

## THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY CONFESSION

### WHAT IS THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION

The Sacrament of Confession is a "new Baptism". It has also been called the Mystery of the Second Baptism since it involves the forgiveness of all sins committed after Baptism. If we go back to the early church, we find that Confession was a public act. It was required from sinners who either had been officially excommunicated or had performed acts liable to excommunication and penance. After the 4th century, Confession took on the form of private confession, followed by a prayer of absolution pronounced by a priest. So unlike the other Sacraments, the Sacrament of Confession does not take place in the presence of other people. Only the Priest and the penitent meet in the Presence of God. In the Eastern Orthodox Church the Priest does not perform the spiritual act of forgiving, baptizing or confirming. He is God's agent, a vessel through which God's divine and sanctifying Grace flows. It is God alone who baptizes, confirms and forgives.

The Sacrament itself, is the service during which the Orthodox Christian who has repented of his sins accuses himself before God and asks for divine forgiveness. He makes his confession before the Priest and receives forgiveness (absolution) from God. The Sacrament of Holy Confession was instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ after His Resurrection when He said to His Holy Apostles:

"Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." (John 20:23)

Jesus knew the power of temptation. He gave us a way by which we could be purified of sin and start again with a clean slate, without being placed in the Baptismal Font again.

### WHY DO WE NEED TO CONFESS

We need Holy Confession because we are not perfect. Everyone does things that can separate us from God. We all make mistakes, either willingly or unwillingly; intentionally or unintentionally. When we realize that we have made a mistake, we also see that it has caused someone pain or unhappiness. If we face up to our deed, we will feel sorry, and to be truly sorry means to repent. Repentance means we cannot feel right and have a clean conscience until we have done something about it. Confession is given us by God as a helpful tool to help us get rid of the unhappiness and guilt associated with our sins and give us a fresh start.

As we know, only Jesus is sinless, but today we are living in a world that tries very hard to ignore the existence of sin. If a person does something good, he is given credit; if he does something evil or harmful, very often the responsibility is placed on someone else. We see this today in the Media, where either the parents, society or environment are to blame for the problems of any individual. We are told, He is not responsible; therefore he has not done anything wrong. The word "sin" as understood by our Church means that we recognize our responsibility for what we do, and when we do wrong, we call it "sin". To understand more clearly what sin is, we need to look at the original use in or the word in the New Testament and the early church.

The Greek word ἀμαρτία, (amartia), means "to miss the mark." This term was used in archery when the arrow missed the target. In theological terms sin means being off target, moving in the wrong direction, heading for the wrong goal.

St. Paul writes that we are to attain to "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" Eph. 4:13). This should be our goal. Like Christ we must be filled with the Holy Spirit and always doing the will of the Father. In confessing our sins we should not look at how well we are keeping the rules, nor should we compare ourselves to others (Publican & Pharisee). The measuring stick for us is the person of Jesus. We are to become as much like Him as possible. This can only be accomplished by trying to keep our thoughts, words, and deeds pure, holy and unselfish; and to keep His commandments.

Our Confession should not be based solely on the Ten Commandments. It is possible to keep all the Ten Commandments and still have the need for forgiveness and the emptying out of our sins. The Commandments give a foundation of some of the most serious sins. Yet there are so many others that we have to also be aware of. We should not consider sins to be normal. We are called by God to rise above our sinfulness. We can't give the excuse that we're only human to justify our sins. Being created in God's image and likeness means we have the potential to control our passions. We should not feel discouraged that we can't measure up to perfection. Having room for improvement gives us a purpose and a goal. As we progress with this effort, we find that the effort itself brings us great rewards.

There are two general types of sins. Sins of commission and omission. A sin of commission involves doing, saying, thinking or feeling something we shouldn't. The Ten Commandments deal with this kind of sin. A sin of omission occurs when we fail to do, say, think or feel something we should.

## HOW DO WE CONFESS PREPARATION

A good confession happens before we even leave for church. A good example to look at is the Prodigal Son who practiced over in his mind what he would say in order to receive forgiveness. Rehearsing and preparation helps us to make a thorough confession. There are two steps we can take:

- 1) Set aside some time to prepare, free from distractions and interruptions.
- 2) Choose a place to prepare where you will not be disturbed.

Silence - We begin simply by placing ourselves in God's presence. When we are silent our minds tend to think about all sorts of things. We play back the disagreement we had with our spouse or friend, we remember all the little mistakes that we may have let slip by at the time. If our minds have wandered then the next step is to bring our attention back to God through prayer.

Prayer - is the single most important thing to do in preparing for confession. Through prayer the Holy Spirit helps us to recognize our sins. In prayer we ask God to show us what He finds displeasing in us. We discover our sins not by seeing how evil we are, but by seeing how good God is? Through prayer we meet our God as the God of forgiveness and mercy, and see the

sinfulness of our anger and judging or others. We are also able to see God as the generous giver of all good things. When we encounter the humility of our Lord, we are able to see the foolishness of our pride and ego, of our greed, jealousy, and material anxiety. We are then embraced by the God of love, and so recognize our selfishness and lust for what they truly are.

Reading - Reading helps us to discern errors. Some of the best Bible verses to read are: The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), and I Cor. 13 are good places to start. The most important thing to remember as we read is to apply it to ourselves and not our neighbor.

Reflection - This is the final step of preparation. We now can examine ourselves closely. To do this we need to have an attitude of self-blame (What have I done wrong). This can be difficult to do, because we want to see ourselves in the best light, and we want others to think well of us. To do this successfully, we must try not to make excuses or compare ourselves to others. We must assume the role of prosecutor instead of defense attorney.

Preparation is the key to a good confession. Naturally, each individual can apply these guidelines in any order that suits themselves best. Bringing a list can be very helpful.

One Helpful Tool for Examination of One's Sins:

A) SINS AGAINST GOD

- 1) blasphemy
- 2) atheism (not believing in God)
- 3) not trusting God
- 4) blaming God for things that happen
- 5) not attending Church
- 6) not receiving Holy Communion
- 7) not asking God's forgiveness
- 8) not praying to God

B) SINS AGAINST OUR FELLOW MAN

- 1) hating someone
- 2) being jealous
- 3) being envious of someone else
- 4) being spiteful or malicious
- 5) criticizing other people
- 6) talking behind the backs of others
- 7) gossiping

C) SINS AGAINST ONESELF

any of the above, plus --

- 1) lying
- 2) cheating
- 3) stealing
- 4) thinking impure thoughts
- 5) taking part in impure acts

By using these groups as a basis, we see that every sin, large or small, will fall under one of these headings.

### LIFE PREPARES US IN GENERAL FOR CONFESSION

The spiritual aspects of our lives; prayer, the liturgy, sermons, spiritual reading, fasting all give us insights into ourselves. These insights can also give us a more honest picture of ourselves. God can use practically anything in our life to reveal hidden sins to us.

### **WHAT NOT TO SAY IN CONFESSION**

- 1) I have no sins to confess. We would have no need for any of God's Blessing. Holy Communion is for the Remission of sins, we wouldn't need it if we have not ever sinned. If we have done our preparation well, and taken the sacrament seriously, then we will know what our sins are. If we get stuck or nervous, ask the priest for help.
- 2) I am a sinner - we shouldn't stop at just saying this, because we are all sinners.
- 3) I've got a problem - Although Confession may lead to the need for counseling, during the Sacrament we should try to focus in on emptying out our sins.
- 4) Excuses - We come to confession for forgiveness, not to be excused.
- 5) Our Neighbor's sins - We have to be careful to confess our own sins and not the sins of our spouse, neighbor, friends or other relatives.
- 6) I'll try to be good - It is important to remember that everyone is good--made in the image and likeness of God. Good people still say, do, think and feel sinful things.

The Fathers of our church teach that there are some sins and passions that we will have to struggle with for most, if not all, of our lives. We should not be discouraged if we are confessing "the same old sins". We should be encouraged that we are at least holding our own.

### **THE PRIEST'S ROLE**

- 1) We do not confess to the Priest, but to Christ. Christ stands invisibly and receives our Confession. The priest is the visible sign of Christ.
- 2) The priest witnesses the sincerity of one's repentance. The priest stands beside the Confessee facing the icon of Christ, in order to offer support and strength.
- 3) Forgiveness of Christ is freely given to the sinner. It is given through the Priest to whom the Lord entrusted the ministry of forgiveness. "May God forgive you!" (not the priest), is how the absolution prayer begins.

### **ABSOLUTION PROCLAIMS THE REALITY OF REPENTANCE**

The priest may withhold absolution if;

- 1) There is no evidence of repentance or desire to stop a sinful activity

- 2) There is a failure to acknowledge a sin as being, in fact sinful.
- 3) The person does not accept the dogmatic and moral teachings of the Church.

Absolution may be delayed to give more time for repentance;

- 1) Extra Fasting
- 2) Silence
- 3) Special Prayers
- 4) Reading
- 5) Further discussions with the Priest

The priest may also give some words of encouragement or instruction in the form of;

- 1) A diagnosis - to uncover causes or the passions underlying the sins confessed.
- 2) a prescription of things for the penitent to help them avoid the same mistakes in the future.

#### **WHAT WILL THE PRIEST THINK OF ME**

- 1) The priest is filled with admiration and joy when someone make an important confession
- 2) Jesus rejoices over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7).
- 3) "My priest used my confession in his sermon". We may not realize that many other people may have confessed the same sin or that the Gospel theme deals specifically with that sin.

#### **WHY CONFESS TO HIM, HE'S A SINNER!**

- 1) Why go to a doctor, he gets sick too!
- 2) It should be easier to confess to another sinner.
- 3) Jesus was also tempted. In Hebrews 2:18 we read, "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."
- 4) The priest can use his own experience in struggling with sin to help others.
- 5) The penitent's confession can strengthen and instruct the priest who must also be aware of his sins.

#### **TWO GREAT OBSTACLES TO CONFESSING**

- 1) Fear - it prevents us from being open and honest with ourselves and our God before a fellow Christian, our priest.
- 2) Laziness - prevents us from taking the time and making the effort to prepare well.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The Sacrament of Holy Confession is a lifetime growing experience. Like anything we wish to do well in life, it takes effort and hard work. Each time we confess our sins and receive forgiveness, we are able to benefit from this blessing the Church gives us. There are very few ways to have a new start in life. Through this Sacrament we are granted this unique opportunity to return to the purity we had when we were first baptized. God waits anxiously and lovingly to embrace us with open arms. We must take the first step.