

The Sacrament of Confession

Confession is one of the sacraments of the Church, which was instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ, when after His resurrection, He said to His disciples, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:21-23) This authority to bind and loose sins Jesus gave to the apostles and in turn to the bishops and priests who followed them throughout the ages.

Confession, as a sacrament of the Orthodox Church, is absolutely essential for the Christian's spiritual wellbeing. Confession begins with the discovery and recognition of our sins and passions (the passions being the source of our sins), leads to the healing of our souls, and continues with the necessary guidance from our spiritual father in living a life of continual repentance. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says "I am the door..." which leads to eternal life. The priest is the one who holds the keys that opens this door for us to enter. The key is the sacrament of confession.

Sin is not merely a bad or evil thought, word or deed. It is a spiritual illness that wounds the soul. The soul can become so wounded by our sins and plagued with guilt that we may reach a state of faithlessness, hopelessness and despair. Satan leads us into thinking that we are so evil that we are beyond God's love and forgiveness. Words cannot begin to describe this tragic form of existence.

The first thing that we learn in Confession is that God's love is greater than any sin we can ever possibly commit. Many of us live our lives here on earth already buried in a tomb. Perhaps we fear coming to Confession thinking that we will be judged. Nothing could be further than the truth. Confession is the sacrament of healing. It is the vehicle by which God's love and mercy are available to us in a very tangible way. God will judge us in the world to come, but in Confession He will be loving and merciful. If we truly repent, He will not only forgive our sins, but forget them: as if they never happened!

Confession is not only about remitting sins, but embracing virtues. It is essential to know what the seven fundamental sins (passions) are; for these are connected to one another and are the roots of all other sins: Pride, Anger, Jealousy, Laziness, Gluttony, Lust, Greed. The opposite of these respectively are: Humility, Patience, Gratefulness, Vigilance, Self-control, Love, Generosity. When we repent, we renounce and avoid these sins, while we strive to embrace and practice these virtues in our lives.

The first step is to meet with our priest to discuss Confession and how to prepare. Any questions and concerns should be brought to his attention. After you have prepared for Confession, make an appointment with a priest to confess. Be prepared for the temptation of Satan that will follow: he will tempt you into canceling, especially if this is your first time. Why? Because he does not wish you to be forgiven or to experience God's love! He wants you to continue living a life alienated from God. Remember, God will not judge us for being imperfect sinners, He will judge us if we are unrepentant sinners.

Having prepared for confession, it is time to meet the priest at the church. There we stand before and icon of Jesus Christ saying a prayer together. We sit down and begin by

confessing our sins to God: perhaps with the ones that trouble us the most. The priest may ask a question or offer insight on what is being confessed. Remember we are not confessing to the priest, but to God. The priest is not there to judge (heaven forbid) for he too is a sinner and in need of confession. He is there to help you with confession. He's there to guide you.

After Confession, follow the guidance of the priest. His advice will help you begin your journey back to God. He may read the prayer of forgiveness and instruct you in how to pray, fast and when to receive Holy Communion. The priest is the physician of the soul, as the doctor is of the body. He will instruct and guide you appropriately. Of course everything you mention to him or the things he mentions to you are absolutely confidential. Remember, he is not there to judge, but to heal. And keep in mind that he too confesses his sins to his spiritual father.

We should not fear Confession but rejoice in it. It may be painful initially as we prepare because it's not pleasant recounting our past sins; but after confessing we are filled with blissful joy. Not only is sin removed from us, like a tumor is cut out of the body; but so is the guilt (all traces of the tumor). We become pure and peaceful knowing that this one action pleases God infinitely...and this after all is our purpose in life.

We should all come to Confession at least once per year; or, as directed by one's spiritual father. Surely we should confess our sins daily in our private prayers. However, we should not avoid or neglect this most holy of sacraments gifted to us by God and His Church for the forgiveness and sanctification of our souls.

Your Spiritual Father

As stated above, the necessity of Confession is absolutely essential. A canonical Orthodox priest who has received the blessings of his hierarch to hear confessions and give spiritual guidance is called a "Confessor". It is not recommended to go to different priests for confession. After meeting several priests, and it does not necessarily need to be your parish priest, you should choose to have one priest serve as your spiritual father or father-confessor. This decision should be made with much thought and prayer.

Once the decision has been made, you should formally ask the priest you choose to be your spiritual father. Of course, he must also be willing to receive you under his care, for this is a grave responsibility for him: you are placing in his hands the care of your soul. He may recommend another priest for you to consider; or, he will humbly receive you. A prostration should be made before him and his hand should be venerated.

A new profound relationship now exists. Your spiritual father hears your confession; he instructs you in how to pray, fast and when to receive Holy

Communion. He counsels you on spiritual matters, or other concerns you may have. He recommends readings from the Bible and the Church Fathers; he will direct you in daily devotional practices; and, he will keep you in his daily prayers.

There is a pious belief among Orthodox Christians that on the fearful day of Judgment, each and every one of us will stand before the throne of God. There we will give an account of all the things we did in this world. But we will not be alone: on one side of us will be our guardian angel, who was gifted to us by God on the day of our Baptism; and, on the other side of us will be our spiritual father. Both will intercede to God on our behalf.

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