

Preparing for Confession

Fr. Bohdan Hladio

One of the most efficacious of the Holy Mysteries given us by Our Lord is the Holy Mystery of Confession. In St. John's Gospel we hear the Risen Christ say to the Apostles "Whosoever sins you forgive they are forgiven, and whosoever sins you retain they are retained." In the absolution prayer read over the earthly remains of an Orthodox Christian at their funeral we repeat these words, and underline that this grace of binding and loosing from sins has been passed down from the apostles to our very day by the act of ordination. So in answering the question "what is Holy Confession" we can say that it is nothing else than our participation in the act of God's forgiveness of our sins by the grace of the Holy Spirit given to the apostles by Christ.

Confession has essentially two main goals - one is the cleansing and forgiveness of sin, and the second is preparation for Holy Communion. When we consider that the reason that God took on flesh, suffered, died, was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven was and is for the forgiveness of sins, we understand that our attitude toward this great mystery should be serious. The entire life of the Church exists for the forgiveness of sin - if we don't need forgiveness of sins there is really no need for any of the Holy Mysteries. Perhaps it isn't enough to show up a half-hour before Liturgy once a year, kneel before the cross and gospel and say "I repent". If it is true that you only "get out of something what you put into it", then perhaps confession is worth a proper preparation.

In preparing for this great act prayer and fasting are very important. We pray to God to help us make a good confession, we might read the canon of repentance or other preparatory prayers, and we fast in an appropriate manner. Besides the Eucharistic fast (abstinence from all food and drink from the evening before receiving Holy Communion) we should always strictly observe the Wednesday and Friday fasts as well as the other fasting periods of the Church year.

We pray in the Lord's prayer "and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". Approaching God to ask forgiveness of our sins, while not asking forgiveness of those we have offended here on earth is not proper. Jesus teaches us that if we have anything against anyone when we are bringing our gift to the altar we should leave our gift, make peace with our brother or sister, and then return to offer our gift to God. Practically speaking, before we even consider approaching for sacramental confession we should consider the state of our life and try to recall if there is anyone against whom we have sinned or who might have something against us. If this is so, then we should make peace with them - personally if possible, in our heart if not. We must keep in mind, however, that if such an act were to be misconstrued by other people (e.g., being perceived as "holier than thou") it could contribute to an even worse situation, and so the manner of and degree to which we will openly ask forgiveness and reconciliation of others is probably as different as each one of us. That we must have peace and no ill will against anyone in our heart is, however, absolutely necessary.

The tradition of asking forgiveness of others before confession is manifested in a beautiful tradition still followed by certain people in our Church. We might occasionally see a person either before confession or before communion stand in the middle of the temple and bow (to the waist or even to the ground) towards the faithful on either side of the Church. This gesture says "I have sinned against God and against you, my brothers and sisters. Forgive me and pray for me."

For all of us, but especially for those who have never been properly prepared to understand the meaning and purpose of Holy Confession, one of the most beneficial things we can do in preparation for confession is to read books about this Holy Mystery. In addition to a good prayer book which contains the prayers in preparation for confession and communion there are several excellent texts which are readily available: *If We Confess Our Sins* by Fr. Thomas Hopko, a "how to" book of preparation and prayers for adults; *We Return To God* by Fr. Constance Tarasar, the same type of book, but for children and youth; *The Forgotten Medicine* by Archimandrite Seraphim Aleksiev, a beautiful book explaining the spiritual meaning of Holy Confession; and *Repentance and Confession* by Fr. John Chryssavgis, which contains both an explanation of and many quotes from

the Holy Fathers on repentance and confession. The section of the book *These Are the Sacraments* by Fr. Anthony Coniaris which deals with Confession is also very good. All these books are readily available at any good Orthodox bookstore.

When should we approach for Holy Confession? The norm in our Church is that those approaching for Holy Confession do so immediately before the Liturgy begins. This practice, however, is not ideal. The priest is under a strict time constraint, and if there are many people approaching it can interfere with his preparation for the Liturgy. While in theory Confession may take place at any convenient time, Metropolitan Ilarion, in the booklet *How To Behave in God's Temple* suggests that ideally we should approach the evening before Liturgy - either before or after vespers. This gives us the proper time and attitude to manifest our repentance in the most concrete manner. In any traditional Christian country Saturday night was not a time to go out drinking, to banquets, or to parties - it was the time to prepare for Sunday Liturgy. It was a time of quiet and joyful expectation, usually spent quietly with family. Visiting, parties, and other festivities were held on Sunday, after Liturgy. Even if we find ourselves in a parish where vespers is not regularly served (an unfortunate and unhealthy situation), it is still important to pass this evening in a pious manner, especially if we will be approaching for Holy Communion the next day. We remember that just as dancing, loud music and parties are forbidden during Lent (since our concentration should be on our spiritual preparation for the feast of the Resurrection) the fasting we do in preparation for receiving Holy Communion *at any time of the year* is no different.

One of the most frequently asked questions by those who are preparing for confession for the first time is "what do I say?" Holy Confession is undoubtedly the most "free form" of all the Mysteries. The *Book of Needs* gives a specific order for the service, which is adhered to to a greater or lesser degree depending on the time, age, state and situation of the penitent and the priest. Generally speaking there are introductory prayers, prayers for a good confession, and an admonition to the penitent which are read by the priest; following this there is the confession of sins by the penitent, during which the priest may or may not ask questions of them; following this the priest will generally give an exhortation or

perhaps give some advice on how to better live the Christian life; and then he will generally read the prayer of absolution. There really is no "formula" for the penitent to recite - as long as they have done a proper examination of their conscience in advance and have prayed for God's guidance they will know what to say when the time comes. As long as there is repentance in our hearts our words will always be correct.

Another frequently asked question is "I can confess to God in my heart - after all, God sees and knows all. Why do I have to confess to a priest?" Two points have to be made. First of all, we do not believe that confession is *either* a public *or* a private matter - we believe that both public and private confession are important and necessary. Every one of us should be privately confessing our sins to God every day, as well as approaching for sacramental confession as often as possible. Secondly, we do not confess our sins to the priest - we confess them to God. The job of the priest is to represent the Church, and to speak the words of forgiveness on behalf of God. Technically speaking, a confession with no one else present, as well as a "confession" in which a penitent does not mention any sins are not "confessions" at all. The definition of the word confession is "the public acknowledgment of something" (in this case sin). This is why public confession has always been practiced in the Christian Church. Anyone who thinks that the public confession of sins is not a serious matter would do well to consider the fate of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5: 1-11), who in not publicly confessing their sin to the Church paid with their lives.

Many of us have probably read about, or seen in television shows and movies the Roman Catholic manner of confession, and are aware of the fact that Catholics are often given "penances", usually a specific number of prayers to recite as a mark of their repentance. Is this a part of our tradition? Is the priest permitted to give us a "penance" after Holy Confession, and are we obliged to fulfill it in order for our sins to be forgiven? The short answer is yes, but this question has two aspects that require explanation - the grace of "binding and loosing," and the understanding of confession as a therapeutic mystery.

If the Apostles truly were given the grace to bind and loose sins, then there is no question that every sin revealed in confession might be retained, that is, not forgiven sacramentally. The reason for this is very simple - such

a great gift, the gift of forgiveness of sins by God himself, must not be treated in a lighthearted or hypocritical manner. A person who approached confession with no contrition for their sins, no repentance in their heart, not looking for forgiveness but only for the validation of their sinful acts by the Church would make a mockery of the mystery. Another example might be a person who has committed a great sin, such as murder, but has not been found or perhaps even suspected for this crime. It would not be right for the priest to hear this person's confession, and not being able to reveal this sin to any other living person (for the "seal of the confessional" - the total secrecy of anything said while the priest has the epitrachelion around his neck - is absolute) just say "that's OK, it doesn't matter" and read the absolution prayer for them.

In such circumstances a penitential act would be in order. In the first circumstance the priest might prescribe an act (perhaps something as simple as the penitent walking to the middle of the Church to bow to the faithful and ask their forgiveness as was outlined above) that will engender repentance in their heart; in the second instance, the priest might tell the penitent that they must first turn themselves in to the police or in some other way take responsibility for their crime before the absolution prayer will be read and they will be permitted to approach for Holy Communion. The principle involved is therapeutic. A "penance" is not a punishment for a sin, but a prescription for a healthy spiritual life. While the above examples are extreme and not in any way common, it might happen that a penitent has a particular sinful inclination which might be helped by reading a specific book or passage of the Gospel, by engaging in some type of volunteer work with the less fortunate, etc. When such an act is prescribed by the priest in confession we must remember that it is for our benefit, and will help us in our spiritual growth and health. The exhortation read by the priest before the confession of sins says "beware, that having approached the Doctor, you depart unhealed." The Doctor is Christ, and in approaching for confession, we approach for the healing of our souls.

Between the time of confession and Holy Communion, in addition to considering the magnitude of the grace of God given to us and trying to remain as much as possible in a state of sinlessness, we should read the prayers in preparation for Holy Communion. It is beneficial to read these

beautiful prayers slowly, considering every sentence and every phrase. As we approach for Holy Communion we remember that we are partaking of Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection - and that in Holy Communion we receive the completion of the forgiveness we asked of God in Holy Confession. Following Communion we should joyfully read the thanksgiving prayers after Holy Communion, and spend the whole day in a joyful, spiritually peaceful manner.

Let us always remember the words of Theodore of Mopsuestia, who writes: *"If we have committed a serious sin of any kind which implies rejection of God's will, we must abstain from Communion. But we must not allow ourselves to stay away indefinitely. No, indeed, we must rouse ourselves to repentance. We must not leave the healing of sins to themselves. God has given us the remedy of confession, according to the discipline of the Church. This is the treatment of sins that God has entrusted to the priests of the Church."*