

## Repentance — The Recovery After Illness

By Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, December 21, 1997

The woman who was bent over and could not fully straighten herself for eighteen years was healed by the Divine power of our Lord and Savior (Luke 13:11-17). This incident, told by the Evangelist Luke, reminds us of the miraculous healing of everyone who encounters Christ during one's journey of life.

It happens during the life in this world that many of us gradually, as the years go by, are bent over by the weight of burdens placed upon us. It could be the burdens of earthly cares, sufferings or unsolved problems. It could be the pressure of a cross placed upon our shoulders when we are struck with illness, the trials which fall upon us and it is our lot to endure; it could be sins which we do not have the strength to cope with.

Sometimes it seems that nothing else in the world exists except the difficult worldly situation that we find ourselves in. The bent over woman, until the Lord healed her, could only see the impressions in the earth under her feet. It is exactly the same with us, who often are not capable of seeing what is above us or what is even on the same level with us, but we see only what is located under our feet. Inclined towards the earth, we do not see Heaven. Immersed in worldly affairs and cares, we forget that besides the tiny piece of land which has been given to us, there exists something eternal, greater and more beautiful: the entire world with the vastness of its lands and seas, the sky with its heavenly bodies and stars and, finally, the Kingdom of Heaven, to which we are all called, for there is a place of habitation which has been prepared there for each of us.

Coming to church affords us the ability to come into contact with this supreme other worldly reality and experience it in our own personal lives. The Church helps us to spiritually straighten ourselves up, forget about worldly things, think about Heaven, renounce materialism and this place, and partake of that which is spiritual and eternal.

Healing the bent over woman, our Lord Jesus Christ shows us what He awaits from each of us. And what He waits for is that we would stand up before Him perfectly straight at our full length, that we would grow, as the Apostle Paul says, "*to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*" (Ephesians 4:13), that we will straighten up, spread our wings and breathe deeply from deep within our chest. The Lord wants us to remember our high and heavenly calling — to be the children of God, to be inhabitants of the heavenly city, the Jerusalem on high.

Often people of faith are bent over by the heaviness of personal sins. But it also happens that they bow down to the ground under the burden of repentance for their sins. The repentance they feel for what they have done does not give them the strength to correct themselves, does not inspire them to a struggle (podvig) of moral self-improvement, to be able to keep the commandments of God, to actively perform good works, but plunges them into even more depression, than that in which they found themselves when they became aware of their sins.

In this type of "repentance" there is some spiritual error. The Lord does not want us to be bent over under the weight of the feelings of unworthiness. We approach the Holy Chalice and confess sincerely and with all our heart our faith that the Lord came "to save sinners, of whom I am the first." If we don't feel this way, then we cannot worthily receive Holy Communion, and even if we were to consider even one person worse than we are, this means that we are not [spiritually] mature enough to meet Christ. But, recognizing ourselves as sinners, seeing the entire abyss of evil which is within us, we should not, as a result, fall into depression or despair. We must remember what the venerable St. Isaac the Syrian says, that there is no human sin, even the worst, which cannot be overcome by the mercy of God. And all of our sins, taken together, according to St. Isaac, are like a handful of sand which is tossed into the ocean by the mercy of God and where they utterly and completely disappear without leaving a trace.

The Church gives us the opportunity to change our focus from ourself to focus on God, to reorient our attention from ourselves with our earthly situations to the Kingdom of Heaven, which we can join and become part of. Irregardless of all of our sins and our inability to raise ourselves to the level on which a Christian should live and, Irregardless of the fact, that we are unable to keep all of the commandments of Christ which, it seems to us, surpass our capabilities and strength, — irregardless of all of this, it is still possible for us to continually and spiritually be restored here, in Church, through receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, through prayer and through the Divine services.

The Church gives us new abilities and strengths in order for us to grow spiritually, to rise “from strength to strength”, to become more and more straightened, to think less about worldly things and to turn more towards Heaven. The closer a person is to God, the more a person is aware of his sinfulness, but at the same time within him arises the sensation of the closeness of God. And then repentance turns into joy — like a recovery after a long illness, like straightening after years of of being horribly hunched over.

Let us walk together with Christ and with each other on the straight and narrow path, not stopping for a day, for an hour, or for a minute. Let us rise up to the habitations of the Kingdom of Heaven, where there is room for each of us, if we would only become worthy of God.