



■ On the Occasion of the Beginning of the Nativity Fast (15 November)

## The Power of Forgiveness in the Mystery of Confession and a Miracle of the Holy Archangels\*

There are those who are in doubt over the Mystery of confession—that is, whether it really **forgives sins**—and others who question its **psychotherapeutic properties**. Concerning these questions, I shall recount, in the present essay, an incident of which I was an eyewitness, and I testify, with fear of God, to the whole truth of the matter.



In October of 1913, the Chief of Staff of our national army, General Victor Dousmanes, sent us, accompanied by two soldiers, a nephew of his who was psychotic and possessed by a spirit of divination (as was once the soothsayer of Philippi). He also sent a letter addressed to our Monastery [of Dionysiou on the Holy Mountain], in which he said: “Here, Fathers, in my homeland (Corfu) is the best mental clinic in Greece, and my nephew, John, stayed there, but we saw no improvement [in his condition], though the doctors told us that they had exhausted all scientific means. That is why we have decided to send him to your holy place, beseeching you to accept him and to do for him whatever is spiritually possible. Perhaps God will have pity on both us and him, through your prayers, and make him well.” Our monastery accepted him, as much out of duty as because of his relation to the General, who was the leading contributor to the victory of the [Balkan] wars of 1912 and 1913, after [the future] King Constantine.

The soldiers brought him loosely bound, but they told us to watch over him since he was liable to take flight and was not conscious of the danger. He was therefore locked up in a room in the guest-quar-

ters with ironbound windows. The Priests would go there and read prayers and exorcisms over him, during which he remained quiet. When, however, he would have attacks, he would bellow, blaspheme, and, in some strange way, be unloosed from his bonds. That is why they one day brought the monastery boatman, who bound him with sailor knots very difficult to undo, but, once again, he was spontaneously unloosed within a matter of minutes.

Guided, moreover, by the demonic spirit, as soon as he would see a brother coming to visit him, he would recount [the brother's] past to him, and especially unconfessed sins. The guestmaster at that time happened to be a young monk who had worked for years in hotels and restaurants of Athens. Every time he brought necessities to the possessed man in the prison, he would be verbally attacked by him concerning his former life in the world. One day, I went with him, and as soon as the possessed man saw us, he immediately began saying to the monk (verbatim): *"That's a fine mug for a Great Schema monk. Hey you, don't you remember what you did on the benches of Zappio Park? At the hotels, and worse yet?"*

When we left, the brother said to me: *"I am not going to him again. I will tell the Elder to send someone else to serve him. Every time he sees me, he humiliates me."* I asked him: *"Is there any truth to what he says, or is he barking in cooperation with the demon?"* He sadly told me: *"Unfortunately, it is as he says."* I asked him again: *"Have you not confessed those sins?"* *"I have not confessed them,"* he answered with a sigh. *"I am ashamed."* Then I said to him: *"Get up immediately and go to Fr. Neophytos at the skete and confess to him in great detail, so that the burden will be lifted from off of you and the demon will not be able to revile you."*

He listened to me and went. On his way back, he fetched me and we went together to the possessed man. As soon as he saw us, he said to him: *"Now I'll start on you again from the cover of the account book and give you the telling-off you deserve."* But, after a moment, he bristled up and started to shout: *"I don't see anything! Who erased it all? Who gave you advice? What am I to do with you now—I don't see anything in the account book...."* We were both struck dumb, and with tears glorified the All-Good God, Who provides for man's salvation by way of confession.

**N**or am I able to keep silent concerning the **miracle of the Holy Archangels** that was performed on that unfortunate possessed man.

It was the All-Night Vigil for the Feast of the Holy Archangels. At the outset, our blessed Elder and Abbot addressed the Fathers, saying: “We shall soon bring brother John down to the Church. You must all beseech that God take pity on him, as well as the Holy Archangels, that he might be delivered from the bonds of Satan.” He charged me and another brother to bring him to the Church and to watch over him, lest he become disorderly or escape us. We brought him and sat him down in a seat in what we call the novice section, while we stood on either side of him as a precaution. He remained relatively quiet, only murmuring from time to time; but when the Priest commemorated him, in particular, during the Lity, he cried out in an incoherent howl.



During the Lauds, we took him to venerate the Icon of the Holy Archangels, and when we brought him back to his seat, he started to become restless and get up to leave. We watched over him and gently calmed him down. But when the *doxastikon* to the Archangel Michael was sung, “*Wherever your Grace overshadows, O Archangel, thence is the power of the devil expelled,*” he shot away from us like lightning. And by way of the small gate of the narthex, through which he had never before passed, he headed for the balcony overlooking the

sea, at a height of approximately one-hundred meters. We ran, as did other Fathers, in the despairing fear that he would cast himself down. But, oh, how great is your grace, praiseworthy Archangels! There, at a short distance from the narthex, in the chamber, as we call it, which is a vaulted apse, the Holy Archangels are painted on both sides. **We caught up with him in there, upright and motionless.** “*What’s the matter with you, John?*” we panted. “*Nothing’s the matter with me,*” he replied. “*I’ve been cured. The Holy Archangels have made*

*me well.*” And, making the sign of the Cross, he kissed their Icons. We joyfully took him to the Church, then to the Liturgy and to the *Trapeza*. He was calm, sober, and clothed, as if he were not the same person as that one previously so wild and unapproachable.

He remained three or four days, and then I took him to Daphne the day that the steamship would be passing through. Having put him on board, I requested that the Captain call the General from Piraeus to come and meet him, which he did. A few days later, we received a letter of thanks from the General, who said that his nephew was well.

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It is subsequently up to the struggler’s good judgment to assess the power of forgiveness in the mystery of confession....



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(\*) See Archimandrite Gabriel (†), “Guide to the Confessor and the One Confessing,” 4th ed., *Ὁρθόδοξος Τύπος* (Athens: 1990), pp. 88-91.