

Penthos: The Lenten Journey To Joy

NB: I gave a presentation on this theme a few decades ago to a group of lay people trying to live the Cistercian spirituality in the world. I was not officially Orthodox back then. Then I revised it and shared it with some Orthodox parishes and sites. It was published on the site of the friends of Mount Athos. I have revised it again this March of 2020 for the benefit of the parishioners of Saint Innocent of Moscow.

As we go through another Lent, we may be thinking, here we go again, many weeks without our favorite eggs and bacon, all that we like to eat, plus this year we have to face so much hardship with the COVID-19, and we can't even go out!

Today, I would like to propose to you a more dynamic and positive outlook on Lent, along the line of Father's presentation last Sunday. Great Lent is actually an adventure, a fabulous journey. All of us Orthodox Christians are together on this journey, and we have a great companion: the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-31).

You heard this parable during the Divine Liturgy a few weeks ago. It speaks volumes on the love of the Father, so much so that some people don't call it the prodigal son, but the prodigal father!

It also teaches us about ourselves. As the story begins, we know that the prodigal son is none other than our own selves, with our sinfulness and rebellion. During Matins (here and after, I'll be quoting several times from the Sunday of the Prodigal Son prayer services), we pray:

"The divine treasure that once you gave me, Father, I have sinfully wasted. I have departed from You and lived as the Prodigal, O Compassionate Father... But now I return to You and cry with tears: I fall down before Your loving-kindness, accept me now also as I return".

"The divine treasure that once you gave me...": with the Prodigal, we acknowledge the goodness of the Father, and we are aware of all the wealth He has given us: our lives, the beauty of nature, our families and friends, and His Salvation.

If we are honest with ourselves, we also have to admit the waste we have made of these treasures. The prodigal son went to a far country, and there spent all that he had. A far country: it is like a definition of our human condition that we must assume and make ours as we begin our journey. We constantly turn and depart from our Father, we run away from the source of His goodness as if we had somewhere more important to go.

Far from our Father, far from our true Home, we are in exile. There, we are enslaved and we suffer. We are enslaved to a multiplicity of needs, many being aroused in us by our consumerism society (just as the prodigal wanted to consume the husks of the pigs). We are torn between all these needs, which keep us at the superficial level, and we suffer, because deep under these needs, we feel the hunger for the only important thing:

"I am wasted with hunger... and in exile from Your presence, O Christ supreme in loving-kindness. Take pity on me as I now return, and save me as I sing the praises of Your love for mankind".

In exile, enslaved and in pain, we cry with tears, with the prodigal and with the psalmist: *"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept at the memory of Zion... On the poplars there we had hung up our harps... How could we sing a song on alien soil?"* This Psalm 136 was written by a nation in exile, dominated in a foreign land, weeping bitterly for the life which then stood afar off.

So did the prodigal weep from his own exile, pondering on the goodness of his Father's love.

The whole Lenten journey, from these bitter tears to tears of joy in the company and union of the Father, can become our own journey if we stand in examination of our lives, see how far we have brought ourselves from the life God intends for us, and then deeply long and desire to return to our true home. This is the spirit of *penthos*, of compunction.

In the Great Canon of Saint Andrew that we sang at Saint Innocent's during the first week of Lent), we pray:

*O Lamb of God,
Who take away the sins of all,
Take from me the heavy yoke of sin,
And in Your compassion
Grant me tears of **compunction**.*

And the word **compunction** is repeated many times throughout the whole canon.

Without compunction, our faith would probably stay at the level of our head. It is important to have compunction to understand God's love for us with our guts, and to love also God and our brothers and sisters with our full humanity.

John Climacus considered compunction as a duty: The Ladder 7,70 p.123: *"When our soul leaves this world we shall not be blamed for not having worked miracles, or for not having been theologians or contemplatives. But we shall certainly have to give an account to God of why we have not unceasingly mourned."*

Compunction is essential according to Saint Gregory Palamas (he is my favorite Orthodox father, and I was originally scheduled to do this presentation on the Sunday of Saint Gregory Palamas, so here are a few passages by him):

"O come, brethren, let us worship and fall down and weep, as David himself urges us, before the Lord that made us, who has called us to repentance and to this saving sorrow, mourning and contrition. Anyone devoid of this sadness has not obeyed the Lord who calls us. He is not numbered among God's saints, and will not obtain the blessedness in the gospel, nor the promised divine consolation. 'Blessed are they that mourn', it says, 'for they shall be comforted' (Mt 5:4)" (Homily 29:15, page 233, translated and published by Christopher Veniamin – Mount Thabor Publishing, 2009).

NB: Gregory Palamas's treatises are difficult, plus they are even all available in English (lucky me, they are available in French), but his homilies on the liturgical year are much easier to understand, and they are beautiful, highly recommended).

And earlier on in the same homily (29:10, page 231), he talks about "the mourning that brings salvation."

As is evidenced in the following passage, for him, compunction can even be a sign of real brotherly love:

*"When you pray to the Lord with contrition and **sweet pain** in your heart equally for yourself and for every man, known to you or unknown, friend or foe, whether or not he has grieved you, then know that you love your neighbor from your soul."* (Homily 44:9, page 351)

Note this apparently contradictory expression, **sweet pain**, I'll be coming back to it later on, when I speak about another seemingly contradictory phrase coined by Saint John Climacus.

So, what exactly is compunction?

Originally, the term *compunction*, the English for the Greek word *penthos*, is a medical term, indicating attacks of physical pain (in Latin: *compunctio*= *cum-pungere*, *to puncture with*). Then it was also used on the spiritual level, to signify pain of the spirit, a suffering due to the actual existence of sin and as a result of our desire for God. It is associated with the notions of conversion and penitence.

Note that *Penthos* has the same root as *pathos*, passion, as in the Passion of Christ. It shares a similar intensity.

In the Old Testament, the word is used to refer to mourning for a deceased member of the family (Gn 27:41) or to a lamentation in a national trial (Jer 6:26). Its concrete expression is penance, sackcloth and ashes. It is also a painful stupor which compels you to silence (Is 29:10, quoted in Rom 11:8). Although you won't find the word *compunction* itself used in some passages, you do meet different people praying with tears, such as Hannah (1Sam 1:10-16) and Hezekiah (Is 38:2-5).

The New Testament also offers passages related to compunction:

Mt 5:5¹: *Blessed are those who mourn², for they shall be comforted.* To highlight the importance of compunction in monasticism, note that the Syriac speaking Christians used this word in Mt 5:5 to refer to monks: *abila*. For them, the monks are *mourners*, the those who have *penthos*.

¹ Or Mt 5:4, according to the translations

² in Greek, the word used here is *penthos*, the word usually translated as compunction

Another important passage is Ac 2:37. It is Pentecost. Right after the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter addresses the people of Jerusalem and explains to them God's plan of salvation, with Jesus' Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension. *"When they heard this, they were **cut to the heart** and they said to Peter and the rest of the apostles: What are we to do, brothers? – You must repent, Peter answered"*.

Compunction is a sudden shock which plants deep in the soul a feeling and a resolution, usually towards conversion. That is exactly what the prodigal son experienced. And as the context illustrates, in this passage of Acts, it is also a painful emotion, as when you contemplate Christ's Passion, hence the usual association with silence and tears.

Penthos is also used in Mt 9:15: *"Can the wedding guests **mourn** as long as the bridegroom is with them?"* And in Rev 21:4: *"Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be **mourning** nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed"*.

These last 2 passages point to the idea of compunction caused by a separation from God. We experience grief, because we have lost the joy and gladness that come from communion with the Lord.

Finally, another passage illustrates very well compunction: *"Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me 3 times'. And he went out and wept bitterly"*. (Mt 26:75). Here compunction is provoked by the memory of the Lord's words, and by the feeling of having separated from Him.

To sum up what compunction is, I will use Gregory of Nyssa's definition:

"Penthos is a sorrowful disposition of the soul, caused by the privation of something desirable" (that is to say, the privation of salvation.)

Note that this mourning has nothing to do with mere sadness. It is neither sadness nor worldly grief, but a godly grief, a grief caused by the awareness of having fled away from God, and by the desire to return to Him. It is always in danger of giving way to sadness, despair, discouragement, its dangerous counterfeit. And it has to become a perpetual disposition of the heart (*mourn* is in the present tense in the Beatitudes).

We can experience compunction at 3 levels:

- Because of the past: the loss of salvation, and our past sins. If God is joy, then our distance from Him means absence of participation in joy itself. St Silouan was a monk on Mount Athos (1866-1938). He wrote a famous Adam's lament, full of compunction. And as mentioned

earlier, The Canon of Saint Andrew is a remarkable collection of Scriptural passages related to compunction and repentance.

- Because of the present: evils of the present life, or brotherly love (we mourn for others) and love of God, to the point of tears, inner tears or physical tears.
- Because of the future: the certainty and fear of death and judgment; or the longing for the joys of heaven. John Cassian has 3 important pages on compunction in his 9th conference on prayer. Here is #29,1,2 (p.347): *“Compunction arises from the contemplation of eternal goods and the desire for that future glory, for the sake of which, too, abundant fountains of tears erupt out of irrepressible joy and overwhelming happiness. All the while our soul is thirsting for the strong and living God, saying: ‘When shall I come and appear before the face of God? My tears have been my bread by day and by night.’ Daily, with mourning and lamentation, it declares: ‘Woe is me that my sojourning has been prolonged.’ And : ‘Too long has my soul been a sojourner.’”*

And in the Philokalia, Evagrios (*On Prayer* #78) writes: *“When you think you do not need tears for your sins during prayer, reflect on this: you should always be in God, and yet you are far from Him. Then you will weep with greater feeling.”*

Tears are provoked by 3 things, which correspond to 3 degrees, according to the Fathers:

1. by poverty, misfortune, suffering
2. fear of judgment, conscience burdened by sins, promise of things to come
3. and at the highest degree: about salvation, out of joy or grief. *“Groanings and sorrows cry to the Lord. Tears shed from fear intercede for us; but tears of all-holy love show us that our prayer has been accepted.”* John Climacus, *The Ladder* 7,7 p.114.

Now, this is all well and good, but how can we obtain the spirit of compunction?

Actually, it is a gift from God! But it requires our cooperation and our preparation.

Awareness prepares the conditions for receiving this gift:

- awareness of our state of sin;
- awareness of often being way from God's presence. In my younger years, I remember my abbess at the monastery, always encouraging us to remain “Present to His Presence.” God is always With Us (Emmanuel, God With Us), but too often we are not with Him.
- and awareness of the goodness of God. *“The beginning of compunction is to know oneself”*, writes Ephrem. It is through self-knowledge that sin itself can finally turn to the good of the sinner, thanks to the compunction which it inspires in us.

This awareness can be helped by opening regularly our hearts to a spiritual father, by the meditation of Holy Scripture, by prayer (silent prayer, practicing the Jesus Prayer, praying the Hours). It requires hard labor, focus, endurance, and self-denial. We must also create a favorable ambiance: renunciation of distractions (too much time in front of TV or on social media will not allow us to go deep, the only place where we can meet the Lord within us), fasting and humility. The Fathers recommend that we pray to receive compunction and the gift of tears.

What are the obstacles to compunction?

- Besides the distraction just mentioned,
- Neglect of these exercises, which leads to a superficial way of living
- Attachment to the goods of this world
- Theodoret said that it is the passion **for God** which gives birth to tears, for God can only become total through total victory over the earthly passions. So any passion such as vanity, pride, is an obstacle to compunction.

What are the effects of compunction?

- John Climacus highlights **purity of heart**.

In The Ladder 7,6 p.114: *“Baptism is the washing away of evils that were in us before, but sins committed after baptism are washed away by tears. As baptism is received in infancy, we have all defiled it, but we cleanse it anew with tears.”*

And in The Ladder 7,9 p.114 he writes: *“Keep a firm hold of the **blessed joy-grief** of holy compunction, and do not stop working at it until it raises you high above the things of this world and presents you pure to Christ.”*

Note that John Climacus has invented here a new word to express joy-grief (which seems as contradictory as the **sweet pain** in Saint Gregory Palamas), it is only one word in Greek, also translated sometimes as *joyful sorrow*. In his Ladder, his whole step 7 is on *compunction*; its title is significant: *On mourning which causes joy*, or *On joy-making mourning* in another translation.

I was thinking about this while attending prayer services at Holy Cross Monastery through livestreaming videos. They have a very joyful tone for “Lord have mercy” that made me think of the blessed joy-grief of compunction.

Along the same line, I would recommend reading Chapter 2 of Great Lent, by Father Alexander Schmemmann. The first part of this chapter is entitled “Bright sadness”. Let me quote a few significant lines:

*“**Bright sadness** is the true message and gift of Lent. (page 32)*

Little by little we begin to understand, or rather to feel, that the sadness is indeed “bright”, that a mysterious transformation is about to take place in us. It is as if we were reaching a place to which the noises and the fuss of life, of the street, of all that which usually fills our days and even nights, have no access --a place where they have no power. All that which seemed so tremendously important to us as to fill out mind, that state of anxiety which has virtually become our second nature, disappear somewhere and we begin to feel free, light and happy. It is not the noisy and superficial happiness which comes and goes twenty times a day and is so fragile and fugitive; it is a deep happiness which comes not from a single and particular reason but from our soul having, in the words of Dostoevsky, touched “another world.” And that which it has touched is made up of light and peace and joy, of an inexpressible trust.
(pages 32-33)

The true nature of worship is to take us into a different world --that of God's presence! (page 33)

And now Fr Schmemmann turns around his expression from “bright sadness” to “sad brightness”:

“Sad brightness’: the sadness of my exile, of the waste I have made of my life; the brightness of God's presence and forgiveness, the joy of the recovered desire for God, the Peace of the recovered home.” Like the prodigal coming home again.

- The comfort of the Holy Spirit: *“If you want to be comforted, practice penthos”* Ephrem.
- **Beatitude** is another effect. Whereas one of the passions is sadness, compunction ends in beatitude, above all other joy. John Climacus, in *The Ladder* 7,40, p.118, writes: *“He who is clothed in blessed and grace-given mourning as in a wedding garment knows the spiritual laughter of the soul”*. It leads to deep joy, because it leads back to union with God, as the prodigal, torn in suffering and desire decided to go back to his father.

According to the Fathers, the privileged occasion of receiving the gift of compunction is in the reading of Scriptures and in psalmody during the liturgy.

Its characteristic expression is tears, because it shows we are far from the hardness of heart which resists grace.

Ultimately, the main effect of compunction is **stimulation**: it arouses us from our torpor and complacency, and leads us to take positive steps to improve our condition. We are drawn to conversion through the positive appreciation of the love and kindness of God: pierced by the realization that, despite all our sinfulness, we are loved by God. Then we desire to respond more fully to the love of God which we have experienced. So it has nothing to do with a depressive sense of

guilt, nor with scruples, but it is the first phase of the whole process of conversion. It is an energizing force which stimulates us to conversion, to make great changes in our life. It is the beginning of love. It is not the end of spiritual life, but its very beginning.

Before concluding, I would like to make some special considerations:

- the gift of tears has nothing to do with hypersensibility nor weakness. It is also experienced by people having a strong will. Compunction springs from asceticism and leads to mysticism.
- It is a **gift**, and a gift which is not only for monks and nuns. It is a gift we have to ask for. Maybe our education, our character, have led us to put aside our emotions in prayer. It is all the more important to ask for this gift, so that our whole self may be part of our spiritual life: our mind, our heart, our body, our emotions.
- At the same time, we must not assimilate our life of faith with emotions. Not to feel God in our prayer and not praying with tears does not mean that we don't know how to pray, nor that God ignores our prayer. Compunction has nothing to do with psychological emotions, it's more a "godly emotion", as Tomas Spidlik says in *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, on page 194.

If we go back to the parable we started from, we find indeed the prodigal, having been through all the steps of this journey, back home, in the joy to be reunited to His Father.

Our Savior teaches us every day with His own voice: let us therefore listen to the Scriptures concerning the Prodigal who became wise once more, and with faith let us follow the good example of his repentance. With humbleness of heart let us cry out to Him who knows all secrets: We have sinned against You, merciful Father, and are not worthy to be called Your children as before. But since You are by nature full of love for mankind, accept me as the Prodigal, merciful Father, and save me.

I wish you all a blessed journey with the Prodigal Son!

And here are a few suggestions to help your reflection regarding *penthos* or compunction:

For further reflection and prayer

1. Take some time in prayer and thanksgiving before God re-reading your "sacred history": the need you had of a Savior, your first meeting with the Lord as a Person, and how His love has changed your life. Let your heart be touched again by His first sign of love towards you.
2. Along these lines, you can pray the beautiful *Akathist of Thanksgiving*, aka Glory to God in All Things.

3. Think about all the treasures the Lord has offered you, and what you have been doing with them (awareness and memory vs. forgetfulness, gratitude vs. considering them as a due, enjoy them only for your own pleasure vs. share their fruit with others).
4. Can you identify the false needs that keep you at the superficial level of your self?
5. Do you think the awareness of compunction gives a new dimension to your prayer life?
6. What leads you more easily to compunction?
7. Re-read the parable of the Prodigal Son, or remember a word or a sentence that the Lord used to speak to your heart today in this short presentation, and see how you can apply it concretely in your daily life during this Lent.

