

## **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 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 can 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. He will not only forgive our sins, but forget them: as if they never happened!

Confession is not only about sin, but virtue. It is essential to know what the seven fundamental sins (passions) are; for these are ones that 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. As we avoid these sins we put in 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 we 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 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 ask the priest you choose to be your spiritual father. Of course he must also be willing to receive you under his care, because this is a grave responsibility for him; for 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 Christian 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 since 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.

Written by: Fr. Michael Varlamos

### **SPIRITUAL HELPS THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD**

1. I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no other Gods before me.
2. Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image.
3. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5. Honor thy father and mother.
6. Thou shalt not kill.
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
8. Thou shalt not steal.
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness.
10. Thou shalt not covet.

### **SELF EXAMINATION BEFORE COMING TO CONFESSION**

#### **First Commandment**

Have I believed in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Have I failed to trust in God and His mercy? Have I complained against God in adversity? Have I been thankful for God's blessings? Have I doubted the Christian faith and the teachings of the Church? Have I tried to serve God and keep His Commandments? Have I given way to superstition? Have I neglected my duties to God through fear of ridicule or persecution? Have I failed to pray to God faithfully? Have I put myself before God?

#### **Second Commandment**

Have I made an idol of any person or thing? Have I given to anyone or anything the worship that is due to God alone? Have I set before myself the holy life of Jesus and tried to imitate Him? Have I read the Holy Scriptures regularly? Have I been irreverent during Church Services, let my attention wander, or been insincere? Have I neglected to receive Holy Communion regularly or without due preparation?

### **Third Commandment**

Have I profaned the holy name of God in any way? Have I cursed anyone or anything, or sworn a false oath? Have I failed to give proper reverence to holy persons and things? Have I had due respect for the clergy of the Church or hindered them in performing God's work? Have I broken any solemn vow or promise? Have I entered into any unlawful contract or made an unlawful promise?

### **Fourth Commandment**

Have I stayed away from Church on Sundays or prevented others from going? Have I done unnecessary work on Sundays? Have I spent the day in unwholesome fashion or profaned it by improper conduct? If I could not go to Church because of illness or other grave cause have I prayed at home? Have I caused anyone else to profane the Lord's Day? Have I kept the Fasts and Feast prescribed by the Church.

### **Fifth Commandment**

Have I respected my parents and been obedient to them? Have I been guilty of deception, or caused them pain by my words or actions? Have I neglected them or failed to help them? Have I done my duty towards my family? Have I been wanting in love or kindness towards my husband (or wife), or harmed him (or her) in any way? Have I set my children a good example and tried to bring them up properly? Have I corrected their faults with patience and not with anger? Have I over-indulged or spoiled them? Have I neglected my god-children and failed in my obligations towards them? Have I worked for my employers honestly and diligently? Have I treated fairly all those who have worked for me? Have I honored God as my Heavenly Father by treating others as my brothers, and have I honored the Church as my spiritual Mother by honoring and practicing my religion in accordance with her teachings?

### **Sixth Commandment**

Have I caused the injury or death of anyone, or wished that I were dead? Have I done anything to shorten my own life or that of someone else by injuring health, or through evil and intemperate living? Have I given way to anger, or harmed others with words or actions? Have I defamed others who needed help, or failed to stand up for those unjustly treated? Have I been cruel to anyone? Have I mistreated animals or destroyed any life unnecessarily? Have I failed to forgive anyone or harbored evil thoughts against them?

### **Seventh Commandment**

Have I given way to impure thoughts, words, or deeds? Have I committed any unworthy actions alone or with others? Have I degraded myself in any way, or forgotten human dignity? Have I read immoral books or magazines, or delighted in obscenity of any kind? Have I associated with

bad companions or frequented unsavory places? Have I eaten or drunk or smoked too much? Have I been lazy, idle, or wasted my time? Have I led others to commit sinful acts? Have I been unfaithful to any trust confided in me?

#### **Eighth Commandment**

Have I stolen anything or wished to do so? Have I kept anything that did not belong to me? Have I tried honestly to find owners of lost articles I have found? Have I cheated anyone? Have I paid my debts? Have I lived within my income, and not wastefully and extravagantly? Have I given to charitable causes in proportion to my means? Have I been honest and upright?

#### **Ninth Commandment**

Have I told lies, or added to or subtracted from the truth? Have I made careless statements or spoken evil of anyone? Have I told any secrets entrusted to me, or betrayed anyone? Have I gossiped about anyone or harmed their reputation? Have I concealed the truth, assisted in carrying out a lie, or pretended to commit a sin of which I was not guilty? Have I tried to see the good in others rather than their shortcomings?

#### **Tenth Commandment**

Have I envied anything good that has come to others? Have I been jealous of another's good fortune? Have I wished for anything that was another's? Have I damaged or destroyed the property of others? Have I wished for things God has not given me, or been discontented with my lot? Have I been stingy? Have I held back anything due another? Have I hoped for the downfall of anyone so that I might gain by it? Have I failed to be gracious and generous to anyone? Have I expected God to give me that which I would refuse one of my fellow men?

(Ten Commandments and Self Examination are taken from the Pocket Prayer Book for Orthodox Christians of the Antiochian Archdiocese)