

September 6, 2009
St. Simeon the Stylite

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although repentance is profitable to the soul, Holy Scripture does not regard it as sufficient to undo the historical effects of sin. That is to say, by repentance I can change the course of my life---and my eternal destiny---but the bad things I have done, and the good things left undone, will still continue to run on their own. My repentance will not undo them. Such is the practical meaning, I take it, of the adage, *factum non fit non factum*---"a thing done cannot become a thing not done."

This truth about repentance was made clear at the discovery of the Deuteronomic Scroll in 622. When this document caused Josiah and his friends to realize how far Judah had wandered into sin, they immediately repented (2 Kings 22:3-13). The prophetess Huldah, consulted on this matter, assured them that the Lord accepted their repentance (22:18-20), but she also warned that their repentance would not avert the historical effects of so much sin. The accumulated transgressions of numerous generations would still bring about the destruction of the nation (22:14-17). Part of Josiah's repentance was an acceptance of the divine judgment on the nation.

Indeed, I believe an integral component of repentance is the grace to leave in God's provident hands the historical judgment of the manifold evil effects of our sins. We repentant sinners make such amends as we can (cf. Luke 19:8), but none of us can even know---much less avert---all the evil consequences our sins have unleashed in history. These things have already taken on a dynamism of their own, and God will deal with them according to His own wise judgment.

As I mentioned, this truth about repentance pertains, not only to the bad things we have done, but also to the required good things we have failed to do. Only in our later years---long after we made the major decisions that governed our lives---do some of us come to realize how many opportunities we have squandered and how few duties we have fulfilled. But now it is too late: our education is long over, our children have already been raised, further opportunities are few, and our neglected friends lie cold in the tomb.

We find ourselves unable to undo any of it. We weep, with Joel, for "the years the locust hath consumed, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm." We are obliged simply to accept the judgment of God, following the insight of the Psalmist: *iudicia Domini vera, iustificata in semetipsa*---"the judgments of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether."

Two biblical characters particularly exemplify this humble attitude, both of them fathers who came to realize, too late, how poorly they had raised their children. Both men repented, but neither was able to reverse the evil course of their former negligence.

The first was ancient Eli, the priest at Shiloh, who recognized, at last, his failure adequately to discipline his two no-good sons, Phineas and Hophni.

To be sure, Eli had spoken to the boys about the low moral quality of their lives, warning them of the inevitable divine judgment (1 Samuel 2: 23-25). When he thought on this judgment, however, Eli considered it only with respect to his two sons: they would not escape God's wrath. He apparently did not perceive the further historical effects of their sins.

So the Lord sent a prophet to forewarn Eli on this point. The flagrant and public offenses of Phineas and Hophni, said this prophet, would in due course destroy Eli's own priestly dynasty (2: 27-36)---evidently a reference to Saul's slaughter of the Nob priesthood (22: 11-19).

Finally, the Lord appointed young Samuel to strengthen the message to Eli: "In that day I will perform against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knows, because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them" (3: 12-13).

Eli's repentance contained a submission to the divine judgment to be revealed in history: "The Lord, let Him do what seems good to Him" (3: 18).

We find the identical sentiment later voiced by David, for he, too, had been an over-indulgent father and raised a thoroughly dysfunctional family. (Incest and fratricide are reliable indicators, usually.) Faced with the results of his long sinful neglect, David responded, "But if [the Lord] says thus: 'I have no delight in you,' here I am, let Him do to me as seems good to Him" (2 Samuel 15: 26).

Repentance, then, as a turning from sin to God, involves more than a release from personal guilt. It means, also, handing over to the Lord's judgment and providential care the countless historical effects of our myriad failures. That is to say, repentance places not only our individual lives but also our larger destiny---the myriad links that join us to the rest of mankind---under God's sovereign governance of history. Repentance makes us *participes rei*, partakers of a thing vastly larger than ourselves.

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