

OR^{IC}†^{XC}_{NI} ^{KA} HODDY

IN A NUTSHELL: Sin and our relationship with God

We were created that we might be made happy. We were made happy when we were created. We were entrusted with Paradise that we might enjoy life. We received a Commandment that we might obtain a good stature by keeping it; not that God did not know what would take place, but because He had laid down the law of Free Will. We were deceived because we were the objects of envy. We were cast out because we transgressed. We fasted because we formerly refused to fast, allowing ourselves to be overpowered by the Tree of Knowledge. For the Commandment was ancient, coeval with ourselves, and was a form of education for our souls and curb of luxury, to which we were reasonably made subject, in order that we might recover by keeping it that which we had lost by not keeping it. We needed an Incarnate God, a God who would be put to death, that we might live. We were put to death together with Him that we might be cleansed; we rose again with Him because we were put to death with Him; we were glorified with Him, because we rose again with Him (St. Gregory the Theologian, Oration 45.28, Second Oration on Pascha)

If we narrowed down all of our problems, that is, all the problems of human beings, they would be narrowed down to this—sin—our own sins, the collective sins of man, and the sins of the dark spiritual realm. “When [selfish] desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is full grown, brings forth death” (Holy Scripture: James 1.15). Not only physical death, but far worse yet, eternal death of the soul, that is, absent of participation in the eternal life of God’s grace. Of course, if each of us dealt adequately with our own sins, there would be no collective sins of man, and the sins of the dark spiritual realm would have no power.

Therefore we must not take lightly that Christ was crucified for our salvation, offering Himself as a sin offering in several ways. One is as a “sin offering” to go beyond justice to show us the final realm of salvation: love and mercy. For He was

innocent, yet suffered with the guilty and for the guilty, being numbered among sinful men that to those who were willing to work out their own salvation, even when this required struggle, would be numbered among the righteous. But He also offered Himself to be one of us in the flesh tempted as we are, yet overcame sin in all ways, finally in obedience on a cross, going beyond virtue to the heavenly realm of action. For “We have a Great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God...we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all things tempted as we were, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4.14-16).

As Orthodox Christians, we have a sacramental understanding of the world. The whole world was created and given sacramentality, and our departure from it is what defines sin. As Fr. Alexander Schmemmann explains: “Sin is itself perceived here as a falling away of man, and in him of all creation, from its sacramentality, from the ‘paradise of delight,’ and into ‘this world,’ which lives no longer according to God, but according to itself and in itself and therefore corrupt and mortal. And if this is so, then Christ accomplishes the salvation of the world by renewing the world and life itself as sacrament” (*Eucharist*, 34).

Sin destroys us as people. Our personhood erodes more and more as sin viciously feeds on it. Since God does not force us to do anything apart from our will, in order to achieve a lasting happiness we must cooperate with Him and let His grace enter our lives. “The soul is susceptible to sin in three ways: in actions, in words, and in thoughts. There are six ways by which we may attain liberty from sin: by preserving the purity of...the soul's non-intelligent or passable aspect [which] consists of the five senses and of the spoken word. ...The body cannot be purified without fasting and vigil, the soul cannot be purified without mercy and truth, and the mind [nous-spiritual intellect] cannot be purified without contemplation of God and Communion with Him.” So says St. Elias the Presbyter (11th-12th c.) in his *Gnomic Anthology* (I.19-21). Here St. Elias gives us crucial first principles by which we might gain back our personhood and gain the peace of God that settles our souls. For the Bible says that He was made like unto us in all things, yet without sin. It is for this reason that

St. Symeon the New Theologian relates this passage to us: “Of us mortals God demands only one thing, that we do not sin. But this...is simply keeping unstained the image and rank we possess by nature. In this way, clothed in the radiant garment of the Spirit, we abide in God and He in us; through grace we become gods and sons of God and are illumined by the light of His knowledge.” (St. Symeon the New Theologian; Practical and Theological Precepts). “Sons of God” and “gods” here refers to the psalms where it refers to the saints as ‘gods’ and other Scriptures as “sons of God,” not by essence, but through grace, known as theosis, or union with God by grace. This, then is what we strive for: union unto the One Man Jesus Christ--the New Adam without sin.


What is sin? Sin, from the Greek hamartia (‘amartia) literally means “not complete” or “not whole.” It is from a (ha or ‘am) meaning “not” and artia (from artios) meaning “complete, whole, full mark or full measure.” This is also why hamartia is also defined as “missing the mark.” Sin is, in Orthodoxy, seen as primarily spiritual illness and disengagement from cooperating with and participating in God’s grace. It is the result of departing from the commandment and the spiritual law of God, since these were given to show us the path to be in union with God by synergy, or co-operation with God. The tragedy and locus of sin, therefore, is not “legal violation” or “rule-breaking,” since man was not created for the commandment, but the commandment for man that He might have synergetic union with God. Sin is truly

transgression of the divine law, but sin’s tragedy and locus is in severance of the soul from the Divine Grace and its departure from thinking and operating in union with God. The divine law “of freedom” in the New Testament is God’s path to wholeness and union with Him. Just as the natural law tells us that we cannot take poison without physical death, and therefore to violate the natural law by taking poison will result in illness and death, so also, when we transgress the divine law, the result is spiritual illness and death. Therefore, to say it is transgression of the law is true, in that transgression of the



law both is an act of spiritual illness and death and also results in the same. Truly the “writ against us” is torn up, but this to heal the breach, not to appease and satisfy a bloodthirsty deity. It is something that needs “healed,” not merely adjudicated.

The Church Fathers teach us that in order to be saved from sin, we need not only forgiveness, but also remission of our sins. Forgiveness and remission are two distinct things and indicate two distinct modes of divine healing in Scripture and in Orthodox theology. Forgiveness is mending the breach, but remission, as with remission of cancer, is removing of the illness. If a drug addict repents, they can be forgiven, but the illness of addiction remains until it is remitted. Both forgiveness and remission are spiritual healing—healing the breach then healing the illness. If one severs his arm, he will lose his arm and die unless two things happen: 1. The breach is mended—to try and regraft the muscles, ligaments, etc. but also 2. That the resulting infection is also healed. Thus, when Orthodoxy speaks of “cleansing” sin, it is referring to cleansing the infection—removing by the “washing” of the grace of God that which corrupts the soul as spiritual infection and leads to death. This is accomplished through the Mysteries of the Church, the Sacraments, in conjunction with a life dedicated to following God’s commandments and to repenting when we fail to follow His commandments. May God help us all so that, through our whole lives we remain receptive to the grace given to us at our Baptism and Chrismation, our sins are forgiven through repentance and through the mystery of Confession, that our sins are then further remitted through Holy Communion, that we are healed by the power operative in these, and in the Mystery of Holy Unction, in which our soul is healed, and our body is either healed of its sufferings or else its sufferings are united to those of Christ who suffered for the salvation of the world.

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