

Preparing for Confession

One of the most efficacious of the Holy Mysteries given us by Our Lord is the Holy Mystery of Confession. In the Gospel read on Antipascha (St. Thomas Sunday) 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 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 the fact that the reason Jesus was born, the reason that God became incarnate, took on flesh, suffered, died, was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven for our sakes was and is for the forgiveness of sins, we see that our attitude toward this great mystery should be properly respectful. 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. 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 confession the most important and most widely known practices are prayer and fasting. We pray to God to help us make a good confession, we should read the canon of repentance in preparation for confession, and we fast in an appropriate manner. Besides the Eucharistic fast we should always strictly observe the Wednesday and Friday fasts the week before receiving Holy Communion, and for those who receive Communion infrequently (3 - 4 times a year or less) it is beneficial to abstain from all meat and dairy products for the entire week before communing.

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 without having asked 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, consider 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 in our heart, and if possible even personally. We must keep in mind, however, that if such an act were to be misconstrued by other people it could contribute to an even worse situation, and so the manner of and degree to which we will openly ask forgiveness 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 custom still followed in certain places. We might occasionally see (or have seen) a person either before confession or before communion stand in the middle of the temple and bow (usually to the ground) to 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.” This is an excellent custom to be retained where it still exists, and to introduce back into parish life where it has died out.

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.

When should we approach for Holy Confession? The short answer is anytime! In some Churches the norm is that to approach 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. Approaching on Saturday either before or after vespers is better, as this gives both the priest and us the opportunity to approach this great mystery in a solemn and unhurried manner.

It's worth remembering that 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 though many parishes do not serve vespers or the vigil on Saturday evening (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 various Books of Needs give a specific (yet different depending on the Church tradition) order for the service, which is followed 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 - public and private confession are both 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. A confession is the public acknowledgment of something (in this case sin). This is why public confession has always been practiced in the Christian Church.

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 must not be treated in a hypocritical manner. A person who approaches confession with no

contrition for their sins, with no repentance in their heart, is not looking for forgiveness, they're only looking to be "validated", along with their sinful lives, by the Church. Such a person would make both themselves and especially the priest and the Church hypocrites were they to approach for confession in such a mental and spiritual state. 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. What happens if a priest hears 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 stole around his neck - is absolute) at the same time recognizes that he cannot simply say "that's OK, it doesn't matter" and read the absolution prayer over the person.

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 instill 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 according to the Slavic tradition 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 prayers after Holy Communion, and spend the whole day in a joyful, spiritually peaceful manner.

Let us 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."*

Fr. Bohdan Hladko, March, 2000