrament.” (Basil the Great, 1894, p. 723)

The canonical letter of St. Basil states once more the teachings about repentance already mentioned in the works of other Fathers of the Church. Furthermore, the gradual discipline, associated with the three sins already mentioned, is also appropriated by St. Basil for kidnapping. “As to those guilty of abduction we have no ancient rule, but I have expressed my own judgment. The period is three years; the culprits and their accomplices to be excluded from service. The act committed without violence is not liable to punishment, whenever it has not been preceded by violation or robbery. The widow is independent, and to follow or not is in her own power. We must, therefore, pay no heed to excuses.” (Basil the Great, 1857c, col. 725) Abduction was certainly considered a serious sin, the punishment decided by St. Basil being in accordance with the seriousness of the deed. Bishops could diminish abduction to a species of adultery. All these considered, strictly speaking, they were free to embrace a more concessive attitude and decide on a form of penitence, other than gradual discipline.

Taking into consideration only the synods held in Ancyra, Nicene and Neocaesarea, St. Basil concludes that public repentance was not prescribed for any other sin, but for those that could be easily reduced to one of the three *ad mortem* sins (murder, sexual immorality, idolatry). For the others, the

penitent should not have to publicly repent. The latter were not disclosed after confession either by the priest or the penitent (Basil the Great, 1857d, col. 1236).

There is another aspect concerning St. Basil that is worth mentioning. At times, the Priest should not be prescribing, not even for serious sins, public penitence when this would do public detriment to the penitent. For example, the great hierarch of Cappadocia requests that the adulterous woman should not be forced to go through all the penitential strategies of sexually immoral persons, but to be allowed to stay together with the believers, but not to take the Holy Eucharist (canon 34) (Gherasim, ***). This 34th canon of St. Basil provides precious information. The conclusion is that it was forbidden to publicly accuse an adulterous woman, a deed which the Priest could find out about only during a private confession, so that the trespasser would not have been exposed to mortal danger. It seems that although Constantine the Great's law provisioned the death penalty for adultery, as in the Old Testament, in theory, for anyone, both men and women, in practice, when it came to enforcing it, the imperial authorities continued to apply the custom in the Old Testament of punishing exclusively women for such a deed.

In his turn, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Basil's brother, supposes a "secret theft" that the Priest could have known only through private confession (Gregory of Nyssa, 1863, col. 233). Thus, personal private confession was a part of the system of penitence in Asia Minor.

3. The Need to Confess Sins Verbally

The Bishop or the Priest has a major role in establishing the canon of penitence, which St. Basil describes in many places as being the "oikonomos of penitence" (Basil the Great, 1857e, col. 661, 716, 723). He is at the service of his sheep, to listen to their confession and decide on the appropriate canon. Saint Basil the Great says that, as a result of the sins of our flesh, we are supposed to confess, without fear, through our own mouth. His words are as follows: "Have we not committed sin when we surrendered our body to it and to trespassing? So, shall we confess through our mouth, using the same instrument to scatter sin. Have you been greedy? Pay for it. Have you drunken too much? Fast. Have you been too proud? Repent of it. Have you been covetous? Take solace. Have you killed? Endure martyrdom or endure things similar to martyrdom; compel your body through confession. And then, after confession, will you be worthy of praising God in the psalter with ten chords." The Cappadocian Bishop does not omit to state the benefits of confessing sins: "The Judge intends to show His mercy on you and share His mercifulness. If after committing sins He will find humble, heartbroken, crying with tears for your deeds, if He sees you confessing, without shame, what you have secretly done, that you ask for your brethren's help in curing, if He sees you have become worthy of mercy, He would be abundant toward you in His mercifulness." (Basil the Great, 1986, p. 250)

In the *Long Rules*, St. Basil states that "the superior is obliged, therefore, to be vigilant on behalf of the souls of the brethren and as seriously concerned for the salvation of each one as if he himself were to render an account for him." (Basil the Great, 1857d, col. 985B; Basil, 1950, p. 288) He underlines that the superior has the duty to lead his brethren in all aspects of the spiritual life. To act as such, "according to the Lord's injunction, every sin must be made known to the superior, either by the sinner himself or by those who are cognizant of his fault, if they themselves are not able to effect a cure; for

vice kept secret is a festering wound in the soul.” (Basil the Great, 1857d, col. 1036A; Basil, 1950, p. 324) This way, the Bishop of Caesarea encourages responsibility toward the others. Saint Basil cannot ignore the presence of sinners amongst a community that aspires to holiness (Basil the Great, 1857d, col. 1165B). For this very reason, nobody can keep silence concerning the sins that are committed within the community, as every sin concerns him or her directly. The disregard for sinners has been seen by St. Basil in strict terms, as uncleanness – the Gr. [molysmos] – “that makes it blameworthy” (Basil the Great, 1857d, col. 1117BC).

According to St. Basil, Christians are called to become guardians of their brethren in faith, to grieve for their brethren’s sins and rejoice in their bettering (Basil the Great, 1894, p. 22 and 295). Under such circumstances, where the involvement of the community and of the superior in the penitence of all is not just a thing to aim at, but also a duty, the questions regarding public confession acquires a new dimension: does the sinner have to confess his or her sins to everybody or only to a single person? The only criterion the great hierarch states in the *Lesser Rules* is that sins must be confessed to those who are capable of helping the sinner (Basil the Great, 1857d, col. 1236A, col. 1233BC, col. 1284D). The ecclesiastical aspect of these rule is underlined by E. Baudry in „A propos du rigorisme de Saint Basile: gravité du péché, liberation du pécheur” (Baudry, 1977, pp. 158-173).

Although the saint’s commandments were followed by some monks in Palestine and the Desert Fathers of Egypt during the 5th and the 6th centuries, yet in the *Apothegms* of the Desert Fathers there are mentioned situations when monks avoided talking about a brother’s sin. Saint Basil’s intention was not to try to eliminate criticism, but to avoid judging a brother. His approach relied on the concept that sin does not concern only the sinner, as the sinner’s deeds could also affect persons who do not show resentment against the brother’s sin. The Desert Fathers shared the same idea, however they came to different conclusions and adopted a different behavioural *pattern* in front of the monk fallen in sin, one that was more appropriate for the monastic community.

We rightly ask ourselves how could the superior of a monastery fulfil his duty to the sinner? The ascetic works of St. Basil, such as the *Canonical Letters* (no. 199 and 217), testify to the method and rules that guided this process (Gain, 1958, pp. 200-206). The superior’s duty was to be a judge who strived to maintain order in the community, being both sensitive and careful (Bitton-Ashkelony, 1999, p. 184; Gribomont, 1984, pp. 183-185). The Cappadocian Archbishop considered public confession as being extremely important especially in the case of sins committed by thought, arguing that public confession encouraged the entire community to pray for the sinner’s healing from his or her disease (Basil the Great, 1857f, col. 881B). Conversely, other renowned ascetics in the late Antiquity contested this type of ‘solidarity’ and, in contrast to St. Basil, they did not consider public confession as being requisite.

In the same context of penitence, in *The Lesser Rules*, 178, when being asked about the significance of the text at Gal. 6:2, he says: “we cast away sin when we lead sinners to conversion (επιστροφή)”. It seems that, from St. Basil’s perspective, the care we provide to the sinner during the repenting process stops at this point. The most significant aid that others are provided with is the counsel to better their behaviour and thinking. In the great Cappadocian’s writings we do not encounter any intention of a model to transfer sin, as we could read in *Apothegmata* or in the writings of St. Barsanuphius.

Although reciprocal responsibility is important with St. Basil, he does not reach the stage of sharing and curing sin, as it is the case with the contemporary writings we mentioned. Apparently, the role of bearer of the burden, as expressed in Gal. 6:2, could be performed only within small and intimate communities. The same point of view is shared by Mark the Hermit (Mark the Hermit, col. 981; Gouillard, 1984, pp. 469-477).

4. Confessors – Spiritual Advisers on the Path to Redemption

Saint Basil, being permanently preoccupied with the spiritual evolution of his clergy, does not hesitate to state that spiritual advisers assigned to listening to their spiritual sons' confessions should be capable to advise them on the path to redemption: "Confessing sins has the same purpose as revealing bodily passions. Thus, as a person's passions of the body are not openly evident to everyone, not even to those who might happen to be close at a given moment, but to those skilled in curing them, so is the case with revealing sins which is rightfully to be done in front of those who can cure, as it is written: «you, the strong, bear the weaknesses of the weak», that is to lift them up by caring for them." (Basil the Great, 1989, p. 415)

The Basilian pedagogy is revealed in minute detail when the Bishop formats one of his writings as a series of questions and answers. Such a question (no. 288) broaches a very basic aspect of confession: "The one who intends to confess his or her sins, should he or she confess to everyone and to those close at the moment, or to whom?". Saint Basil's answer is precise: "it is necessary to confess our sins to those entrusted with the *oikonomia* of God's mysteries. As this has been done by the older ones who were repenting in the time of the saints. As it is written in the Gospels that they entrusted their sins to St. John the Baptist, and in the Acts, that they were confessing to the Apostles, who baptised them all." (Basil the Great, 1989, p. 446) Saint Basil's intention to limit, by this answer, the number of receptors of confession is plausible. The latter was performed not in front of the gathering of the believers, but in front of the clergy, who are those who were assigned through ordination as *oikonomos* and stewards of the Holy Mysteries.

Saint Basil does not accept confession to another person only to the Priest, as he is the one who receives the private confession, manages the public one and imposes on the penitent the canon required to cure the disease of sin. The confessor's skilfulness is a prerequisite of an authentic confessional act ("The administering of a reprimand appertains to the cure of the soul; therefore, just as not everyone may practice the medical art, so no one should give a reprimand except he to whom the superior, after careful consideration, gives this permission" (Basil, 1950, p. 330)). Thus, since the penitence procedure represents a cure for the soul, not anyone can prescribe penitence, as not anyone can cure. Under these circumstances, the Priest should consider the fact that he cannot be either ignorant, or impose burdensome prescriptions, but he must consider a set of criteria: "The duration and the kind of penitence acts should be decided by the superior, according to the stamina of the body, in accordance with the mood of the soul and the seriousness of the mistake." (Basil the Great, 1989, p. 363)

Saint Basil's canon 34 provisions that the priest must keep the secret of the confession as the scope of the Mystery is to cure the sinner's trespassings, not to disclose them or to cause affray or to expose

the penitent to public judgement. Confession brings together the person's revealing his or her intimate thoughts and God's judgement, and the one that prevails is the latter.

5. The Moment when the Priest Ascertains the Fervour of the Penitent's Repentance, the Former Could Shorten the Epiteimia

Saint Basil considers both the person that prescribes the epiteimia and the penitent. His empathic capacity is obvious in the way he states the answer to question no. 158: "In what state of the soul should one accept the canon? Answer: The one that suits the sick son who fights for his life, being cared for by his father and doctor; even if curing is sour and painful, it is right that he should trust the love and skilfulness of the one that looks after him and wishes him to be cured." (Basil the Great, 1989, p. 383)

Pursuing the deepening of the filial relation between the penitent and the spiritual adviser, the Caesarean Bishop considers that the periods prescribed by the canons can be shortened, when one considers that penitence fulfilled, meaning that it has strengthened the penitent's soul against sin. This way it becomes obvious that St. Basil allows the confessor to shorten periods as he perceives the deep repentance of the penitent establishes in him or her a resolve against sin, as a fruit of his or her penitence. Besides that, the entire Eastern tradition, focusing on the Priests' ability in organising the disciplinary side of penitence, does not mention anywhere any legal aspect of it. From this perspective, the Priest is not a judge, but an instrument of the Holy Spirit. Saint Asterius of Amasea recommends us not to judge so that we be not judged in our turn (Asterius of Amasea, col. 360CD). The word of the Gospel does not prevent us from judging kindly and thoughtfully, but from condemning persons by an exaggerated sentence. As, even we should accept judgment, this should be given according to the procedures used by doctors to evaluate a case or as the Priest in the Old Testament who was assessing leprosy cases (Theodoret, 1860, col. 320C).

Further details will be given in St. Basil's writings, who, in a very practical manner, turned this observation into a canonical rule in his third canonical letter: the moment when the Bishop ascertains the fervour of repentance, he can shorten the epiteimia (can. 74): "Whether any of those fallen in the above mentioned sins will pass time diligently confessing sins, the one entrusted by the God of love to bind and unbind, ascertaining the profound and sincere confession (repentance) of the sinner, at his will and from love for people can shorten the time for penitence, he will not be worthy of condemnation, the teachings of the Scripture saying that the ones who confess (repent) with deep sorrow, receive more of God's love for people". This rule survived time. In the 6th century, Symeon the Stylite the Younger received one day a man who displayed sincere and profound repentance, through a public confession. He immediately asked for forgiveness. The Saint unbound his sins and lets that one go, forgiven and in peace (Simeon Stylite the Younger, 1865, col. 3188A). Saint Maximos the Confessor tells us about the situation of a nun who ran away from her monastery: "The repentance of her soul is deep and untellable, the same is the humbleness of her soul after this mistake she has done and because she is now separated from you which is enough punishment for her." (Maxim the Confessor, 1865, col. 457A]

This practice is thus a very old one. The Eastern pastoral tradition could estimate the sincerity of repentance and, passing over rules, lessened discipline to reinforce the evangelical spirit. In the *Apothegms* a feature of penitence is not accepting long periods of penitence. This comes into opposition with the statements of St. Basil in the *Canonical Letters* and the ascetic works, even if he insists on the quality of confession more than on its duration.

6. Conclusions

In the works of St. Basil one can easily notice that, when approaching penitence, the great Cappadocian does not convey the idea of punishment or penitential actions aimed at the purging of sins, as it is suggested, in a limitative way, in the everyday speech, but at a profound and intense penitence, in accordance with the seriousness of the sin. This penitence leads to putting an end to the sinful life and restoring communion with Christ. After all, redemption is a personal decision, a voluntary commitment to follow the narrow path to eternal life. According to the degree of acknowledging his or her responsibility for eternal life, every Christian shall be worthy of merits or punishment.

Repentance is changing the core of the Christian's will. The penitent aims at something different, something that can turn him or her into a different person. Penitence means establishing good landmarks in life, day by day, hour by hour. True repentance also means defeating the devil by man, the one who has been vanquished by committing sins. A real repentance also means man's gratitude towards God, penitence is man's real offering to God. All the others have been given to us and granted by Him. Meditating on repentance for sins, each of us can understand and enjoy the generous love God pours upon us, the Christian, and His will to see us redeemed, as this has been conceived for us, mankind; He wants the people to repent.

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