



THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION

By FR. MICHAEL SHANBOUR

1. What is the Sacrament of Confession?

Confession is part of the process of "repentance," which is the essence of the Christian life. Repentance is a change of heart, usually with corresponding changes of behavior or attitude. Repentance includes at least the following: 1) awareness; 2) sorrow and contrition; 3) confession; and 4) struggle to change. It may often include making amends or a penance (see below). Without confession, repentance is incomplete. Confession is a verbal acknowledgment of our "falling short" of what we are called to be.

2. What is Sin?

The word "sin" (which has so many terrifying connotations in our society) means simply "to miss the mark." The Greek word, taken from the sport of archery, was used to designate missing the target. To sin is to miss the target of what we are created to be. In this sense, to put grape juice in the gas tank of a car is a "sin." Cars are made to run on gas, and we are made to run by the Grace of God in our hearts. The act of putting grape juice in the car misses the mark of how cars are made to run. To do anything that puts something other than

So, if someone snubs us and we feel that passion of anger or indignation or resentment or worse welling up inside us, it is a sign that our heart is still sick — not completely filled with God's love — and we are missing the mark.

There are different ways of missing the mark. There are different sins, and there are different manifestations of the same sin, with greater or lesser degrees of consequence. Consciously ignoring someone, giving someone a dirty look, hitting someone, and murdering someone, are all a product of the same sin — anger or hatred. The seriousness of each is different, but



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the condition of the heart in each case is similar or identical. This is why Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'Thou shalt not commit murder' ... But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment" (Matt. 5:21-22). The thought of murder is the same sin as physical killing, and every murder began with a thought ... a thought that was not restrained or confessed. This is why Jesus said that all sins and all thoughts come "out of the heart": "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries ..." (Matt. 15:19).

So we have all sinned, and every sin in thought is a sign of our heart's sick condition and a potential sinful act. Remember St. John says in his first Epistle: "If we say we have no sin, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us."

3. Is the Sacrament of Confession essential? Why is it important?

It is a commonly held belief (actually a Protestant belief) that confession with a priest is not necessary. "Why must I confess to a priest? ... I tell God in private." First, it is very important to understand that we Orthodox do NOT confess "to" the priest. (This is a Roman Catholic understanding). We confess TO God in the presence of the priest. The priest is both a representative of the whole Church and a witness to the true condition of repentance in us, that we are truly desiring to be reconciled to God. Next, the Scripture tells us to confess: St. James' Epistle says to "Confess your sins one to another." Also, the Gospel tells us that St. John the Baptist was baptizing people as they were "confessing their sins." King David confessed (to murder and adultery) in the presence of Nathan the Prophet (and only after being confronted by him). In the early Church, sins were confessed publicly to the whole church gathering before the Eucharist began. There are very common-sensical reasons that the Church has always had a "public" form of confession.

- God already knows our sins.

Confession to God is not really confession properly speaking. We should, however, confess our sins to God daily. This is part of repentance.

- Telling our sin to another person makes it "real." How many times have we only finally gotten relief for a guilty conscience after confessing it out loud? Most of us realize that when we have a problem we need to talk to someone, we need to get things "off our chest."

- We often need help and encouragement to confess and face our sins.

- Confession makes us accountable. If we confess to God privately, but have not declared our sin to someone else, there is much less sense of accountability. It is much easier to repeat our sin. For this reason it has been "popular" off and on in Protestant circles to have "accountability partners," people with whom you confess and who encourage you to remain faithful.

- God acts in confession. In every sacrament of the Church God acts. In the prayer of absolution the priest says: "May that same God forgive you ... through me, a sinner ...". He does so "through" the priest, the successor of the Apostles, who has the responsibility to guard the Faith, to preserve the integrity of the Church and the souls of Christians. Jesus Christ acts through His Church, and through those ordained by the Church. Remember, after His Resurrection He said to the Apostles: "Whosoever sins ye remit they are remitted, and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained." He says in another place, "Whatever sins ye remit they are remitted in heaven."

- The Grace of God is given in confession. There is an incredible and undeniable power and grace in confession. The sacrament is more than what we might see with our eyes. Great Grace is imparted to those who take advantage of this sacrament. Some remarkable and extraordinary "miracles" have been known to happen in confession ... miracles of release from burdens, epiphanies, something said which pierces the heart and effects change, etc. It is not so much that God gives the "authority" to the priest. Rather,

He works in His Church through the priest. His grace and power are available and accessible in and through the Church, Her prayers, Her teachings, Her whole life and atmosphere.

4. How does Confession work ... what do I do ... what does the Priest do?

The actual mechanics of confession tend to be fairly informal in the Orthodox Church. However, at different times in history, and in different places, there were more formal approaches or set dialogues. There are actually different customs among various national Orthodox Churches, different "styles" among Orthodox priests, etc. In some practices the penitent kneels, in others he stands. If in doubt, ask your priest how he handles the mechanics of the confession.

As the priest stands in front of the icon of Christ, the penitent approaches and stands (or kneels) beside him to his right. The priest usually begins with prayer. In some cases he will ask you to read a prayer, and there are some different "dialogues" and prayers that can be said before the confession.

The priest will then ask what it is that you have to confess to our Lord. The penitent begins to enumerate those sins he or she is aware of, and must speak from his or her heart. Each person, having his own personality, will vary slightly in the way he confesses. Some may weep, and all should seek to be reverent, heartfelt, repentant, and generally serious.

It is usually advised not to mention any names in confession and especially not to assign blame to another for our sins or to "confess the sins of others." We are there only to take responsibility for our sins, not to enumerate the sins of others.

Although we try to be thorough about the sins we have committed since our last confession, we should not be "obsessed" with this. It is fine to confess that we did not keep the fast with perfection on a Wednesday, for instance. Yet, in coming to confession we should also try to focus on the spiritual condition of our hearts, our spiritual poverty, what is truly keeping us from God. It is more



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important to confess with greater weight those sins with which we are truly struggling or which have dragged us down and are affecting our spiritual life adversely.

We should try to become aware of the teaching of the Church on various sins and their causes. We should become aware of the "passions," those sinful inclinations and promptings which are a result of the Fall of Adam. These un-healed passions are the cause of all sins and need to be confessed as they come out in various situations within our life. We can learn to "name" our sins. It may be that we were hurt when someone insulted us or did not praise us enough, but the problem is our ego, the sin of pride.

It is sometimes asked how much detail we should include in confession. The simple answer is that we include details when they are important in revealing the nature of our sin. For example, a man confesses that he broke a vase. He then confesses that he was very angry and broke a vase. Finally, he confesses that he got angry and broke a vase ... over the head of his wife! Breaking a vase is not really sinful in and of itself. Anger is a sin. Anger acted out in an act of violence against a spouse is a completely different story. It is not important whether the vase was blue or green. The Fathers also tell us that in the case of carnal sins, we should not be detailed so as not to tempt our confessor or ourselves.

The priest may respond with questions or words of guidance. Although we are confessing to Christ the Physician, we may speak to the Physician's assistant (the priest) and receive his advice and comments so that we may be healed of the sins we are confessing. The priest may also give a "penance," which is like a medicine to help our healing. This may be a specific prayer, an instruction to ask forgiveness of those we have offended, instruction to return to confession at specific intervals, or temporary exclusion from Holy Communion, etc. These are based on the discernment of the priest, as God has given him Grace. One should always fulfill a penance given. The

priest may ask a last time if there are any other sins to confess. If not, unless the penitent cannot be restored to Communion, the priest says the Prayer of Absolution which "seals" the confession and grants forgiveness for the sins confessed (and those legitimately forgotten), bringing purifying Grace to the penitent, and restoring him to blessed communion with God.

5. How often should I come to Confession?

This is a very legitimate question. But sometimes it is asked in the spirit of the lawyer who asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven?" An implication of his question seems to be, "What is the LEAST I must do to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?" The man left disappointed, precisely because the Lord gave him a maximalistic answer: "Sell all that you have, distribute to the poor, and come, follow Me." Since the Christian life is a life of repentance, and since confession brings reservoirs of Grace to assist us in the spiritual life and bring healing to the passions of our soul, we should avail ourselves of it often. We should avoid thinking in terms of the "minimum requirements." We reap what we sow. If we confess minimally, we will grow mini-

mally. Long periods between confessions present the danger of the accumulation of "little" or habitual sins without intervention. We may also forget many of our sins over an extended period of time between confessions. A good minimal rule is four times a year during the four fasting seasons of the Church. However, as a way of avoiding the pitfalls mentioned above, once each month will serve our spiritual lives much better. Otherwise, we should come any time there is need or desire. While we should prepare sincerely for confession, we must be careful not to use the need for preparation as an excuse for procrastination. Preparation (or the thought of preparation) for confession should not be an overwhelming or exhausting experience. It may happen that we suddenly become aware of a particular sinfulness during prayer, or at a Church service. Rather than waiting a week or month for Great Lent, and bringing a comprehensive "list" of sins, why not bring this illness to the Doctor of our souls immediately, if possible? Would we procrastinate if there were an earthly pain and an earthly doctor?

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