

Reflections on Armatia  
Frieda Upson  
Upbeat  
V.3, n. 2, 1970

The Greek word which is used in the Divine Liturgy and in other services and prayers of the Church to denote “sin” is “*armatia*.” This word and its related forms – the verb “to sin” and the noun “sinner” – are very old and even appear frequently in Homer.

The tragic poets and classical literature generally used “*armatia*” in two senses: that of missing the mark or of wandering from the right path, and also of failing in one’s purpose and going wrong.

In the Septuagint the translators used the word to denote sins in the sense of evil acts against God: “And the Lord said: “The cry of Sodom and Gomorrha has been increased towards me, and their sins are very great.” (Gen. 20:18) In the New Testament Book of Acts, St. Paul uses the word to mean a sin against the law of the Jews or against the law of the land. In his defense before the Roman provincial governor, against the charges of the Jews, Paul says: “neither against the law of the Jews nor against the temple, nor against Caesar, have I offended at all. (Acts 25:8)

Jesus uses the word “*armatia*” to denote sins against one’s fellow man in the parable about the rich man and the poor man who both die and go their respective ways to Heaven and to Hades. He concludes by telling His disciples: “Take heed to yourselves, if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, ‘repent,’ you must forgive him.” (Luke 17:4)

In the Orthodox Liturgy, and in the funeral service where the priest petitions for forgiveness of sins, mention is always made of sins “voluntary and involuntary, of knowledge and of ignorance.” The implication is that a person may commit a sin without at the time realizing that it is a sin. His intention may be good but his deed falls short of his intention.

Like the archer aiming at the target which he sees clearly before him, he may not reach the goal because his aim is imperfect. In the case of his moral acts, it is his judgment which is imperfect.

In other words, every sin is not necessarily a deliberate intention to do wrong or a wrong committed with full consciousness of the wrongness. Our actions conditioned by the freedom of choice which our free will provides, but limited by the deficiencies of our judgment. If we could truly foresee the consequences of our acts, we would not make these mistakes in judgment. It is in keeping with the sense of good balance and understanding of human nature which characterize the Orthodox Church that she should take into account this aspect of human imperfection.

What has man done about the problem of sin when he recognized his plight? The Hebrews in ancient times developed the idea of God as the authority to whom man is responsible for the rightness of his acts. This rightness was measured by his observance of God's laws, and the spirit in which this observance was carried out was of secondary importance. Laws always offer many loopholes, and as people's moral consciousness developed, it became clear that observance of law and punishment for disobedience are not enough. Christ made it clear that without love, the observance of law is an empty thing.

Before Christianity, man was unable to solve the problems of how to restore himself to spiritual health after he committed a grievous sin. For the Hebrews, punishment or vengeance was the only solution. The ancient Greeks realized that this was not a satisfactory answer. The case of Oedipus is an example. His great sin was performed in ignorance, and there was no way to expiate it. The awareness of his sin places man in a hopeless situation from which there is no escape, through his own efforts.

It was only because of Jesus Christ – through His life, His death, His resurrection – that man was able to be restored to wholeness and newness of life.