

PREPARATION FOR CONFESSION

During the Great Lent, at the various other fasts of the Church Year or, as needed, it is customary for all Orthodox Christians to go to Holy Confession to their priest and spiritual father. Properly, this should be done at least once yearly although the exact frequency should depend upon how often one is blessed to receive the Holy Mysteries and on the counsel and blessing of one's spiritual father.

The Sacrament itself is part of the most ancient practice and tradition of the Church. It is a Sacrament or Mystery instituted by Jesus Christ Himself when He gave His disciples that power to loose or bind sins. The Orthodox Church believes that this authority has been handed down to the clergy of today through Apostolic Succession. As with any Mystery in the Orthodox Church, it bestows the grace of God on the penitent and is deeply personal. There are no booths or walls between the priest and penitent but, instead, there is a personal spiritual father/spiritual child connection made that assists the penitent in growing, maturing, and accepting the forgiveness and love of God in his/her life.

As a preparation for this sacramental confession and to help one examine one's conscience before coming to confession, the following questions are sometimes distributed in parishes and, although the list is not exhaustive, it may be a help to those of our readers who are Orthodox Christians.

Sins Against God

Do you pray to God in the morning and evening, before and after meals?

During prayer have you allowed your thoughts to wander?

Have you rushed or gabbled your prayers? or when reading in church?

Do you read the Scriptures daily? Do you read other spiritual writings regularly?

Have you read books whose content is not Orthodox or even anti-Orthodox, or is spiritually damaging?

Have you pronounced the name of God without reverence, joking? Have you asked God's help before starting every activity?

Have you made the sign of the Cross carelessly, thoughtlessly? Have you sworn? Have you murmured against God?

Have you sinned by forgetting God?

Have you been slack in attending church?

Have you consecrated even part of the feast days, particularly Sundays and the Twelve Great Feasts, to God?

Have you tried your best to attend church on these days? or have you spent them more sinfully than ordinary days?

If unable to attend church for some reason, have you nonetheless tried to devote some part of these days to prayer and spiritual reading?

Have you joined with people not of the Faith in prayer, or attended their worship services?

Have you kept the fasts?

Have you behaved irreverently in church, or before the clergy?

Have you laughed or talked in church, or moved about unnecessarily, thus also distracting other people from prayer?

Have dressed modestly and in a becoming manner when in church?

Have you tried to pay reverent attention to the readings, hymns, and prayers in church?

Have you striven to pray with the service, crossing yourself, etc., or have you rather simply stood and day-dreamed?

Have you prepared for the services beforehand, looking up the Scriptural readings, making sure you have the texts to follow the service etc., especially if the service will be in a language you do not readily understand?

Have you ever left church after the Divine Services, and particularly after receiving the Holy Mysteries and immediately engaged in light talk and thus forgotten the blessings and graces you have received?

Have you been ashamed of your Faith or the sign of the Cross in the presence of others?

Have you made a show of your piety?

Have you used your Orthodox Faith or its teachings merely to browbeat others or belittle them?

Have you used it as a shield or excuse for your own inadequacies rather than humbling yourself?

Have you believed in dreams, fortune telling, astrology, signs and other superstitions?

Do you give thanks to the Lord for all things?

Have you ever doubted God's providence concerning yourself?

Do you at least try to perceive His purpose in all the things that come upon you?

Sins Against Your Neighbors

Do you respect and obey your parents?

Have you offended them by rudeness or contradiction?

(These two apply also to priests, superiors, teachers and elders.)

Have you insulted anyone?

Have you quarreled or fought with anyone? Have you hit anyone?

Are you always respectful to old people?

Are you ever angry, bad tempered or irritable?

Have you called anyone names? Do you use foul language?

Have you derided any that are disabled, poor, old or in some way disadvantaged?

Have you entertained bad feelings, ill will or hatred against anyone?

Have you forgiven those who have offended you?

Have you asked forgiveness from those whom you have offended?

Are you at peace with everyone?

Have you left the needy without help when you could have helped?

Have you attended the sick or elderly when they have asked you to do so?

Have you shown kindness and attention to all, remembering that God is expecting just such an attitude from you?

Have you hit animals without a cause or been cruel to them, or neglectful of those in your care?

Have you stolen anything?

Have you taken or used other people's things without asking?

Have you kept money or things that were lent you without returning them?

Have you wasted your employers' time or resources? Have you taken things from work for your own use, used the firm's phone or other facilities for your own purposes without permission or repayment?

Are you obstinate, and do you always try to have your own way?

Have you been inconsiderate of other people's feelings?

Have you tried to have your revenge against those who have offended you?

Have you harbored resentment? Have you deceived people?

Have you gossiped?

Have you told untruths?

Have you judged and condemned others?

Have you taken pains before approaching for confession to be reconciled with all?

Sins Against Yourself

Have you been proud? Do you boast of your abilities, achievements, family, connections or riches?

Do you consider yourself worthy before God?

Are you vain, ambitious? Do you try to win praise and glory?

Do you bear it easily when you are blamed, scolded or treated unjustly? Do you think too much about your looks, outward appearance and the impression you make?

Have you sinned in thought, word or deed, by a look or glance, or in any other way against the seventh commandment? (Adultery, fornication, all extra-marital sexual relationships with others, masturbation, engaging in unnatural sexual acts, fantasizing, pornography, etc.)

Have you envied anyone anything? Have you been over-sensitive?

Have you been lazy? Have you done your duties heartily?

Have you wasted your time, energy or abilities in things that do not profit the soul?

Have you become obsessive about anything? Have you been despondent or listless?

Have you had thoughts of committing suicide?

Have you brought a curse on yourself or others or ill-wished them, being impatient?

Have you a weakness for alcohol? Have you drunk too much, or become dependent on drink?

Have you taken drugs, other than necessary medicines? Have you smoked?

Have you watched television too much or indiscriminately? Have you given yourself up to any other similar pastime which wastes your time and energy and might have harmed you?

Have you been greedy, either with regard to food or to possessions?

Have you indulged in comfort-eating? Have you become accustomed to eating between meals?

Have you been picky about your food, or wasteful of foods, forgetting that so many people are without proper nourishment? Have you been extravagant? Have you been wasteful?

Do you care for and seek first the salvation of your soul, the spiritual life and the kingdom of God, or have you put earthly considerations in the first place?

Is there any other sin, which burdens your conscience, or which you are ashamed to tell?

Anyone preparing for confession must ask God to help his resolve to tell all his sins. A penitent should prepare for confession and collect his thoughts regarding his sins at least a day before confession. The most valuable thing in the eyes of God is the confession of the sin which weighs most on the conscience.

The questions listed are intended to help the Orthodox Christian examine him/herself and identify the symptoms of their spiritual ills; they should not be taken as some kind of test to ascertain how well we are doing as if there was a certain "pass-mark." Before God's perfections, we shall always fail. It is for that reason that, as believing Christians, we throw ourselves on the mercy of the Lord and do not trust in our own righteousness.

Remember that our sins can never outweigh God's love towards us. Even if we should seem to have failed with regard to all the points mentioned above and more, we should not lose heart but confess our sins humbly and completely, we should regret the wrongs we have done, be resolved to make amends, and receive whatever remedy our confessor should be guided to lay upon us. Most of all, one should be assured of the blessing of God which these endeavors will bring upon you.

THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION

A Theological Understanding of the Sacrament

A Christian, at any rate an Orthodox Christian, views repentance as a dynamic act of responsibility to God, but also to other men. It is not pining away in narcissistic self-reflection, even while implying self-knowledge and self-examination. Sin itself is a relational act - a break in the "I-Thou" relationship. It concerns my relationship with another person. When the prodigal son "came to himself" in the Gospel parable (Luke 15), he did so in relation to his father: "I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before You'" (v. 18). We repent in the face of God; and we repent in communion with others, in the Church. Repentance in the early Church was in fact a solemn public act of reconciliation, through which a sinner was readmitted into church membership. Even in Buddhism, monks regularly confess their sins publicly before Buddha and the congregation; the phenomenology is the same as in the Church, even if the theology or ideology is different. Sin (and evil) divides, repentance conciliates, confession affirms the conciliation. Outside the community, outside the Church repentance would settle into guilty gloom, dulling the spirit or even driving to despair: metanoia turning into paranoia.

Confession, too, takes place within the Church. It is not a private procedure, a treatment of some guilt-ridden individual on an analyst's couch. It is not based on an admission of guilt and certainly cannot be reduced to a feeling of guilt, of liability for conduct contrary to norms and laws which render a person subject to punishment. It is related to what is deepest in man, to what constitutes his being and his relation with other human beings as well as with God. It is a sacrament - "the visible form of an invisible grace" (Saint Augustine), re-establishing a bond of union between God and man, between man and man. This is why confession also takes place within prayer because it is there that a personal relationship in all its intensity is realized both with God and the entire world. As such, confession and prayer are not merely technical terms but means and opportunities offered by the Church for overcoming sin and death. Repentance is indeed the cause and consequence of prayer, being the highest and fullest foundation for and form of prayer. "True prayer," according to Saint Anthony, "is that in which one forgets that one is praying," and genuine repentance enables one to forget oneself and simply long for God, who is present in the very depth of repentance. For it is "before Him alone that one sins" (Psalm 50.3-4) - this is the personal or relational aspect of both sin and repentance.

The supreme act of communion is the Eucharist, the communal sharing of bread and wine, symbolizing sacramentally the reconciliation to come and the reconciliation already achieved in the here and now. Repentance and confession as sacrament seals man's change of direction from disruption to reconciliation. An examination of the early forms of confession shows that they are derived from community services and even liturgies. Origen, the great theologian, explicitly stresses the significance of the Eucharist for the forgiveness of sins. Later services for confession developed undoubtedly from community rites closely related to the Eucharistic celebration, or else to the monastic offices of matins or compline. Since forgiveness of sins involves reconciliation in and through the Eucharist, the Eucharistic prayer contains penitential elements as immediate preparation for communion.

In early Christian times the exhortation of James served as a foundation for the sacrament of repentance: "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (5.16). Confession was regarded as a form of repentance and regeneration (Matthew 3.6; Mark 1.5; Acts 19.18). The actual ritual aspect of repentance was a direct result of such apostolic testimony, at first in the form of confession before the entire Church and, subsequently, before a spiritual father. Nevertheless, the earliest order of confession is of relatively late origin (tenth century, and is ascribed to John the Faster, Patriarch of Constantinople. This text may well be the source of later Greek and Slavonic services of confession. The communal, sacramental aspect of confession was more apparent in the early Church when penance constituted a public act rather than an individual episode. It was only after the fourth century that private confession was more widely practiced. But even then penance did not have the legalistic and clericalistic character which it acquired later. In fact, very few Church Fathers refer even to absolution as a formal procedure, although such silence does not necessarily mean that absolution in some form or other did not exist. It is the reduction of sin to a punishable legal crime, an act of law-breaking inviting a penalty that is almost wholly absent in patristic literature. "Have you committed a sin?," asks Saint John Chrysostom, "then enter the Church and repent of your sin ... For here is the Physician, not the judge; here one is not investigated but receives remission of sins."

Unfortunately confession at times undermines and even replaces the genuine inner repentance of a Christian: people feel "entitled" to communion after confession. This contradicts the true nature of repentance. It is a result of the sacrament being narrowly and juridically reduced to "absolution." Scholarly theology tended to transpose the concept of sin, repentance and forgiveness into a forensic idiom, and placed the emphasis on the power of the priest to absolve. In the Orthodox Church, the priest is seen as a witness of repentance, not a recipient of secrets, a detective of specific misdeeds. The "eye," the "ear" of the priest is dissolved in the sacramental mystery. He is not a dispenser, a power-wielding, vindicating agent, an "authority." Such a conception exteriorizes the function of the confessor and of confession which is an act of re-integration of the penitent and priest alike into the Body of Christ. The declaration "I, an unworthy priest, by the power given unto me, absolve you" is unknown in the Eastern Orthodox Church. It is of later Latin origin and was adopted in some Russian liturgical books at the time of the domination of Russian Orthodox theology by Latin thought and practice. The idea served to bring confession into disrepute, turning it into a procedure of justification and exculpation in respect of particular punishable offenses. Forgiveness, absolution is the culmination of repentance, in response to sincerely felt compunction. It is not "administered" by the priest, or anybody else. It is a freely given grace of Christ and the Holy Spirit within the Church as the Body of Christ.

A word must be said about "general" confession, as distinct from a face-to-face confession between penitent and priest. General confession, in certain circumstances, could be a living model of repentance as a communal act, involving the whole body of the Church and as such manifesting the very essence of confession. But it is not strictly a substitute for personal confession, involving intimate self-examination on the part of the penitent and possible guidance on the part of the confessor. Altogether, the function of the priest should not be ignored or minimized. "All who have experienced the blessing of having as their confessor one imbued with the grace of true spiritual fatherhood," writes Bishop Kallistos Ware, "will testify to the importance of the priest's role. Nor is his function simply to give advice. There is nothing automatic about the absolution which he pronounces. He can bind as well as loose. He can withhold absolution - although this is very rare - or he can impose a penance (epitimion), forbidding the penitent to receive Communion for a time or requiring the fulfilment of some task. This, again, is not very common in contemporary Orthodox practice, but it is important to remember that the priest possesses this right ... Not that the penitence should be regarded as punishment; still less should it be viewed as a way of expiating an offense ... We do not acquire 'merit' by fulfilling a penance, for in his relation to God man can never claim any merit of his own. Here, as always, we should think primarily in therapeutic rather than juridical terms."

The most significant effect of confession is indeed due neither to the penitent nor to the priest, but to God who heals our infirmities and wounds. It is not a matter of a let-off, a clearance; it has the force of healing, of making the penitent whole. As such it is a gift from God which man must be open to receive, and learn to receive: "Let us apply to ourselves the saving medicine of repentance; let us accept from God the repentance that heals us. For it is not we who offer it to Him, but He who bestows it upon us." It is significant that the Greek for confession, *exomologesis*, implies not only confession but also thanksgiving (cf. Matthew 11.25; Luke 10.21): "I shall confess/give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, and tell of all His wonders" (Psalm 9.1).

Reference has already been made to the cloud of guilt which at times shrouds the sacrament of confession. It is by no means a theoretical question, for guilt is part of the tragedy experienced by many people, whether in their personal lives or in the face of the appalling sufferings and misery - mental, physical, social - which afflict the world at large today and for which we all share the responsibility and the guilt. But in the specific context of repentance and confession, guilt is a highly misleading concept, largely fostered by Western thinking. It originates in a hyper-trophied individualistic, self-regarding view of sin and salvation, and indeed of repentance with its attendant legalistically oriented penitential system. Orthodoxy always resisted legalism, whether in repentance or in confession, eschewing both undue confidence in man's achievement or merit and the overwhelming sense of guilt, which is the negative aspect of being centered on oneself and seeking for some means to propitiate God's wrath. By contrast with this God is seen to declare His love for men at their most unacceptable. It is God's identification with man and His loving acceptance of the worst that men can do that makes repentance and confession a way of rediscovering God and one-self, and thereby of being set on the road to full and loving relationship with God and with other men. There is no mention in Scripture of the word "guilt" (*ενοχή*), although there is the adjective "guilty" (*ενοχος*). Instead of "guilt" there is "sin" (*αμαρτία*) - failure, loss, a break-up in relations, result-ing in a kind of false consciousness. Even "*ενέχομαι*" implies keeping fast within, cherishing, sharing, as distinct from being ashamed in the face of God who inflicts retributive punishment.

Break in communication or communion can lead to pathological forms of guilt. But there is guilt born of a sense of responsibility for others as well as for oneself, leading one to an awareness of other people. The Christian view of man is largely a social one. Where there is a breakdown in personal love, or a rise in institutionalism, one finds a thickening of the atmosphere of guilt. Its antidote is collective confession, communal prayer to "our Father." A saint might confess daily without fear of neurosis, because he is in constant communion with God and man. Acknowledgment of one's limitations leads to personal communion with God who alone can erase sin: "I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not hide my iniquity.... Then You did forgive the iniquity of my sin" (Psalm 32.5).

Through the forgiveness of sins in confession, the past is no longer an intolerable burden but rather an encouragement for what lies ahead. Life acquires an attitude of expectation, not of despondency; and confession becomes the way out of the impasse caused by sin. In this respect, repentance is also an eschatological act, realizing in our very midst, here and now, the promises of the age to come. Looking backwards would seem to imply the fate of Lot's wife (Genesis 19.26); 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God' (Luke 9.62). God Him-self is revealed before us and walks in front of us. "One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" (Philippians 3.13).