

**V**asileios THERMOS, Stephen MUSE, *Cuvinte în Duhul. Perspective pastorale despre Taina Spovedaniei (Words into Spirit: Pastoral Perspectives on Confession)*, translated by Valentin Radu Trandafir, Doxologia Publishing House, Iași, 2021, 384 pp.

The work published at the prestigious publishing house *Doxologia*, in 2021, is a translation of the original published at St. Tikhon's Monastery Press, 2019, under the title *Words into Spirit: Pastoral Perspectives on Confession*. The two editors, priest Vasileios Thermos and deacon Stephen Muse, started a winding, but essential process of awareness and deepening of the pastoral responsibility given by the Holy Sacrament of Confession and the dimension of spiritual counselling of this mechanism, which can be equated with the paschal mandate of the Savior Jesus Christ gave to the Holy Apostles, after the Resurrection from the dead, when He said: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them: Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained". (John 20, 21-23). Structured in three chapters, containing fifteen studies, the volume captures diverse and converging approaches to pastoral perspectives on the Sacrament of Confession. The communications were drafted for a specific work, to which were added three researches elaborated for the Conference of the Institute for Pastoral Education of the Holy Archdiocese of Athens, which took place at Penteli Monastery on 12 February 2011. The three coordinates of the volume are provocative and invite the reader to discover some current paradigms for approaching spiritual counselling, taking into account elements such as: the theology of the Sacrament of Confession, the person of the priest or contemporary psychology and the Sacrament of Confession.

In arguing for the appearance of the volume, the editors make a shocking observation, namely: *it seems that priests and believers make this deeply personal Sacrament of loving reconciliation reduced to a narrow*

*legal formality, a regression to fulfilling the “letter of the law” only to give access to Holy Communion, missing its Spirit, which involves a deep personal encounter in love and humility* (p. 9). In this context, a closer look at the approach is essential for clerics, first of all, but also for practicing Orthodox Christians or not, especially since in recent years the growth of a secular culture of psycho-social therapeutics has been observed. So, counterbalanced by a culture of psychological emotion, confession offers us a personal existential encounter with the priest, an “other” who moves the confessor beyond the closed monologue of individual subjective psychology into a relational event where there is a partner, which implies responsibility by/and for another. So, the questions arise: how much psychology does a priest need to know to listen to confessions? Should he offer psychological counselling to people who come to Confession, and if so, what kind? Will he be able to recognize the need to refer for psychotherapy when appropriate and necessary? How does the priest determine when, how and to what extent to apply the canons without causing further damage? (p. 17) These are only a few questions that constitute the plot of the present work, offering us a series of answers by specialists, not in the sense of an abstract theorizing, but even by well-known living beings of our century, connected both to the canonical tradition of the Church, but also to the complicated times we live in.

Contributors such as the Archimandrite Zacharias Zaharou from Essex introduce us to the topic through an extraordinary excursus into the *Mystery of Reconciliation* (pp. 23-46), in which I would highlight the vision of spiritual paternity, an element argued biblically and practically through a high-quality theological thinking, sending us to the first Father. According to the vision of St. Silouan the Athonite, *in order to correct the unjust inequality that entered the lives of men as a result of the Fall, Christ overturned the pyramid of cosmic being and sat at the top of the inverted pyramid. He bore the sin and suffering of the whole world and restored true justice as the indisputable demand of the spirit and conscience of men* (p. 34). Thus, according to this incomparable Model, the spiritual fathers truly honour their ministry, only then are they lower than every person who approaches them, when with humility, without pretence, they offer the

person the opportunity to receive the word of the Gospel. Only then, the life of the priest persistent in deep repentance will be rich in experiences of joy, but also of spiritual suffering.

A particularly necessary approach, captured in the pages of this volume, is that of the archimandrite canonist, currently Metropolitan Gregorios Papathomas, who clarifies the topic of adapting the holy canons to the Sacrament of Confession (pp. 109-124). It primarily clarifies the text and context of the pseudo-epigraphic canons, which appeared between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, invested with the influential names of certain saints, reached the canonical tradition of the Church and entered fundamental collections such as the *Pidalion*, where St. Nicodim treats them with discernment and more much attention. In order to contextualize the problem, the canonist makes clarifying statements regarding *akriveia* and *economia* (dispensation) in the holy canons, which open the opportunity for each spiritual parent to act according to each situation and each person he is called to help. Last but not least, Archimandrite Gregorios Papathomas analyses via canon 102 Trulan and concludes that the perspective of the Sacrament of Penance is clearly and exclusively soteriological, not to feel good psychologically and esoterically.

The second part of the volume is centered on studies regarding the person of the confessor. Here we find very well-documented approaches regarding the relationship between priest and penitent (pp. 109-124), or practical aspects on how to be humble, give spiritual advice and do no harm. (pp. 124-126). One of the editors begins his lecture with a very topical pastoral remark of Archimandrite Sophrony, respectively: *According to the pastoral teaching of the fathers - we must not urge the flock to strive to acquire what we have not yet accomplished in ourselves* (p. 124). Analyses such as *difficulties in listening to confessions and in giving spiritual advice, the Confession Dialogue, the problem of clericalism or when certain aspects of sins are repeatedly emphasized* are real milestones in the coherent and healing approach to the Sacrament of Confession. It is also within these frameworks that the research regarding the preparation of the priest is surprising in registers such as: *preparation for humility, preparation for mercy, preparation for patience, preparation for*

*discernment, preparation for self-knowledge, preparation for authenticity, preparation for understanding special psychopathology, etc...* (pp. 167-186). All these perspectives oblige us to a careful and permanent focus on the need for spiritual and psycho-educational training of the confessor.

The last part of the paper presents seven studies of an overflowing topicality regarding the convergences but also divergences between contemporary psychology and the Sacrament of Confession. In the sub-chapter *Features of modernity and postmodernity: challenges to Confession*, the author, Archimandrite Chrysostom Tympas, makes a comparative analysis between traditional spirituality, psychological equivalents in modernity and features of the psyche in postmodernity (pp. 201-202), concluding that unlike the perspective of space multidimensional of postmodern thought, the Confession is based on a much simpler one-dimensional approach, on a consolidated “vertical” understanding of a God the Father and man as His creature, this being the relationship contested by postmodernism, eminently self-centred.

A necessary approach is that of the formative character of the person in the Sacrament of Confession, which not only solves the problem of a burdened conscience, but opens the opportunity for a new way of being, potentiating to the highest heights the challenge of four-stage life change. To enhance the dimension of the change, Protopresbyter Evangelos Ganas, in the preamble to the presentation of the four stages of the formation of the person in Christ, believes that *the penitent is not clear about what happened in his past until he expresses it in words, assuming responsibility* (p. 237).

The convergences and divergences between psychological and spiritual pathology are far from rigorously analysed challenges in studies such as: *When psychopathology wears a spiritual mask* (pp. 260-286), *The Sacrament of Confession and mental disorders* (pp. 286-302) and *Why psychotherapy cannot replace The Sacrament of Confession* (pp. 302-330). Another extremely delicate aspect is addressed by protopresbyter Nikolaos Dulgheris in the study *When the spiritual father approaches eros and sexuality* (pp. 330-360). Contemporary pastoral realities such as pornography, premarital relations, couple intimacy, homosexuality are

shocking images that the priest is challenged to approach and deal with in as real a way as possible, but carefully, since eros must be seen *as an integral part of the potential to experience the deep fullness and joy that comes from discovering the other and communion with the other and not as a source of fear, guilt or, worse, a mere opportunity to satisfy only selfish senses and desires, which sooner or later they will trap him in self-centred and selfish solitude* (p. 359).

Such an editorial approach is more than necessary in the academic environment, for Pastoral Theology teachers, especially for the deepening of special pastoral theology, as a constitutive element in the pastoral “adventure” of future clerics who are preparing in theological faculties. The bibliographic resource and the experiences made available to the reader also create new directions in the understanding of the sacrament of confession, but also in the matter of spiritual counselling, which we consider today as a preliminary stage or preparation for the Sacrament of Confession. Equally, this “pastoral handbook” is of maximum usefulness and topicality for priests in communities, often tried by the challenge of the Sacrament of Confession, perhaps the hardest yoke of priestly ministry. Through a permanent reading with up-to-date themes, grafted on a state of prayer and humility, in the dynamic tradition of the Church, today’s clergy can, in many circumstances, make the essential difference in the life of man, who relates to him as a resource of spiritual guidance.

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