

How to confess – a short guide

God does not desire the death of a sinner, but rather that he turn away from his sins and live. In the Holy Sacrament of Penance, we have the means whereby we may obtain forgiveness of our sins, and be restored to the favor of Almighty God.

In order to conduct a proper confession so that we cleanse all of the filth and dirt within our conscience and brighten and turn our soul “whiter than snow,” we must not approach this Holy Sacrament without proper preparation. A mystery such as confession warrants the corresponding preparation and must be approached with the fitting state of our heart.

In order to make a good confession, it is necessary for us to prepare ourselves carefully. We ask God to give us grace to make a thorough examination of conscience, courage to make a sincere and complete confession, and strength to amend our way of life in the days to come. We ought to prepare at least one day or several hours before we go to confession. During this preparatory time period we collect our thoughts and nous. We reflect on the length of time since our last confession—can we recall when we last confessed? Or, is this our first time? In this manner, we attempt to recall from that time until now the type and number of times we committed various sins. Either through word, deed or thought, and whether we intended or we did so through negligence and carelessness.

It is also very important, before going to confession, to pray to God for your Spiritual Father as God to put in his mind and heart a word to benefit your soul. St. Sophrony from Essex said that in this way you will make your Spiritual Father a Prophet because his word will be inspired by God, not by a human.

Let us begin our examination with the time of our last confession; try to recall whether you omitted anything through carelessness or lapse of memory, or from fear of embarrassment. Sometimes a piece of paper will help you to organize and collect your sins and your thoughts. We do not confess only our sins but also our thoughts. Many thoughts could be so damaging both for our soul and even for our body.

Now let us examine ourselves with the assistance of the form of self- examination according to the Ten Commandments:

1) I am the Lord Thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me:

- Has God had the first place in your life? In order to answer to this question you need to check the followings: How long do you pray daily? How much do you think about God during the day? Do you read Orthodox Spiritual books every day/every week? Do you read Holy Scripture every day? Do you go to the church as often as possible attending other services than Sunday Divine Liturgy? Do you go to Divine Liturgy late because the service is too long? Do you complain about the length of any Church services? Are you impatient during the Divine Services checking your watch? Do you do/plan other things during Sunday Divine Liturgy or the most important

Orthodox feast days? Do you check your electronic device during Divine Liturgy or other services? Do you talk with other people unnecessary thing during Divine Liturgy?

- Do you love or fear anyone or anything more than Almighty God?
- Do you ever think you can get sick by taking Holy Communion? Have you ever doubt about the Sacrament of the Confession and Holy Communion?
- Have you neglected your daily prayers? Do you pray at all? Do you pray every day more than 5 minutes? Do you use a prayer book for your daily prayer routine? Do you say Jesus prayer: Lord Jesus Christ son of God have mercy on me a sinner.
- Do you attribute your money, talent and time to God or your own abilities?

2) Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven Image:

- Have you trusted in anything or anyone more than Almighty God?
- Have you ever said: how could God help me in this situation?
- Have you venerated the Holy Icons and the Precious Cross in the correct way?
- Do you make the sign of the cross in a correct way or you rush and "play the guitar instead"?
- Have you thrown away icons, images with God, holy Mother and Saints?
- Have you loved yourself, money, power or position more than Almighty God?

3) Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain:

- Have you used profane language, cursed or sworn at others or taking the Lords name in vain? Here are included words like these: Gee, Lord Jesus Christ, OMG, etc
- Have you fulfilled your baptismal promises or other kind of promises to God? Ex. God if you help me in this situation I will do this or that
- Have you wished that evil might come to anyone? Have you attended superstitious practices, or been to fortune-tellers?
- Have you treated/preserved without watchfulness the Holy Water, Blessed Bread or other holy things?
- Have you taken Holy Communion without proper preparation and after you eaten without to inform the priest or worst hiding from the priest?
- Have you taken Holy Communion just because the rest of the people in your church were doing so or just because you fasted, or just because this is the tradition and not being aware about Lord Blood and Flesh?

4) Remember to keep Holy the Lord's Day:

- Have you brushed aside thoughts of Almighty God, His Day, His Word, His Services, His Holy Orthodox and Catholic Church?
- Have you spoken against the Lord, or against His Holy Church, His priests, Bishops and teachers?
- Have you attended the Divine Liturgy each Lord's Day?
- Have you permitted anything to interfere with your Sacred Obligations?
- Does your mind wonder during the Divine Liturgy, Vespers, and individual prayer time?

5) Honor thy father and thy mother:

- Have you thought evil in your heart towards your parents or superiors?
- Have you spoken against parents or superiors and provoked them or others to anger?
- Have you disobeyed or been disrespectful to your parents or superiors?

- Have you prayed for them, and taken care of them?

6) Thou shalt not kill:

- Have you secretly hated others or wanted to harm them in any way?
- Have you made an abortion (for women) or you force/advice a women to make an abortion after you conceived together (for men)?
- Have you wished that evil come upon others? Ex: I hope one day they will pay for what they did to me or God does not sleep or they will pay after they die
- Have you spoken against others unjustly or provoked others to hatred?
- Have you quarreled or teased others?
- Have you used physicals violence against your brothers/parents/friends/other people?
- Have you purposely injured your own health or that of others?
- Have you consumed drugs that damage your mind and body health?
- Have you drunken or eaten excessively?
- Have you totally forgot someone who mistreated you or did something bad to you? In order to find the answer to this question analyze your inner feelings and reactions when you meet that person by accident in the street or somewhere else. Did you have an uneasy feeling? Did you avoid looking at that person and pretending you did not see her/him? Did that meeting let in your soul a said feeling? If you answer yes to one of this question this means you did not forget that person and you need to pray more for that person and for yourself to be able to forgive him/her completely.

7) Thou shalt not commit adultery:

- Have you indulged in impure thoughts or lustful desires?
- Have you looked at someone with lustful desires?
- Have you listened to or told obscene stories?
- Have you watch pornographic video/movie/images?
- Have you done impure things with yourself (pleasure yourself) or with others before marriage?
- Have you been faithful to your wife, your children and to your family?
- Have you preserved the chastity of the Holy Matrimony? (here it refers to any intimacy practices between the husband and wife that are not accepted by the Orthodox church; abstinence during certain period of the month, and during the fasting period based on the spouse mutual agreement and according to their physical limits). Each part of our body was created by God with certain function and designation. For instance, our mouth was created by God to praise Him, to take Holy Communion and to eat, not for perversions acts.
- Intimate relations with person same sex
- Does your heart belong to God, are you faithful to God?

8) Thou shalt not steal:

- Have you schemed to get for yourself what belongs to others?
- Have you taken money from your parents, brothers, grandparents and other family members without their consent?
- Have you told untruths about things you sold, that is, misrepresented the value of things?
- Have you taken what belongs to others - things, money, time, and their good name?

- Have you stolen other people time? Your friends/parents/children/professors/etc. ex: when you keep a person complaining about a never ending story that happened to you, or when as a parent do not spend time with your children being too busy with earthy things, or when you do not pay attention to people when they talk with you
- Have you avoided paying someone who did any kind of work for you?
- Have you taken credit of someone else's work?
- Have you paid back your debt obligation?
- Have you borrowed something and you forgot to return it, or you lost it?
- Have you contributed to the Holy Church? (equivalent with stealing what belongs to God)

9) Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor:

- Do you think evil of others or hold grudges?
- Have you judged, slandered or gossiped about others?
- Have you lied to or about others?
- Have you testified falsely?
- Have you encouraged evil talk or deed in others, both at home and at the work-place?

10) Thou shalt not covet:

- Have you been jealous or envious of others and their goods?
- Have you been bored with your family and friends?
- Have you connived with others about getting what does not belong to you?
- Have you tried to take what belongs to another?

Other possible sins:

- Pride and Vanity. Ex: you like people to know when you did something good; you like taking credit in front of others; you are hurt when people do not pay attention to you or do not recognize your effort or your value; you have spiritual pride about your prayer life or you think you are so religious; You like expensive car, clothes, jewelry, etc; you look down to people who are poorer, less educated than you
- Avarice: indifference for other people sorrow, needs, situations, etc. You find out about someone in need you know and you pray and hope other people will help him/her and you do not do anything to help them with your own money or time.
- Selfishness – you do not think of other people fillings, situation, misery; you do not think or care how your actions could affect your family, friends, co-workers, etc ; you put yourself always on the first place; all the time you talk only about yourself ; lack of respect of other people fillings, time, money, things.
- And anything else that bother your conscious

It is very important to confess your thoughts too. Example of thoughts that should be confessed:

Advise for a good confession

- Father my thought told me to not go to confession or to not tell to the priest this sin because he will be disgusted about what you did or he will judge you or he will be scandalized or he will not like you anymore. I judge you father and my thought told me: do not tell him this because he will be mad on you, etc
- Or bad thoughts during the Divine Liturgy or during personal prayer against God, Saints, Holy Mysteries.
- Suicidal thoughts always inspired by the evil one. By confession them they do not have power over your soul
- Thoughts that nobody is loving you, that you are the worst person in the world, that it is not justice for you, etc, etc

When we go to a spiritual father, you will tell him all of your sins and exactly how they were committed. We will hide absolutely nothing, we will alter nothing and we will assign blame and fault for all of our sins to no other but our own selves. Furthermore, we will not be content with a “dry, catalog-type” enumeration of our sins but instead, we will also present, in general terms, the overall condition of our soul, our passions, inclinations, tendencies, vices, faults, and weaknesses. In this manner, the spiritual father, as a physician of souls, will be afforded the opportunity to diagnose and form a complete picture of our illness and thus decisively and effectively assign the correct therapy.

The method through which we describe our sins must be especially careful so that it combines exactness with decency. In other words, on one hand we must state concisely and with few words the conditions and corresponding elements of each sin – the what, how, when, etc. -- so that the spiritual father assesses its proper “weight.” On the other hand, again, we must avoid detailed and wordy descriptions which are tiresome and at times even scandalous. The latter serves no benefit to either us or the spiritual father. It should be especially noted that if a sin was committed with one or more persons (i.e., we stole with some of our friends or committed adultery with a person we know), it is best to not reveal their identity. Let us truly repent for our own sin and leave all others to our Lord’s judgment and mercy.

Among all various factors, the most important is that we find a spiritual father that is experienced, discrete, wise, prudent, sensible, and capable of healing, through our cooperation and by Gods grace, the sores and wounds of our soul. In the same manner by which we search for a good medical doctor that can heal our physical ailments, it is likewise and even more persistently that we ought to search and discover a spiritual father who is capable of contributing towards our spiritual help. That is because “if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into a ditch.” (Matt. 15:14) When, however, you find this spiritual father, keep him as your spiritual father for life and do not change him. Those who go around from spiritual father to spiritual father find no benefit or profit with any one of them, whether they do this because of ignorance or ego. It is only when a spiritual father follows us systematically and gets to know us well that he can substantially aid in our spiritual struggles for the cleansing of our soul and the path towards our salvation.

A good confession is characterized by the following attributions:

1) It is brief but substantive. In other words, it is conducted with no omissions and without superfluous and empty talk, useless repetitions, oblique presentations or even stories and fables.

2) It is humble. In other words, it is conducted with the full realization of our sinfulness and guilt a realization which is also reflected both in our words as well as our posture as Christians.

3) It is honest. It thus contains nothing more and nothing less than the pure truth, and is fully absent pretenses and excuses. It further assigns zero blame to anybody else, even to the demons or Satan himself!

4) It is immediate and it thus takes place without any delay or postponement. At the very moment our conscious censures and reproves us, we must run to our spiritual father for confession as we are always unaware when death will visit us without any warning.

5) It is discreet. In other words, it is characterized by good judgment, common sense, and prudence. It is also formulated clearly, plainly, explicitly, carefully, and orderly.

6) It is complete and it therefore contains all of our sins and omits nothing with the intent of confessing it to a different spiritual father.

7) It is Publican like; in other words, it is conducted with extreme devoutness, piety, and contrition of the heart. It is no different than what we read in the Gospel, "And the Publican standing afar off, would not so much as lift up his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner'." (Luke 18:13)

8) It is private. Thus, other than the priest who is the spiritual father and the confessing Christian, nobody learns and nobody should learn the content of one's confession. If someone should hear one's confession—an unlikely and highly improbable event—he must absolutely never reveal it to nobody whatsoever but to take whatever he heard with him to his grave. This is even more applicable to the priest himself who in no instance is allowed to reveal sins confessed to him, even when his own life is at stake.

9) It is the beginning of a new life. Along with our confession we make a solid decision consciously to engage in our personal spiritual struggle and warfare. We thus decide not only never to repeat the sins we just confessed, but to also make good whatever we can from the sins that we committed in the past. Thus, we compensate a person whom we wronged, return something we stole, ask forgiveness from anybody that we insulted, etc. If we do not do so our repentance is not real!

10) It is accompanied by our acceptance of whatever penance or kanona that may be possibly assigned by our spiritual father (e.g., fasting, almsgiving, or whatever else he considers suitable). We also must fully comprehend and accept that such penance does not constitute a "sentence" or a "punishment," but it is a therapeutic and pedagogical element of our spiritual healing and means by which our spirituality is increased.

May our Lord guide us all to find a good Spiritual Father or to improve the relation and the quality of confession with our existing Spiritual Father in order to benefit from the wonderful mystery of the Holy Sacrament of Confession and Repentance.

