

## Penance

Besides the "dismissal penances of the Holy Mysteries", there are other "penances in separate conditions of whatever good deeds" (See Spiritual Regulation, Supplement for the Orthodox Church Clergy, item 14; Book on the Duties of Parish Presbyters, § 106), which for the penitent "the father confessor imposes and defines what prayers, alms, fasts, travel to holy sites, prostrations and similar, seeing that it will seem appropriate according to the judgment of the father confessor" (Orthodox Confession, answer to question 113). Imposing these **penances** on the penitent in needed cases, the priest should firmly remember that they are not punitive, but corrective means, that they have for its own purpose not vengeance to the sinner for sins, not satisfaction of judgment of God, but of the spiritual healing of the infirm, rooting out of them those sinful habits and propensities, which are done by his unworthy son of the Church. The purpose of this penance, the Orthodox priest must never forget, is their character in order to act correctly and expediently while imposing them on the sinner. (Book on the Duties of Parish Presbyters § 106).

The **General Canons**, as is possible to establish relative to the use of penances are the following:

1) Whoever doesn't understand his illness, opened only by the father confessor (it happens, sometimes, they even don't know that major sins are sins), then it is necessary to impose penances on him so that the infirm understands his infirmity and whenever possible become healed.

2) Whoever due to the habit of his illness does not sincerely feel its power and danger, does not show this in repentance of the imposed destruction, then it is necessary to impose a penance for this.

3) Whoever, understanding his infirmity and trying to free himself from it, from his side uses some effort to eradicate it by himself, but, unfortunately, it is necessary to impose a penance for this and to continue it for however long it takes for the sinner to be corrected.

4) On people with living consciences, with confused memory of their sins, and after repentance it is necessary to impose penances even though their sins were not heavy - for the calming of conscience.

5) On people, fallen into heavy, though not secret sins (e.g. carnal sins), it is needful to impose penances and at the sincerity of repentance from the side of sinners in order to stop the possibility of returning to sin, even by chance.

As penances have as their goal the eradication of sinful habits in us and the authentication from our side of the sincerity of the repentance, then in compliance with this goal feats of such virtues are appointed in **penances** as would be directly opposite to that sin for which they are appointed, so for example for the lover of money is appointed alms-giving, for the fornicator is appointed a fast, for the weakening in faith and hope are appointed prayers and so forth.<sup>1</sup>

"Repentance", says St. J. Chrysostom, "I call not only what remains from former bad deeds but even more what makes good deeds. Create, says John (the Forerunner of Christ), fruits worthy of repentance. How do we create them? Arriving at the opposite, for example, have you carried away another's? First give also yours. Have you committed adultery for a long time? Now abstain from intercourse with your own wife for certain days and get used to the abstention. Have you offended and even beaten someone? First bless those offending you and be a benefactor to the one beaten. For it is insufficient to only remove the arrow from the body for our healing, but it is also necessary to apply medicine to a wound. Have you, before, indulged in lechery and drunkenness? Now go and fast and only drink water. Before, have you looked at another's beauty with voluptuous eyes? First of all, do not look at women at all, for it is said: evade evil and do good" (Commentary 10 on the Gospel of Matthew, Russian translation, pp. 179-190).

However, at the imposing of penances, it is necessary to also pay attention to the **external condition of the penitent**, in order sometimes not to impose such penances which the penitent finds impossible to execute<sup>2</sup>. It is impossible e.g. to impose a fast for pregnant women, simple soldiers or the needy - the distribution of alms to a merchant or officials and in general people very engaged with their affairs - long-term prayers and so forth (see the Book on the Duties of Parish Presbyters 106).

The penance assigned is either **great or little**, the heavy or easy depending on the quality of the sin<sup>3</sup>, according to the reasons and circumstances accompanying it<sup>4</sup> according to the gender<sup>5</sup> and the age of those confessing, by gender and age<sup>6</sup>, social rank, service and marital status<sup>7</sup> and so forth<sup>8</sup>, and the main thing by sincerity of repentance: for the person, sincerely and deeply rooted in their sins, may be more indulgent in the assigned penances. Then, depending on the zealousness performed in fulfilling the penance and self-correction of the penance it may be reduced; but to the cold and careless person the assigned penance should be more severe and longer, and, in case of his slow persistence in sin, it should be increased<sup>9</sup> (see I, 12; VI, 102; Basil the Great 84; Gregory of Nyssa 2, 3, 4, 5).

At the imposing of penances it is necessary in the most exact paradigm to define its **means, time and place of fulfillment**, that is to say: when to begin and end the penance, as to fulfill it and so forth. Otherwise the penitent may remain in perplexity, confusion and unease. Finally, the father confessor should prepare the penitent to accept the penance assigned to him - up to the full recognition, that the penance is imposed not arbitrarily but necessarily<sup>10</sup>.

As penances are no satisfaction to God for sins, that **it is also possible not to impose any penance**<sup>11</sup> on the sinner at all, if he sincerely regrets his sins with tears and promises before all and with all his strength to be kept from them. St. John the Baptist did not assign any penances to repenting publicans, besides, that they always arrived henceforth under the law, ordered for their calling (Book on the Duties of Parish Presbyters § 108).

According to the "Book on the Duties of Parish Presbyters" even penance should be determined **secret** for secret sinners, in order not to open their sins before all and through that not to harden them; but for obvious sinners, such as public women, obvious thieves, robbers and so forth, a clear penance should be assigned, e.g. going to church during a certain time, public prostrations in church and public alms. One should approach it this way because if obvious sinners, seduced by their bad enticement in the whole society without clear penances, were allowed with their bad behavior equally with others commune of the Body and Blood of Christ, then they would be the cause of new temptation, as there would not be any apparent difference in the judgment of the church "between clear sinners and those who are not in any way accused among honorable Christians" (Book on the Duties of the Parish Presbyter, § 107). However, the priest should remember that he himself cannot impose a clear penance. If one meets a case in which public penances would be imposed on the penitent, then the priest should be required to present this matter for the review of the local Bishop (See the "Reminder to Priests" p. 212).

Generally, the priest should firmly remember that he is obligated "to carry and present" to the local Hierarch the "**greater and not easily judged faults**" and generally all doubtful cases met in confession (Stavl. hier. gram. [Certificate of Hierarchical Ordination]). Thus in the reports to the Hierarch he should not name the penitents, but "only presents in detail the sin and should ask for his judgment" (Spiritual Regulation, Pribavl. o prav. prich. tserk. [Supplement for the Orthodox Church Clergy] item 13).

**The dean** should, by his prudence and how his God will stand, to refer to the necessary manual for priests and find in it how to confess their spiritual children by it, how

to bind and absolve the human conscience (Instruktsiia blagochinnim [Instructions for Deans] 17).

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<sup>1</sup> One may order the **covetous man** with undoubted advantage, besides returning goods unfairly taken from others to the proper party, the distribution of alms to the beggar (See the Book on the Duties of the Presbyter § 106; Orthodox Confession, answer to question 26); for him and what is an already important victory over himself and his passion, if though with effort, though unwillingly the first time, he will be forced to a distribution even though it is not rich alms; with the flow of time, often with the help of repeated acts of mercy, he may learn by experience that "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35), and will recover from his thoughtless predilections for perishable treasures. It is rather timely to order those suffering **from pride** to unfailingly read the word of God every day (For more details, see Past. Bogosl. [Pastoral Theology], § 115-150).

When **penances of prostrations** are appointed **in quality**, then it is better not to define their number: it is possible that the other will probably deliver a prayer in one mechanical process, but on the penance he will not look at it as a means to refrain from vice and become accustomed to virtue, but exclusively as to an expiatory punishment. It is better to assign in a penance the slow reading with penitential feeling of this or that prayer, which whoever knows, a certain number of times so that throughout all this reading those praying continually do full prostrations. For one ignorant of any prayer (of course that should not be in the parish of the good shepherd) it is possible to specify the Jesus Prayer, which, of course, everyone knows, and if he does not know, then in the confession of such a person it is possible to teach it very conveniently and in brevity: "O Lord Jesus Christ" (bow), "Son of God" (bow), "have mercy on me, a sinner" (bow) (Rukovodstvo dlia Sel'skikh Pastyrei [Guide for Village Pastors] 1860, 12).

<sup>2</sup> Such penances, as a **donation to the temple**, for example, olive oil, candles and so forth, if it is accepted willingly and does not burden the woman under penance is admissible (Tserkovnyi Viestnik [Church Messenger] 1894 31).

<sup>3</sup> It is dangerous to assign to a penitent a **great and long penance** for small and insignificant sins: from this, instead of correction, it may result in other still greater despondency and even exasperation and then from despair and grief to indulge still in the major vices and lawlessness. The same sort of action may also lead to less than adequate penances, e.g. the assignment of 1000 prostrations daily in Great Lent and so forth (Fr. Hojnatsky, p. 147).

<sup>4</sup> At the resolution of the question relative to penances for a woman **with a dead child** should enter into that investigation, as much as the deed depended on the will of the mother: whether there was malicious intent or negligence or an accident and to arrive at agreement with these (Tserkovnyi Viestnik [Church Messenger] 1890, 15)

Relative to the penances "for **having aborted a child**" see above pp. 881-882 and refer to pp. 1025-1026.

<sup>5</sup> According to the 34th canon of St. Basil the Great, "that the crime of **women** under penance for adultery, upon their own confession, or otherwise convicted, our fathers have clearly forbidden to publish this, that it not be the occasion for their death; but that they remain out of communion, for as long as the repentance was not fulfilled". From this canon it is apparent, that the Holy Fathers had no custom and even positively forbade to even subjecting such heavy punishment on sinful women which may open them to other sins.

This wise canon was decided according to indulgence for infirm women - not for their sins but for their infirm spirit, not able to maintain all the weight of open accusations before all, but also by attention to their external status, which through detection of their dishonorable sin, could become unfortunate forever both in the family and in society, and would generally subject them to indelible shame, but this could be a cause of death for them, i.e. could kill the soul by despair and to make life intolerable (Archim. John, Kur. Tserk. Zakonov [Course in Church Law], Vol. 2, pp. 55-56).

It is self-understood, that the danger of this disclosure, might submit the reason "for death to the accused" obliging the pastor not to generally impose such penances on sinners, by which their sin could made known to others, at the same time this does not at all release the pastor from the necessity to subject sinners to such penances, by which their sin cannot be disclosed to others, if these secret penances are necessary for the clarification and pacification of the conscience of sinners.

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Anyway the pastor, as the father confessor, without submitting his line of action "the reason for death" women, who sinned by adultery together with them should undertake all pastoral measures for the protection of such sinners from danger to return to their former sins.

Generally this sin presently demands special attention from the pastors of the Church, as "excessive freedom in circulation of genders" have now become so usual that during weakness or sometimes even total absence of consciousness in the spouses of their duty to care of the moral safety of each other, gives easy access to the family center of depraved married women; now the false teachers are preaching "freedom of feelings", but also the prevalence among us of the known manner of "modern" shows, entertainments, books etc., filling the imagination with seductive pictures, dulling the sense of bashfulness and irritating sensuality, weakens the consciousness of the heaviness of the sin of adultery.

<sup>6</sup> The lower the age of the confessor, the more indulgent should be the penance. See note 2 on p. 995 concerning **penances for adolescents.**

<sup>7</sup> Imposed by the priest on the penitent, the **penance should not harm** the good reputation of the latter; but this is why one should be careful to impose such a penance, which would enable others to find out the sin of the penitent. Here it would be necessary to carry those penances, which could become known to another, to give cause for another to think that the person bearing the penance is more sinful than others, and that to offend his honor or to raise different rumors and misunderstanding. Generally this should mean that the penitent sincerely confesses in confidence that nobody will find out his sins. That is why it is not necessary that the priest impose such a penance, which might become known to another (refer to p. 1030 below), and it is always necessary to have the danger, as though the fear of penances did not keep the penitent from sincere confession (Reminder to Priests pp. 101, 211). It is self-understood that the priest in any case should not become angry about some of the parishioners to refuse whatever thing, in view of the penance, in kissing the cross in Church, when others freely kiss it or not to give the antidoron when he approaches for his reception or to deprive another of what church ceremony (e.g. visiting the houses of all parishioners with Holy Water to bypass the dwelling of that one with whom he is angry) "Such presbyters rather sin, because with all such actions will be without honor in the name of God" (Book on the Duties of the Parish Presbyter, § 109).

<sup>8</sup> According to the "Novaia Skrizhalj [New Tablets]" the father confessor "is obligated to observe during the confession of the penitent the seven following **circumstances**: who, what, where, by what influence, for what, how and when.

That is who is repenting? ... The elderly, the young, the married, the virgin, the educated and so forth.

What was done? ... Has he sinned, has he broken a commandment, what kind of and namely in what.

Where? That is in what place, secretly or openly, in church or at home and so forth.

By what influence? ... Advice, command, compulsion, example and so forth.

For what? ... Whether naturally, or infirmity demanded this, whether by the need or by one's will.

How? ... That is by what pattern? in word or deed, in thought or by intention, suddenly, thoughtlessly or after premeditated reflection and preparation and so forth.

When? ... That is during what time? In time of famine, in need and disability, or in prosperity and wealth, on ordinary days or during lent and on feasts and so forth.

Conforming with these circumstances, one should also impose penances, in measure with the heaviness of the sins" (Novaia Skrizhalj [New Tablets])

<sup>9</sup> Having imposed a penance, one should not disregard its execution, whether for all this it is better to keep the corresponding record better or it is indispensable at the subsequent confession to ask if **in the former confession a penance imposed** has been executed and whether it has offered the expected result (see p. 1002; refer below on the "Prayer of Absolution").

<sup>10</sup> However, when the penitent has presented satisfactory reasons that he **may not execute** this or that **penance**, then the priest may cancel it and assign to him another more convenient one for execution (Fr. Hojnatsky p. 148).

<sup>11</sup> There exists a belief that **confession in the name of the holiness of any place** or the special value of a relic, at which this confession is made, it has a special power and may comfortably resolve any sins not only without any obstacles, but even without any kind of penance. This belief is especially widespread in the western territory of Russia, owing to the existence there of "dropped" confessions (refer to note 2 on p. 875), inherited from Latins and Uniates, Priests should dispel this error dangerous to moral life. They can also eradicate it practically through imposing stricter penances at confession in holy places (Fr. Hojnatsky p. 145; for more details see the Rukovodstvo dlia Sel'skikh Pastyrei [Guide for Village Pastors], 1871 vol. 1).

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If the **penitent asks about assigning a penance for him, then** in view of soothing the conscience of such persons, it is not necessary to refuse a penance to them. Especially, this is necessary to have in view concerning those who have returned from the schism (Zabelin, pp. 207-208). Such persons have during their stay in the schism, taken root in the belief that penance consists of the unconditionally main necessary accessory of the mystery of repentance, without which confession is not in the confession and that the forgiveness of sins is given by God after the person will execute a penance. In view of this, according to some, on those confessors even for ordinary sins of human infirmity, it is possible to impose a respective penance, small and easy, but all the same to impose it so that their conscience was not confused and they have not thought that the physician does not heal. (Rukovodstvo dlia Sel'skikh Pastyrei [Guide for Village Pastors], 1860, 43). However, it follows to notice that the priest, worried about soothing the ailing conscience of those confessors, should implant in their consciousness a true insight on the mystery of repentance.

*S. V. Bulgakov, "Handbook for Church Servers", 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1274 pp., (Kharkov, 1900), pp. 1027-1030.  
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