

# Repentance



*Hillock at Iona where St Columba did his writing*  
“No one is crowned except he who has striven lawfully.” (St Columba)

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We find ourselves at the threshold of Lent. Beginning on Ash Wednesday we will be spending 40 days of penance and hopefully “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Mt 3:8). Christ requires this of us and tells us, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is a hand” (Mt 4:17). We will have a cross of ashes traced upon our foreheads, a practice that draws its origins from the Old Testament. Remember, for instance, the story of Jonah who preached to the Ninevites to repent, and the King of Nineveh “arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered Himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes” (Jonah 3:5-6).

God wants our salvation. By sin we cut ourselves off from God, who is All-Holy. Only He can forgive sins, and does so through Christ in the Church, but this presupposes that we truly want to change. Fear of His chastisements is one thing, but what we must really fear is separation from God. If there is no fear, there will be no amendment. If we are severed from God by sin, we can return to communion with Him by repenting our sins and changing our ways (conversion). We must stop being addicted to sin. God forgives us if we are truly repentant. Remember what the prophet Isaiah said, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

True repentance sometimes takes on tough forms. An example that springs to the Celtic mind is that of Saint Columba. He quarreled with Finnian of Moville for having made a copy of the psalter without the abbot’s authorization, but which he fully intended to keep. Finnian insisted that he hand over the copy to him. But Columba, who could have been heir to one of the thrones in Ireland, would not. During the first part of his life he had the ardent, agitated, even quarrelsome character of the race. What ensued was a bloody battle during which many men were killed.

Though victor of the battle, Columba soon underwent personal remorse and much condemnation. A synod excommunicated him, and though the excommunication was later lifted, his confessor condemned him to perpetual exile from his beloved Ireland. Columba bowed to this sentence with sad resignation. He exiled himself to the small

desert island of Iona from which, due to his humble penitence, was to blossom the most powerful spiritual movement in that part of the world. His penance brought so much holy fruit.

St John Climacus says: “A sign of true repentance is the acknowledgement that we deserve all the afflictions that come upon us.” St Silouan adds: “The truly repentant man readily bears every affliction – hunger and nakedness, cold and heat, sickness and poverty, humiliation and exile, injustice and slander; for his soul is turned with longing towards God, and he has no care for earthly things but prays to God with a pure mind.” These holy men understood the gravity of sin and the deep need for repentance. But like the father of the prodigal son, God will run out to meet us and embrace us in forgiveness.

We live in a post-Christian society where many have returned to paganism, while so many believers have fallen into spiritual mediocrity. At baptism we were washed of our sins, but we still carry with us the disposition to sin. True purification of our sins washes us as if in a new baptism by Christ’s expiating death.

St Tugdual gives the following image. Like good gardeners, let us think of all the work of our sanctification. Our sins become as compost by our repentance and are placed in the soil of humility. Seeds are sown, germination begins, and we pull out the weeds and all the other work necessary until the harvest. We cultivate the garden but have to watch over it. All kinds of animals, birds and insects can damage it, the enemy comes with his chaff, and parasites continue the damage. So is it with our souls. But if we do the work of repentance diligently, the great autumn harvest comes, and “There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Lk 15:10). Do let us give the angels their rejoicing! Amen.