

is best for them, and will that they suffer punishment or condemnation, often on the assumption that they deserve it. In addition, we often harbor negative feelings toward our enemies and do nothing to counter those feelings. Compassion is not among those feelings, but animosity often is. We end up, then, out of step with what God would will and feel toward the people in question. We thus become out of step with God.

Is there a solution in our cooperating with God? Evidence from my experience suggests an affirmative answer. Even so, I cannot presume that all others have the same evidence. So, I have not assumed that God's existence or redemptive power is indicated by the experience or evidence of all others. I have talked of what God *would* do or *would* be like, to avoid begging key questions. I can recommend, however, that inquirers make the effort to inquire properly about God, and thereby put themselves in a position to receive evidence of God's reality and meaning from God. That effort can change the direction of a person's life, for the better, if the relevant evidence and meaning are found. In that case, lasting meaning will eclipse despair, and one's will and affections will be renewed by the unique character of God. Life then can begin again, for the better, with new purposes and meaning.

## St. Isaac's Dictum

Terence Cuneo

For nearly fifteen years, I have had on my office wall an icon of St. Isaac the Syrian.<sup>1</sup> Like many icons, this one includes both an image—in this case, one of Isaac himself—and words attributed to him. The words are these: "This life has been given to you for repentance. Do not waste it on vain pursuits." St. Isaac's dictum, as I'll call it, is both severe and striking. Literally rendered, it appears to say that the point of this life is to repent (and that much else is vain pursuit). When set against the rest of Isaac's thought, it is clear that the person to whom we are to repent is God. So, what the dictum tells us is that the point of this life is to repent to God. Given the additional assumption that, if one's life has a point or purpose, then one ought to pursue it, St. Isaac's dictum implies that we should dedicate our lives to repenting to God.

St. Isaac's dictum is a hard saying, even by the standards of traditional Christianity. Although those of us who locate ourselves within the Christian tradition recognize the importance of repentance in the Christian life, few of us savor the activity. It is often difficult to do. In addition to being a hard saying, St. Isaac's dictum is puzzling. Repentance, after all, does not appear to be a good candidate for being the point or end of our lives. At most, it seems to be an activity whose value lies wholly in whatever valuable end it brings about, such as enabling reconciliation. How, then, could Isaac intelligibly maintain otherwise? Moreover, even if we could make sense of the idea that repentance is the point of this life, why would Isaac say that it is? There seem to be many other candidates that are better suited for this role. The Western medieval tradition, for example, nearly unanimously held that beatitude is the point of this life (and, given their theological commitments, it is easy to see why). Finally, supposing that we could answer these first two questions

<sup>1</sup> St. Isaac the Syrian (or St. Isaac of Ninevah) (c. 613–c. 700) was a monastic and, for a short period, bishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church in Ninevah. The best introduction to his thought is Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cisterian Publications, 2000).

satisfactorily, what would a life dedicated to repentance look like? As noted above, repentance is not a peripheral activity in the Christian life. But it does not appear to enjoy anything like the prominence that Isaac wishes to give it. When one looks at the texts that the Christian tradition provides for both private devotion and corporate worship, for example, these texts typically include prayers of repentance; but these prayers are hardly their focal point. As a practical matter, it is difficult to envision the ideal that Isaac has in mind.

My project in this essay is to address these three questions. Although I am going to contend that each admits of a satisfactory answer, it is the third question that most interests me; I am particularly interested in describing how pursuing the ideal that St. Isaac's dictum articulates takes shape in the liturgical life of the church. So, my discussion divides into two main sections: the first is dedicated to interpreting the ideal that Isaac articulates, while the second discusses the extent to which the ideal is realized in the liturgical life of the church.

But before I turn my attention to these matters, I need to address a pair of questions that might be on the mind of the reader. St. Isaac does not belong to the canon of figures with whom philosophers regularly engage. Indeed, he has at best a limited presence in the Western Christian tradition. One might rightly ask, then, why we should pay attention to what he says. The brief answer is that while Isaac is largely unknown in the west, he is a towering figure within Eastern Christianity whose writings have shaped its thinking and approaches to various theological and practical issues. For those who identify with or have interests in this tradition, his reputation warrants taking very seriously what he says, however puzzling it may appear initially. For those who do not have such interests, it may prove instructive to engage with a figure whose approach to issues such as what the point or end of this life might be diverges in interesting ways from approaches standardly offered in the Western canon.

The answer I have just offered to the question why it makes sense to engage with Isaac's writings presupposes that Isaac's audience includes non-monastics such as you and me. The second question to address is whether this assumption is correct. Like many monastic theologians, Isaac primarily wrote for his fellow monastics, providing guidance from his own experience (and that of others) regarding the monastic life. And, in fact, a good deal of what Isaac recommends to his fellow monastics—such as how to cope with the rigors of a strict rule of prayer—is largely inapplicable to you and me.<sup>2</sup> It

<sup>2</sup> As Isaac himself acknowledges. See *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, translated by Dana Miller (Boston, MA: Monastery of the Holy Transfiguration, 1984), 339. When citing this work hereafter, I will abbreviate its title as "I" and cite the sermon number, placing the page number in parentheses. So, the reference above would be given as I/69 (339). I'll refer to Isaac of Nineveh [Isaac the Syrian], "*The Second Part*," *Chapters*

is natural to ask, then, whether St. Isaac's dictum should be viewed as advice given only to his fellow monastics and, hence, of limited relevance to the rest of us.

I think we cannot decisively rule out this possibility. But I doubt that it is the best interpretation of St. Isaac's dictum. My primary reason for thinking this is not simply the suspicion that Isaac has put his finger on something very fundamental to the Christian life. It is also because Isaac himself probably did not view his audience so narrowly. Commenting on a related issue in the introduction to the collection of writings known as *The Philokalia*, G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherard, and Kallistos Ware note that the monastics of the Eastern Church tended to hold that the activities on which the monastics were commenting, such as prayer and inner stillness, are for everyone to pursue "to the best of his or her ability and whatever the circumstances under which he or she lives."<sup>3</sup> In this respect, they continue, the distinction between "the monastic life and life 'in the world' is but relative: every human being, by virtue of the fact that he or she is created in the image of God, is summoned to be perfect, is summoned to love God with all his or her heart, soul and mind. In this sense all have the same vocation and all must follow the same spiritual path."<sup>4</sup> Later, I'll be returning to this theme of perfection and how it helps to make sense of what St. Isaac says. For now, I'll simply note that if what Palmer, Sherard, and Ware write is correct, St. Isaac's dictum is intended to apply to each of us—or at least to each of us who has committed himself or herself to the Christian way of life.

What should now be evident is that my project in this essay is not to offer a defense of the claim that the Christian tradition provides a rationally compelling account of what the end or meaning of life might be. Rather, it is to explore and make sense of one such account, unusual by the standards of the broadly Western Christian tradition, offered by a prominent figure within the Eastern Christian tradition.

## 1. The ideal

St. Isaac was not a systematic theologian or even a theologian with systematic tendencies. Kallistos Ware describes Isaac's writings as "full of repetitions,

*IV-XLI*, ed. Sebastian Brock (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 554, *Scriptores syro* 224. Louvain 1991) as "II."

<sup>3</sup> "Introduction," in *The Philokalia*, vol. 1 (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 16. See also Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware, *The Lenten Triodion* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2002), 21. I'll refer to this work as *LT*.

<sup>4</sup> "Introduction," 16.

of unexpected transitions, of epigrammatic sayings not fully explained.”<sup>5</sup> St. Isaac’s dictum belongs to the last category: it is an epigrammatic saying not fully explained. While Isaac might not fully and explicitly explain what he means when he says that this life has been given to us for repentance, it is not difficult to piece together his thinking on the topic of repentance, since it belongs to a short list of topics about which he has much to say.

Repentance, according to Isaac, consists in the “abandoning of former deeds and grieving for them.” Building upon this initial characterization, Isaac proposes that:

the meaning of the word *repentance* (*tyabuta*) ... is this: continual and mournful supplication which by means of prayer filled with compunction draws nigh to God in order to seek forgiveness of past offenses, and entreaty for preservation from future [offenses].<sup>6</sup>

Here Isaac describes repentance in its full-fledged form as it pertains to God. So understood, repentance is both complex and demanding. When repenting to God, one must at once own one’s own wrongdoing and yet set oneself against it: one must resolve not to engage in such wrongdoing again. In addition, when owning one’s own wrongdoing, one must not simply acknowledge or state that one has done what is wrong; one must request to be forgiven of it, and to ask for assistance in not performing such actions again. Finally, Isaac intimates, repentance is not supposed to be an emotionally colorless activity: it is to be performed in such a way that one expresses remorse or grieves over one’s wrongdoing. Elsewhere, Isaac writes that feeling such compunction often involves the shedding of “abundant tears.”<sup>7</sup> It is in the “sweetness” of such tears, says Isaac, that a person can “see the Lord at all times.”<sup>8</sup> Repentance, apparently, is a way that we experience God. I’ll touch upon this theme again.

This is to describe what full-fledged repentance is. It is not yet to describe its role in the Christian life. Isaac is forthright regarding this matter:

Because God, with that compassionate knowledge of his, knew that if genuine righteousness were required of human beings, then only one in

ten thousand would be found who could enter the kingdom of heaven, he accordingly provided them instead with a medicine suitable for everyone, namely repentance, so that on every day and at every moment there would be available to them an opportunity easily to be put in the right by means of the strength of this medicine.<sup>9</sup>

In a moment, I am going to consider Isaac’s comparison of repentance to medicine, but for now let me point out that Isaac is clearly working with an understanding of repentance and forgiveness according to which the former is a precondition of the latter. Speaking of God, Isaac writes:

Seeing that his face is set all the time towards forgiveness ... he pours over us his immense grace that, like the ocean, knows no measure. To anyone who shows just a little suffering and the will to compunction for what has occurred, to such a person immediately, at once, without any delay, he will grant forgiveness of their sins.<sup>10</sup>

I take Isaac’s thought to be this: God has a standing intention to forgive those who have wronged God (and not, say, a standing intention to look past such wrongdoing as if it doesn’t matter). But the intention is one that can be exercised only when wrongdoers repent of their wrongdoing. While Isaac is sensitive to the therapeutic dimensions of repentance—recall that he likens it to medicine—the point of the activity is not primarily to relieve oneself of a painful psychological burden; rather, its point is to “be put in the right” with God.

At the outset of our discussion, I asked how Isaac could claim that repentance is the point of this life and what would drive him to say such a thing. The passage just quoted holds the beginnings of answers to these questions. Admittedly, at first glance, it doesn’t look that way. The parallel that Isaac draws between repentance and medicine seems only to exacerbate the challenge that his position faces. Those of us who have had the opportunity to introduce students to the distinction between final goods and instrumental goods, often offer medicine (or the taking thereof) as a paradigm example of the latter. Someone who understands what medicine is would never say that the point of this life is to take medicine; it is a purely instrumental or contributory good. The same seems true of repentance.

The key to making sense of what Isaac says is to mark an ambiguity in our talk about the “end” or “point” of a life. Understood in one way, the

<sup>5</sup> “Forward” to Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 12. Of course Isaac’s writings would in this regard be similar to the work of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, which philosophers take very seriously. Here and elsewhere I use the term “theologian” in a more relaxed fashion than does the Christian East, which recognizes only a small number of figures as theologians.

<sup>6</sup> I/70 (340).

<sup>7</sup> I/37 (174).

<sup>8</sup> I/37 (178–179).

<sup>9</sup> II/40, 8–9. Quoted in Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 130.

<sup>10</sup> II/40, 13. Quoted in Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 133.

phrase refers to the ultimate end of one's life: roughly, that end for the sake of which all an agent's actions are (or ought to be) ultimately performed. As intimated earlier, the ancients and medievals were more or less united in their conviction that the ultimate end of a life is eudaemonia, beatitude, or happiness—Aquinas claiming, for example, that such happiness consists in the contemplation of the divine essence. But understood in another way, the point of one's life is some ideal or activity around which one can (or ought to) order one's life. Important for our purposes is the observation that an activity or ideal can function as that around which one orders one's life without being an ultimate end. You might, for example, order your activities around the ideal of becoming an expert musician. But it wouldn't follow that your ultimate end consists in achieving this ideal. It might simply be that you achieve your ultimate end *by* ordering your life around this ideal. At any rate, once we mark this distinction, we can begin to see how Isaac could say that the point of this life is to repent. Under a charitable reading, he is not claiming that repentance is the ultimate end of one's life. Rather, he is claiming that it is an ideal or activity around which we are to order our lives.

Of course the activities or ideals around which we order our lives can bear different relations to one another and have different properties. Some lie close to the center of who we are and what we care about; others lie nearer to the periphery. All such ideals and activities demand time when pursued; many require sacrifice. Most importantly, some activities and ideals warrant ordering our lives around them; others do not. Those that do warrant such ordering enjoy a privileged place, for they can not only justify or make sense of the sacrifices we make to achieve them, but can also render a life ordered around them significant or meaningful. For ease of reference, let's call these *meaningfulness-conferring* activities and ideals. To advert to the example above, being an expert musician is for many a meaningfulness-conferring ideal. Charitably interpreted, Isaac is telling us that the same is true of repentance. It is also a meaningfulness-conferring ideal.

Under a natural understanding, a meaningful life just is one ordered around ideals or activities that warrant such ordering. If we avoid some of the more misleading connotations of the phrase "the meaning of life," we can take a further step and affirm that St. Isaac's dictum tells something about the meaning of life. For, under what we might call a "meaningfulness first" conception, the meaning of life consists in leading a meaningful life. If it does, then St. Isaac's dictum tells us something substantial about the meaning of life.

Suitably interpreted, then, St. Isaac's dictum is perfectly intelligible. It instructs us to order our lives around the activity of repenting. That is why St. Isaac can say that we have been given this life for repentance. Note that St.

Isaac does not say that we have been given this life *only* for repentance; that would make no sense. But it does make sense to say that it is an activity and ideal such that by ordering our lives around it, we would thereby order our lives around something that is fitted to give our lives meaning. Indeed, not only is St. Isaac's dictum intelligible, there is also a sense in which repentance is a good candidate for being that around which a person can order her life: it is not a "one-off" activity but one in which an agent can continually engage.

The question that we need to address is why St. Isaac would give repentance this sort of role in the meaningful life—why he holds that "no virtue is more pre-eminent than repentance."<sup>11</sup> Part of the answer, I believe, is implicit in a passage quoted earlier from Palmer, Sherard, and Ware in which they write that "every human being, by virtue of the fact that he or she is created in the image of God, is summoned to be perfect, is summoned to love God with all his or her heart, soul and mind. In this sense all have the same vocation and all must follow the same spiritual path."<sup>12</sup>

In what is arguably the best known passage in his corpus, Isaac articulates in striking language the ideal of perfection to which we are called. The saints, Isaac writes, "seek for themselves the sign of complete likeness to God: to be perfect in the love of the neighbour."<sup>13</sup> And that, he continues, consists in being merciful "in the likeness of God":

And what is a merciful heart? It is the heart burning for the sake of all creation, for men, for birds, for animals, for demons, and for every created thing; and by the recollection of them the eyes of a merciful man pour forth abundant tears. By the strong and vehement mercy which grips his heart and by his great compassion, his heart is humbled and he cannot bear to hear or to see any injury or slight sorrow in creation. For this reason he offers up tearful prayer continually even for irrational beasts, for the enemies of the truth, and for those who harm him, that they be protected and receive mercy. And in like manner he even prays for the family of reptiles because of the great compassion that burns without measure in his heart in the likeness of God.<sup>14</sup>

This passage is remarkable not simply in its depiction of what God is like but also in how it expands our ordinary categories of concern, including things such as birds, animals, and demons. Since Isaac includes the latter among our

<sup>11</sup> I/32 (153).

<sup>12</sup> Palmer, Sherard, and Ware, "Introduction," 16.

<sup>13</sup> I/71 (346).

<sup>14</sup> I/71 (344–345).

enemies, he draws the conclusion that Christ's commandment to love our enemies implies that we are to pray even for the demons.

Like many in the monastic tradition, then, Isaac takes very seriously the claim that the aim of the Christian life is perfection. And like many in the tradition, he takes a close approximation of what we might call the Christian ideal to be attainable. That this is so is evident in his reflections on the incarnation and death of Christ:

God the Lord surrendered his own Son to death on the cross for the fervent love of creation ... Yet this was not because he could not redeem us in another way, but so that his surpassing love, manifested hereby, might be a teacher unto us. And by the death of his Only-begotten Son he made us near to himself. Yea, if he had anything more precious, he would have given it to us, so that by it our race might be his own. Because of his great love for us it was his pleasure not to do violence to our freedom, although he is able to do so, but he chose that we should draw near to him by the love of our understanding. For the sake of his love for us and obedience to his Father, Christ joyfully took upon himself insult and sorrow ... In like manner, when the saints become perfect, they all attain to this perfection, and by the superabundant outpouring of their love and compassion on all men, they resemble God.<sup>15</sup>

Fascinating and radical as it is (at least by the standards of dominant strands in Western Christianity), Isaac's soteriology is not what interests me most here. Rather, what interests me is Isaac's affirmation that some saints achieve something approximating the perfection of Christ, thereby resembling God. Satisfaction of the Christian ideal, in Isaac's view, is such that we can genuinely approximate it.<sup>16</sup>

When we couple this fact with the further observation that the Christian way of life consists in committing oneself to approximating the ideal of becoming Christ-like, Isaac's rationale for ordering one's life around repentance emerges: repentance—indeed, continual repentance—is (at least in part) an emotionally engaged recognition that one regularly fails to approximate the Christian ideal to which one has committed oneself. The commitment, it should be added, is not to some abstract ideal “the Christian ideal.” Rather, it is (in the first instance) a commitment to God: committing oneself

<sup>15</sup> I/71 (345–346).

<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere Isaac draws back from the claim that the saints achieve perfection, writing: “The limit of this journey [to perfection] is so truly unattainable that even the saints are found wanting with respect to the perfection of wisdom, because there is no end to wisdom's journey” I/37 (163).

to the Christian ideal is (in the first instance) to commit to God that one order one's life around the activity of becoming like Christ. Of course the commitment is more than this; it is also a commitment to the Christian community that one order one's life around the activity of becoming like Christ. And it is probably more than this; it is probably also a vow to oneself that one order one's life around the activity of becoming like Christ. At any rate, it follows that the badness of violating this commitment does not lie in the mere fact that one has violated a commitment—even a commitment to God. We can after all, commit to God, each other, and ourselves to doing things that are trivial or evil. Rather, the badness consists in the fact that, in violating this commitment, we fail to order our lives around something that is of supreme importance. So, Isaac suggests, repentance is called for. Paradoxically, the continual recognition that we continually fail to approximate the Christian ideal is what enables us to more closely approximate the ideal.

In the next section, I am going to touch again on the role that commitment plays in making sense of what Isaac says about repentance. For now, I want to note that Isaac's thought that we more closely approximate the Christian ideal by repentance is not simply that such repentance allows us to repair damaged relationships that we have with God or the Christian community but also to *experience* God. When offering a gloss on the beatitudes, Isaac connects his thinking on repentance with the experience of tears:

Blessed, therefore, are the pure in heart, for there is no time when they do not enjoy the sweetness of tears, and in this sweetness they see the Lord at all times. While tears are still wet in their eyes, they are deemed worthy of beholding his revelations at the height of their prayer; and they make no prayer without tears.<sup>17</sup>

Isaac continues that “even in sleep” the one who sheds tears of repentance “converses with God,” for “love is wont to cause such things.”<sup>18</sup> In repentance and the shedding of tears, a person becomes “aware of the taste of the love of God.”<sup>19</sup> This, in Isaac's view, is crucial, for without “actually direct experience of God's providence, the heart is not able to confide in God. And unless the soul tastes suffering for the sake of Christ, it will not share in knowledge with Him.”<sup>20</sup>

What emerges from passages such as these is that Isaac assumes there to be significant asymmetries between repentance as it pertains to other

<sup>17</sup> I/37 (178–179).

<sup>18</sup> I/37 (183).

<sup>19</sup> II 18,7. Quoted in Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World*, 141.

<sup>20</sup> *On Ascetical Life* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 87.

humans and as it pertains to God. As it pertains to fellow humans, repentance is fraught with risk and pain: when repenting, we are aware that people sometimes rebuff the requests for forgiveness that accompany repentance, or accept them but do so in a way in which they attempt to exercise power over the person who repents. When it comes to God, things are different: there are no risks of this sort. Repentance is, as Isaac writes elsewhere, an occasion for God to pour forth “immense grace” that “knows no measure” on the person who repents and, hence, for that person to intimately experience such grace. Isaac, then, is thinking of repentance as medicine of a special sort; it doesn’t simply heal fractured relationships, it also allows one to taste the goodness of the One who heals. Given the further assumption that experiencing God in this way can be an important component of coming to more nearly resemble God, we can better see why repentance is an activity that Isaac urges us to order our lives around.

There is more to Isaac’s thinking about the connections between repentance and approximating the ideal of perfection than just this, however. Isaac is also keen to emphasize that ordering one’s life around repentance alters one’s orientation to God and others. The alteration consists in clothing oneself in what Isaac calls the “raiment of the Godhead,” namely, humility. Throughout his writings, Isaac continually returns to this theme, singling out humility as a primary way in which we resemble God:

Humility is the raiment of the Godhead. The Word who became human clothed himself in it, and he spoke to us in our body. Everyone who has been clothed with humility has truly been made like Him who came down from his own exaltedness and hid the splendour of his majesty and concealed his glory with humility, lest creation be utterly consumed by the contemplation of him ... Blessed is he that has gained it, because at every moment he kisses and embraces the bosom of Jesus.<sup>21</sup>

Humility, Isaac goes on to say, “makes man god on earth.”<sup>22</sup>

Isaac’s thought seems to be that humility can take several forms. In one form, the trait consists in lowering oneself in such a way that one underemphasizes or even “conceals” one’s own excellence or accomplishments for the purpose of being able to relate to others in ways that would otherwise be impossible. A parent, for example, might exhibit such humility when entering into imaginary play with a child, voluntarily not employing her own advanced abilities in order to build bonds of trust with the child. In another

<sup>21</sup> I/77 (381–382), (384–385).

<sup>22</sup> I/6 (60).

form, humility consists in lowering oneself in such a way that acknowledges and emphasizes one’s own lack of excellence or accomplishments for the purpose of relating to oneself and to others in ways that might otherwise be impossible. If our relationship is fractured, you might set aside whatever excellences or accomplishments you have, acknowledging ways in which you have failed, and do this for the sake of reconciling.

In its first form, Isaac says that God is the paradigm of humility. In its second form, Isaac indicates that the saints are the paradigm of humility. While these forms of humility are importantly different, Isaac seems to think that they are species of a common genus, since both involve a type of “lowering,” where this is a matter of distancing oneself from, underplaying, or not attending to one’s excellences or accomplishments for the sake of obtaining some interpersonal good, such as building bonds of trust or reconciling. If Isaac is right about this, the acquisition of humility in either of its forms is a way in which we can resemble God. Moreover, acquiring it in its second form is both the fruit of and motivation for ordering one’s life around repentance. It is the fruit of such an ordering because we come to acquire this trait by engaging in full-fledged repentance. The acquisition of humility is the motivation for ordering one’s life around repentance, since it is by acquiring this trait that we can more nearly approximate the Christian ideal.

Let me now summarize the interpretation of St. Isaac’s dictum that I’ve offered. The dictum states that the point or end of this life is repentance. I’ve suggested that we interpret this to mean that we are to order our lives around the activity of repenting. The reason for doing so is that those who have committed themselves to the Christian ideal have committed themselves to an ideal whose achievement is extremely demanding. Each of us will repeatedly fail to approximate it. The remedy or “medicine” for this failure, Isaac says, is to order one’s life around the activity of repenting. Yet repentance is, according to Isaac, an unusual sort of “medicine”: in the very activity of acknowledging that one has failed God, one thereby can experience and resemble God. Paradoxically, the acknowledgment of failure to approximate the Christian ideal is that which allows someone committed to the Christian ideal to more closely approximate it.

Let me now add a layer of nuance that may help Isaac’s view come into sharper focus. According to the interpretation that I’ve developed, repentance is the activity that Isaac recommends in the face of our failure to achieve the Christian ideal. That can make it sound as if repentance is something external to the Christian ideal and only contingently and instrumentally related to it. Recall, though, that Isaac advocates an ideal such that those committed to it “seek for themselves the sign of complete likeness to God: to be perfect in

the love of the neighbor,<sup>23</sup> God, and creation.<sup>23</sup> Keeping this in mind can help us to see that, for Isaac, repentance is not an activity external to or merely contingently related to the Christian ideal. Rather Isaac's idea is that to fully commit oneself to pursuing this ideal is to commit oneself to the activity of repenting. Given our nature and God's, there is no other way genuinely to pursue it.

## 2. Implementing the ideal: Liturgy

I dedicated the last section to addressing the questions of whether we could make sense of St. Isaac's dictum and, if so, why Isaac would say that the end of this life is repentance. There is, however, a third question I raised that concerns what, as a practical matter, a life ordered around repentance would look like. The question seems worth raising because, while the texts that the Christian tradition provides for both private devotion and corporate worship typically include prayers of repentance, these prayers are hardly their focal point. In light of this, it is tempting to conclude that if one attempted to implement Isaac's advice, one would have to significantly supplement what the tradition offers. Perhaps one would have to become a monastic.

Although there is something to this generalization regarding the place of repentance in the Christian tradition, much depends on where you look within the tradition to ascertain the role that repentance plays in the life of the church. Given Isaac's location within and influence on the Eastern Christian tradition, one would expect that it is within this tradition that one might find something that approximates the ideal that Isaac articulates. These expectations are not disappointed; if anything, they are exceeded. The extent to which the Eastern Church implements the ideal in both its personal and corporate prayers and rites is considerable.

On this occasion, I shall mention only in passing that the activity of repenting figures heavily in the daily rule of prayer as it is understood within the Eastern tradition. (The paradigm Psalm of repentance—namely, Psalm 50—is included in the daily rule of prayer.)<sup>24</sup> And I'll have nothing to say about the role that the sacrament or mystery of confession plays in the life of the Eastern Church, which is considerable. Instead, I want to focus on the role that repentance plays in the Eastern Church's corporate worship services. My rationale for doing so is not simply that one might suspect that it plays a lesser role in these services than in the prayers employed in personal

<sup>23</sup> 1/71 (346).

<sup>24</sup> Psalm 51 in the Christian west's numbering of the Psalms.

devotion. It is also because repentance takes on a unique character in the church's liturgies. (When I say this, I don't mean simply to draw attention to the fact that repentance is performed in a public setting.) The corporate services that I have in mind, however, are not the various versions of the Divine Liturgy—although it should be noted that, for a type of service whose central event is the celebration of the Eucharist, the *mood* of this service is strikingly penitential.<sup>25</sup> Rather, the services on which I want to focus are those that compose the period known as the Great Fast, which is a ten-week period of daily services that includes (but is not limited to) the forty-day period known as Great Lent, in which the church prepares itself for the celebration of Pascha or Easter. Alexander Schmemmann calls this period the church's "school of repentance."<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting that many texts used in these services are from the fifth through the eighth century, having their provenance in the Syriac and Palestinian Christian tradition to which Isaac belonged.<sup>27</sup>

Unless you hail from the broadly Pentecostal tradition, the corporate prayers of repentance and their mode of expression with which you are familiar are probably succinct and staid (albeit sincere). That is not, however, how the prayers of repentance and their expression take form during the services of the Lenten Fast. These prayers are not succinct or staid; they are elaborate and effusive, even turbulent.

Let me illustrate. Having declared that the "season of repentance is at hand,"<sup>28</sup> the prayers during the first week of Great Lent, which are in the first-person, begin with the acknowledgment that our need is dire:

The multitude of my transgression is like the deep waters of the sea, and I drown in my iniquities. Give me Your hand, O God my Saviour; save me as You saved Peter, and have mercy on me . . . rouse my thoughts to repentance, and make me a tried labourer in Your vineyard . . . Grant me the firm intent to turn back to You, for You alone love humankind, and have mercy on me.<sup>29</sup>

Lest one be under the impression that repentance is something that we can accomplish under our own power, the liturgical text offers a corrective: it is not

<sup>25</sup> To be more exact, its mood is a complex admixture of reverence, celebration, and repentance. The "kyrie liasons" that the congregation repeatedly offers in response to the litanies that compose the Divine Liturgy have multiple layers of meaning, but they are prayers of repentance at the very least. I address this issue at more length in section III of "Love and Liturgy," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 43 (2015): 587–605.

<sup>26</sup> *Great Lent* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1969), 9.

<sup>27</sup> See Ware, "The Meaning of the Great Fast," in *LT*, 40–42.

<sup>28</sup> *LT*, 210.

<sup>29</sup> *LT*, 184. Mary and Ware use King James English in their translation. I have modernized it.

something that we can perform under our own power. Nor, for that matter, are the actions that are the “worthy fruits” of repentance, such as the acquisition and practice of the virtues: “Do not demand from me worthy fruits of repentance, for my strength has failed within me. Give an ever-contrite heart and poverty of spirit, that I may offer these to You an acceptable sacrifice.”<sup>30</sup> These expressions of distress and pleas for resolve and strength are coupled with the acknowledgment that deep compunction is absent when the effort to repent is made: “When I try to repent, I have no tears to shed . . . I have no tears, no repentance, no compunction.”<sup>31</sup> These acknowledgments are followed by still more petitions: “Grant me tears falling as the rain from heaven, O Christ . . . Give me tears, O God, as once You gave them to the woman who had sinned, and count me worthy to wash Your feet that have delivered me from the way of error.”<sup>32</sup> Variations on this last theme are repeated again and again.

These are only a very small sample of the many prayers included in the liturgical text used during the Lenten Fast. But they are representative of the character of the text: the prayers consist in petitions for the resolve or strength to repent, acknowledgments that one lacks this resolve and proper compunction, and still more petitions to have such compunction. A moment ago, I referred to these as “prayers of repentance.” But that is probably not the best description of them. For, strictly speaking, these prayers do not express repentance. Rather, they are acknowledgments of distress, petitions that one be given the strength to repent, and exhortations to emulate figures who repent, such as the woman who washed Jesus’s feet with her tears. These elements of the liturgical text are better categorized as *repentance-oriented* prayers.

Interestingly enough, the Eastern Church’s paradigm prayer of repentance, the Prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian, also appears to be not a prayer of repentance but a repentance-oriented prayer. This prayer, which is said at least once at each weekday office during the services of Great Lent, runs as follows:

O Lord and Master of my life, give me not a spirit of sloth, despair, lust for power, and idle talk.

But give to me your servant a spirit of sobriety, humility, patience, and love.

O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to condemn my brother: for blessed are you to the ages of ages. Amen.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *LT*, 414. This passage, I take it, is supposed to stand in contrast to ones such as this: “Let all of us set forth eagerly on the course of the Fast, offering our virtues as gifts to the Lord” (*LT*, 191).

<sup>31</sup> *LT*, 184, 238; cf. 272.

<sup>32</sup> *LT*, 188.

<sup>33</sup> I cite the prayer as it is translated in *LT*, 69.

Like the prayers cited above, this prayer is not a confession or expression of repentance in any straightforward sense; were one sincerely to recite this prayer, one wouldn’t thereby confess that one has wronged God or one’s fellow human beings. That one has seems to be taken for granted. Instead, the prayer takes the form of a petition, asking God that one not have certain characteristics, such as lust for power and despair, but that one exhibit others, such as patience and humility.

I say that the Prayer of St. Ephraim *appears* to be a repentance-oriented prayer. But there is more to the Prayer of St. Ephraim than the text I have cited indicates. This becomes evident when we mark the distinction between a *liturgical text*, on the one hand, and a *liturgical script*, on the other.<sup>34</sup> A liturgical text is roughly a collection of sentences that would be uttered by the assembly in the enactment of a liturgy; in the Eastern Christian tradition, the liturgical text is nearly always given in written form. In contrast, while a liturgical script often includes a liturgical text, it also includes instructions for when a liturgy is to be performed, by whom, what actions are to be performed during a liturgy, and in what manner and when. For example, the liturgical script for the Stichera of Repentance offers instructions that this service only be performed on the first Sunday of Great Lent by the assembled, that they are to utter the sentences that compose the liturgical text, and are to do so by employing whatever musical tones that are used for that week. (The Eastern Church alternates between eight “tones” that it uses to sing or chant the liturgical text.) Most importantly for our purposes, the liturgical script for the weekday services of Great Lent instructs the assembled to fully prostrate themselves when reciting the Prayer of St. Ephraim: after each verse, one falls to the ground, touching the ground with one’s forehead.

The Greek term used to refer to these prostrations is *metanoia*, which means *repentance*. Once one appreciates that the scripted performance of the Prayer of St. Ephraim involves not just the recitation of a liturgical text but also the performance of bodily actions of this sort, we are better able to see that to liturgically perform this prayer is to perform (at least) two distinct speech acts: it is both to petition and to repent.<sup>35</sup> When all goes well, the linguistic act of uttering the text of the prayer counts as petitioning God; the bodily act of fully prostrating oneself counts as repenting.

<sup>34</sup> What I am calling the “liturgical script” corresponds to what Schmemmann calls the *ordo* in his *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1966).

<sup>35</sup> Of course it may be more than this; it could also express humility and reverence, for example. I am helping myself here to the somewhat controversial assumption that there is the speech act type *repenting*.



The linguistic act of reciting the Prayer of St. Ephraim and the performance of a full prostration, I've said, count as petitioning and repenting to God when all goes well. The qualification is necessary because the liturgical performance of these linguistic and bodily actions is not perforce to petition or repent. One can, after all, perform a speech act insincerely, as when one says "I'm sorry" when one is really not. In such a case, one would perform the speech act of repenting but not repent. More importantly, given the tradition's robust understanding of repentance (*metanoia*) in which it is the enactment of a resolution to transform one's mind, one could perform the speech act of repenting and even express the resolve to repent, but fall short of *enacting* the resolution and, hence, genuinely repenting. As Isaac emphasizes, whether one enacts this commitment by genuinely turning away from what one resolves to leave behind is something that happens over time to different degrees, taking place not simply in the performance of speech acts but also in one's day-to-day activities. When sincerely and competently performed, then, a liturgical action such as performing the speech act of repenting may have limited implications for the actual process of repenting and, hence, making progress toward approximating the Christian ideal.

The texts of the services that compose the Lenten Fast are sensitive to this last point. Indeed, it is because they are sensitive to this point that we can make sense of what might appear to be a puzzling feature of the services of the Lenten Fast. The texts of these services, I've pointed out, are composed in large measure of repentance-oriented prayers. But if the aim of these services is to enable people to repent, why would so many prayers be of this sort? Why wouldn't these texts simply—or at least primarily—contain prayers of repentance? Answering these questions, I want to suggest, helps us to identify the unique character of repentance as it takes shape in the liturgies of the Eastern Church.

This coupling of prayers of repentance with these repentance-oriented prayers makes sense, I want to suggest, when we reflect on what it is to perform the speech act of repenting. According to the account of speech acts that I take to be correct, the performance of this type of speech act consists in committing oneself to the world being a certain way and to one's being in mental states of certain kinds.<sup>36</sup> In the case of repenting, for example, one commits oneself to (i) the fact that one has engaged in wrongdoing and to one's believing or acknowledging that one has engaged in such wrongdoing; (ii) one's being against what one has done; (iii) one's being sorry or remorseful for what one has done; and (iv) one's being committed to not performing

such an action again.<sup>37</sup> Call these the *commitment conditions* of repentance. (When Isaac describes what it is to repent, he includes each of these conditions.) In taking on these commitments, one alters one's normative position with regard to God, the fellow members of the assembly with whom one performs these actions, and oneself. For, in the performance of the speech act of repenting, one puts oneself "on the hook," laying oneself open to correction, admonition, or even blame if the conditions just cited are not satisfied. (Unless I indicate otherwise, in what follows, I'll use the term "repent" to mean the *speech act* of repenting.)

As I read them, the liturgical texts are keyed into the ways in which we often fail to satisfy these conditions upon (or subsequent to) repenting. It is because we so regularly fail these conditions, I want to further suggest, that repentance-oriented prayers figure so prominently in the liturgical texts.

Consider, to begin with, passages such as the following:

I have rivalled in transgression Adam the first-formed man, and I have found myself stripped naked of God, of the eternal Kingdom and its joy, because of my sins.

David, the forefather of God, once sinned doubly, pierced with the arrow of adultery and the spear of murder. But you, my soul, are more gravely sick than he, for worse than any acts are the impulses of your will.

I fall before You, and as tears I offer You my words. I have sinned as the Harlot never sinned . . . but take pity on your creature, O Master, and call me back.<sup>38</sup>

Interpreted from one angle, these passages appear to engage in moral self-abasement, even if one allows for hyperbole in expression. Relatively few of us are inclined to hold that the "impulses" of the will are worse than actually murdering someone.<sup>39</sup> Interpreted from another angle, however, these passages function as correctives to the tendency, which many of us exhibit, to think of the wrongdoing in which we engage as not particularly serious. Under this reading, the point of these passages is to sensitize or alert us to the tendency to assume that the actions that we perform do not put us at

<sup>37</sup> I use the phrase "things that we do" capaciously so that it also refers to acts of omission.

<sup>38</sup> *LT*, 199, 205, 262. Similar claims are made in every Divine Liturgy in the pre-communion prayers.

<sup>39</sup> There is an interesting issue to address here, and that is whether in denying that you are worse than other sinners commits you to the claim that you are better (in this respect) than they are. I take there to be no such commitment. One could hold—very plausibly, to my mind—that while few are in a morally good state, the moral differences between us are largely incommensurable: your moral standing is neither worse than, better than, or identical with mine.

<sup>36</sup> I defend this position in *Speech and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

variance with God or tend not to matter that much. For, when we exhibit this tendency, we fail the first of the commitment conditions of repentance, the satisfaction of which implies that one believe or acknowledge that one has engaged in wrongdoing—where the assumption is that in having such a belief, one presupposes that what one has done matters.

Other passages of the liturgical text voice similar themes but address other ways in which our acts of repentance can be defective:

When I examine my actions, O Saviour, I see that I have gone beyond all men in sin; for I knew and understood what I did; I was not sinning in ignorance. . . . With full knowledge and by my own free choice, I have eagerly desired a shameful and prodigal life.<sup>40</sup>

Alas! What will become of me? What shall I do? I feel no pang of conscience when I sin, nor do I fear the Master. Because of this . . . I stand condemned. O just and loving Judge, turn me back and save me.<sup>41</sup>

When I try to repent, I have no tears to shed . . . I have no tears, no repentance, no compunction.<sup>42</sup>

To satisfy the second and third commitment conditions of repentance, one must not only be against one's wrongdoing but also be remorseful for it. The texts of the repentance-oriented prayers call our attention to the fact that we often fail to satisfy these conditions, voicing a plea for help in avoiding these failures.

And then there are passages that address the last of the commitment conditions of repentance in which the prayers of the liturgies use the technique of a narrator addressing his own soul:

The Law is powerless, the Gospel of no effect, and the whole of Scripture is ignored by you; the prophets and all the words of the righteous are useless. Your wounds, my soul, have been multiplied, and there is no physician to heal you . . . You have heard, O my soul, of Job justified on a dung-hill, but you have not imitated his fortitude. In all your experiences and trials and temptations, you have not kept firmly to your purpose but have proved inconstant.<sup>43</sup>

Once again, the idea seems to be that, when repenting, we need to be aware of the ways in which we can and often fail in satisfying that to which we commit

<sup>40</sup> *LT*, 242, 319.

<sup>41</sup> *LT*, 212.

<sup>42</sup> *LT*, 184, 238; cf. 272.

<sup>43</sup> *LT*, 207–208, 222.

ourselves. Repentance begets repentance at this point. Failure to satisfy the conditions of repentance generates still another reason to repent. One begins to get a sense for why Isaac claims that the activity must be continual!

My aim in this section has been to address the question of what, as a practical matter, it might look like to order one's life around repentance. With an eye on the liturgical practices of the Christian East, I've noted that repentance figures prominently in these practices, more so than in any other tradition within Christendom of which I am aware. In this way, the Christian East implements the ideal stated in St. Isaac's dictum. I've also pointed out that, when one examines the prayers and practices of the Great Fast, it becomes evident that many of the prayers included in the church's liturgical texts are not prayers of repentance but repentance-oriented prayers. Although this orientation can initially appeal puzzling, I've suggested that when we specify the commitment conditions of repenting, we can see why these liturgical texts include these repentance-oriented prayers. In one or another way, they address the fact that we frequently fail to satisfy these conditions, and that we need to be aware of this when repenting. The reason we need to be aware of these tendencies, I take it, is not simply that we need to have an acute awareness of the fact that we are likely to fail in our endeavors to genuinely repent. It is also that we should repent with a clear-eyed recognition that the activity ought not to be an episodic event in the life of the Christian. Given its character and ours, repentance is an activity in which someone committed to the Christian ideal must continually engage. When read against the rest of his thought, I take this to be exactly what St. Isaac's dictum says. And it is something made manifest in the liturgical texts of the Great Fast.

### 3. Universal but not corporate

As Alexander Schmemmann tells the narrative, the liturgies of the Christian East are the product of three main influences: the influence of the synagogue, the Byzantine court, and the monasteries.<sup>44</sup> The liturgies of the Great Fast are the product of the last influence. One telltale sign of this is that their prayers of repentance and repentance-oriented prayers wholly concern themselves with and intensely scrutinize the inner spiritual life of the believer. We've seen that both the prayers of repentance and the repentance-oriented prayers are typically cast in the first-person—although it should be noted that the

<sup>44</sup> *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*.

voice employed in these prayers is often that of a biblical character such as the Prodigal Son or the Publican with whom the assembled are to identify.<sup>45</sup>

To my knowledge, there are no prayers of repentance or repentance-oriented prayers in these liturgies that deviate from this pattern. There are, for example, no collective prayers of repentance or repentance-oriented prayers in which a congregation confesses its shortcomings.<sup>46</sup> In one sense, this is not surprising, given the monastic provenance of these texts. But in another sense, it is surprising. The Eastern Church thinks of itself not as a group of individuals organized around common ideals and activities but as a tightly unified collective: a person is baptized into the church and it is the church that is “actualized” in the celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>47</sup> The church’s unity, Ware writes, “is not maintained from without by the authority of a Supreme Pontiff, but created from within by the celebration of the Eucharist” by various congregations.<sup>48</sup> This strong sense of unity is true not only of the church, but also of the individual congregations that (partially) constitute it: they too are united around the celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>49</sup> Under the plausible assumption that congregations no less than individuals have obligations and responsibilities that they can fulfill or fail to fulfill, it is surprising that the Eastern Church’s liturgies of repentance do not appear to recognize this dimension of repentance. If it did, it might recommend that we would have to expand our understanding of St. Isaac’s dictum: those committed to the Christian ideal are to order their lives around repenting not only of their own individual wrongdoings but also those of the congregations and groups, which constitute the church, to which they belong.

In recent years, there has been a flurry of work done on the topic of group agency.<sup>50</sup> This work raises the question of whether communities can have lives and whether they also can be meaningful. If they can lead such lives by ordering their activity around meaningfulness-conferring activities, it might

<sup>45</sup> I explore the liturgical practice of identifying with characters in the liturgical script in “Liturgy and the Moral Life,” *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, ed. Christian Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015: 572–589).

<sup>46</sup> For an explanation of why the Eastern Church would not talk of the *church* repenting, see Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, *The Orthodox Church*. New Edition (New York: Penguin, 1997, ch. 12). Here I speak of the liturgies of the Great Fast. The Eucharistic liturgies, I believe, are plausibly interpreted to include corporate prayers of repentance.

<sup>47</sup> A theme that Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* emphasizes.

<sup>48</sup> *The Orthodox Church*, 246.

<sup>49</sup> In his book *The Orthodox Church*, John Meyendorff writes: “Now the *fullness* of this reality ... is present in every local church, in every Christian community gathered around the Eucharistic Table and having a bishop at its head” (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962, 212).

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Christian List and Philip Pettit, *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design and Status of Corporate Agents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

be that we can intelligibly speak of what it is for those congregations that constitute the church to lead meaningful lives. Given an expanded understanding of St. Isaac’s dictum, such a life would also consist in being ordered around repentance.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Thanks to Jon Jacobs, Rico Vitz, Nick Wolterstorff, the editors of this volume, and an audience at the Theistic Ethics Workshop at Wake Forest University for their comments on a version of this chapter. Work on this chapter was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.