

God-abandonment and the “Heavenly Penance” of COVID-19



From the Fall of Adam and Eve and their exile from Paradise until the coming of the Messiah, Christ's incarnation and saving actions in history, innumerable centuries passed. All this time, it seemed as if God had abandoned humanity to our tragic, unredeemed fate.

Yet, this is not true. God never forsook the creation of His hands. With paternal affection, He followed the course of humanity on earth and from time to time sent messages of His presence, through His Angels, His Prophets, His miraculous interventions, His pedagogical trials, thus cultivating systematically and patiently the longing for God and quest for a Savior in the hearts of post-fallen humanity. The fall and rebellion of the first human beings against their Creator was so great that it took a long time to prepare subsequent generations to receive the expected Messiah.

In our time, the great evil of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused many people to feel abandoned by God. Many believe that God has forsaken us. However, while God may seem to be hiding for pedagogical reasons, He never really abandons us. His grace is never absent from our lives. What actually happens is that many times God is not seen. If, in reality, He had departed from us, then we all would have been lost at once. Without God's grace, no one can live.

One way or another, all people experience the apparent abandonment from God. Just as we sometimes experience intensely the presence of God within us, we also experience, at times, His temporary absence. This happens, in part, in order to humble us and teach us to base our spiritual progress not on our own strength, but solely on God, who told us, ***"without me you can do nothing"***(John 15: 5).

It is characteristic and instructive for all of us that, in His human nature, Christ also experienced God's abandonment as he suffered on the Cross. For this reason, He cried out in a loud voice: ***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*** (Matt. 27:46)

The tragedy of today's pandemic can be understood as a "heavenly penance," through which we may come to our senses and amend our ways. Just as an earthly father may reprimand his child to teach him how to live rightly, so also may our Heavenly Father allow an ordeal like this in order to awaken us from our apostasy, unfaithfulness, and egoism.

The term ***"penance"*** can mistakenly be associated with punishment, thus portraying God as an avenging sadist. Our Church, however, uses the term "penance" not to denote a punitive act, but a healing one stemming from the inexpressible charity of God and His Church toward the spiritually sick person. As is well known, the canons and penances used in the Orthodox Church are not "cannons" that kill, but medicines that cure spiritual illness, aiming at the holistic health of the person.

The pandemic is a test that we must accept in obedience to Christ. We must humbly acknowledge our sinfulness and admit with contrition, that ***“we are justly punished for what we have done”*** (Luke 23:41). We must not, by any means, detach this trial from Heaven. For is it possible that the whole of humanity would endure such a trial without God’s permission? Is it possible that the new coronavirus is superior in power and authority to the Triune God of Love? No, of course not; but how should we respond?

First, we must accept this “heavenly penance” prayerfully. Let us raise our hands to Heaven and ask with tears our Merciful Lord to “shorten” the days of our trial (cf. Mk 13:20). Second, we are to accept the “heavenly penance” pedagogically. That is, to believe absolutely that this pandemic is a blessed teaching tool of infinite love for our salvation. Nothing that God allows in our lives does not have a salvific orientation. Third, we are called to face the “heavenly penance” with ***repentance***. There are countless examples from the Bible and the life of the Church that confirm the fact that sincere repentance affects God greatly and is even capable of changing His decisions. A great example is the authentic repentance of the Ninevites, for whom only three days were enough for God to change his mind and not to destroy their city (Jonah 3: 1-10). St. John Chrysostom mentions that, in this event, ***“God ‘lies,’ going back on His word, out of love for humanity”!*** If we were to say like the Ninevites, with a repentant heart: ***“Lord, stop Your wrath, as we have stopped the error; stop the punishment, like we have stopped evil. You have educated us with fear, so give us time to prove our love for You,”*** then we can be sure that through our sincere repentance, God will also “repent” (Jonah 3:10) and remove the “heavenly penance” from us.

One may ask: So should we do nothing to protect ourselves from the new coronavirus and leave everything to the Providence of God? Certainly not. We will follow the rules of hygiene, we will consult the doctors, we will take medicines, we will get vaccinated, and we will observe the safety measures recommended by health experts. After all, ***“God has appointed the doctor in his function and that is why we must honor him. The Most High gives knowledge to the physician to heal; The Lord created medicines from the earth and a sensible man will not loathe them”*** (Wisdom of Sirach 38: 1,2,4). Nevertheless, we must above all, turn our minds and hearts to the “physician of our souls and bodies” and ask Him to ***“speak only one word”*** (Matt. 8: 8) in order to get rid of this terrible scourge.

In these difficult times we are experiencing as a global human community, God, through our repentance, will bend to the sighs of our heart, because it is not possible for Heaven to remain apathetic to the drama of the earth. The sooner we acknowledge our mistakes, and the more sincerely we repent, the sooner God will resolve the “heavenly penance” and by His grace we will head into the post-COVID-19 age.

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