

1. The Need for Confession

For many Orthodox Christians, Confession is merely a religious obligation to be performed at the required time (e.g., at least once a year during Lent) to remain in “good standing” within the Church. According to popular teaching, some consider Confession a necessary exercise to undergo to be granted access to Holy Communion. For others, the “requirements” of Confession are considered man-made rules which change from time to time, and therefore Confession is optional depending on one’s own desire to participate.

Do we ever stop to think why we have Confession in the first place? The Church is the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Family of God the Father. Everything we have and do in the Church – if it is from God! – draws us closer to Christ, enlivens us in the Spirit, and enables us to truly say *our Father in heaven*. This is true of Confession.

We confess our sins which sever us from Christ, deaden us in the Spirit, and make us disobedient children of the Father. Because we are sick with sins and death, we seek out the Physician of our souls and bodies who is able to heal us with forgiveness, comfort us with His grace, and enkindle within us the desire for godly living. *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:8-9).

Confession is simply repentance in action. If our hearts and minds have been turned from darkness to light then we will walk in the light of Christ in Confession. *All things that are exposed are made manifest by the light* (Eph. 5:13), which is why

Confession can be so scary! God sees us for who and what we truly are, and we have to admit that reality for ourselves – there it is! Yet as Christ says, *The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out* (John 6:37). We learn that we need Confession because this is what it means to be a Christian.

2. Confession – Repentance in Action

Confession is repentance in action, the defining characteristic of what it means to be a Christian. Our Lord preached: *Repent* (lit., *be repentant*), *for the kingdom of heaven is at hand* (Matt. 4:17). St. James writes: *Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed* (Jam. 5:16).

There are only two ways of dealing with sin once it is committed. One, continue in that sin justifying it, excusing it, and even delighting in it. Or two, turn from that sin confessing it, being forgiven of it, and deciding to practice the opposite virtue according to the will of God. Continuing in sin makes sin the master of your life, and you live in bondage to your sin. Turning from sin in confession and godly living breaks the power of sin, and you live in freedom as a child of God. *Because I kept silent, my bones grew old from my groaning all the day long...I said, “I will confess my transgression to the Lord,” and You forgave the ungodliness of my sin* (Ps. 31[32]:3, 5).

Far from being merely a religious obligation, or man-made requirement, Confession is the God-given means of healing power from the sickness of sin. Because sin always leads to death (cf. Rom. 6:23), Confession is the key to opening life in Christ for us who struggle with the chains of sin.

When our Lord told his Apostles: *And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven* (Matt. 16:19; 18:18), He was supplying His Church through its leaders with the gift of Confession. After His Resurrection, Christ repeated His gift: *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained* (John 20:22). The reason Confession is done in the presence of the Bishop, or Priest, is because bishops and priests are the successors of the Apostles (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4), so that sin is healed by the authority of Christ Himself.

3. Primary Means of Spiritual Direction

In Confession a person simply and without presumption lays bare their sins to God in the presence of the Priest. The Priest, as a successor to the Apostles and mouthpiece of Christ, listens to the one confessing and pronounces the forgiveness of God to the person repenting of their sins. The Priest also adds words of spiritual direction depending on the circumstances and spiritual state of the person; for this reason the Priest is a Spiritual Father joined in a relationship of mutual love and respect with his spiritual child (cf. 1 Cor. 4:15-17; Heb. 13:17).

A person’s conscience dictates the sins confessed. Our conscience accuses and excuses us according to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, which is true repentance born of faith in God. A person’s conscience is literally “knowledge of one’s self.” Thus Confession is also the revelation of our thoughts, how we think about ourselves and how we interpret people and the world around us. An experienced

Father Confessor helps the one confessing to shape their thoughts in a positive, godly way and humbly to see their own faults and not those of other people.

Christians have always practiced Confession with another person, and not merely privately before God. No one is their own spiritual director because self-direction leads to pride and deception. Likewise in Confession, the Spiritual Father does not offer his own opinion; rather, appointed by Christ, the Priest functions by the grace of the Holy Spirit to give counsel in accordance with the will of God.

Confession then is the primary means of discerning the authentic life of God for the individual person. In Confession we prove our genuine repentance (lit., *change of heart*) by accepting obedience to Christ. In Confession we are freed from deceptive demonic suggestions by consciously laying aside our own interpretations of reality born of ego, self-interest, and self-justification. Confession is the renovation of our interior life in heart and mind, and thus renewed, we can serve God in purity and truth.

4. Confession and Communion

How is Confession related to the reception of Holy Communion? Does a person have to go to Confession each time they want to go to Communion, or at least once a month, or at least once a year during Lent? Does going to Confession automatically qualify a person to receive Holy Communion?

First, it is Christ's will and the teaching of the Church that every baptized Christian should be prepared to receive Holy Communion every week, particularly during the Sunday Divine Liturgy (see Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11:17-25). Having been reconciled to God in Christ, living in repentance and faith, Holy

Communion is the True Food without which we cannot live and grow in the grace of God. A real problem exists if a Christian purposely abstains from, or neglects, Holy Communion when offered in the Liturgy.

Thus weekly reception of Communion may, or may not, include frequently going to Confession. The Apostle writes: *Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup* (1 Cor. 11:28). Unless a person has fallen into some sin which threatens to break their communion with God or another person, then they need not go to Confession every time they go to Communion. Examples of such sins are: unbelief, persistent neglect or disdain of the Liturgy, laziness, willful immorality, and hatred of others. Particularly regarding other persons, our Lord says, *First be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift* (Matt. 5:24).

Second, no Scriptural or canonical requirement exists concerning the frequency of Confession (e.g., once a month, during the fasting seasons, or once a year before Pascha). General guidelines may be given from Parish to Parish, but when and how often a person goes to Confession depends on their repentance and need for spiritual direction. The relationship with one's Spiritual Father determines a person's frequency of Confession; however, Confession remains necessary, not optional!

Confession is repentance in action. Not only is going to Confession to "keep a rule," or "get Communion," a complete misunderstanding of Confession, but it twists Confession into its exact opposite – an outward act with no interior renewal. As with Communion, we must desire Confession in faith and love because herein is healing for our souls and the very gateway into the Kingdom of God.



CONFESSION in the ORTHODOX CHURCH

Some Practical Considerations

St. John the Baptist Orthodox Church
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