

Archimandrite SERAPHIM



THE FORGOTTEN REMEDY

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ORTHODOX READING
THE
FORGOTTEN
REMEDY

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With the blessing of
His Eminence
the Metropolitan of Debar and Kičevo,
TIMOTHY,
and of His Very Reverend
Archimandrite SERAPHIM

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THE WEALTHY TRAVELLER

In a secluded, lovely Balkan village, a strange foreigner arrived for a summer holiday. He was a very wealthy man. He travelled alone, was greatly weary, and wished as soon as possible to find a place to stay, so that he might rest. He intended to gladden those who would provide him with a quiet and pleasant shelter. Since his wealth was beyond measure, he desired to give his hospitable hosts such a gift as they had never even dreamed of.

He noticed a little house that was beautiful on the outside and situated in a splendid location, and he decided to ask there for a place of rest. He knocked at the door. But as soon as they opened to him and invited him to enter, he instinctively stepped back. From within, an unbearable stench washed over him. What did he see? The home of those people and the pigsty were under one and the same roof. Without saying why he had come, the traveller excused himself and left the yard.

He went on farther, along the clear little river that flowed through the village. Nearby, his attention was drawn to another fine, newly built house. He decided to knock there as well. But the master of that house was a very ill-tempered man. When he saw a stranger approaching the gate, he unleashed his dog and did not allow him to enter even the yard.

The traveller sought shelter in a third house. There they invited him in kindly, and he entered. Yet when he saw that everything in that house was scattered and in disorder—covered with dust

and soot, littered with rubbish and cobwebs—he concluded that there, too, he would not find the peace he was seeking.

At the fourth house, since he was already exhausted, he decided that no matter what he noticed, he would stop. But there, besides the disorder and filth, he observed something else as well: on the stairs there were stains from bedbugs—and he could not tolerate parasites. Moreover, they began to crawl over him, and he hastened to flee from there too.

He went around the entire village, yet nowhere did he find a clean corner where he could rest in peace. He marvelled at how those people, living in such a beautiful place, could so greatly neglect their homes. A small river flowed through the village; along the crooked, steep lanes, in many places little brooks babbled; and elsewhere in the village there were springs and fountains from which water poured abundantly. It was clear to the traveller that the uncleanness of the villagers' houses was not due to a lack of water, but only to the carelessness of their householders.

At the end of the village, already overcome by fatigue, he made his way toward a small cottage where it turned out a good homemaker lived. There he met with great hospitality, with pleasant and smiling faces. At once, as soon as he entered one of the rooms, he noticed that inside everything was simple—yet clean and neatly arranged. There were no cobwebs in the corners; the floorboards had just been washed; and the air in the room was fresh and aired out. One could see that, through the open windows, the pleasant scents of the nearby meadows and forests were often allowed to enter that house.

The traveller sighed with relief and stayed in that home. At last, he had found a quiet, pleasant corner in which to rest.

There he left his great gift.

Dear readers, have you ever asked yourselves: if our Saviour were to come—He Who brings us the greatest gift, His heavenly grace, by which He makes our souls glad and saves them—and if He were to seek shelter for Himself within our souls, would He find a fitting place?

Saint Macarius of Egypt says: “Just as God created heaven and earth for man to dwell in them, so He created the body and the soul of man as His own dwelling-place...” Therefore, the Apostle says: “We are His house” (Hebrews 3:6).

Jesus Christ, that wondrous heavenly Guest, comes to us often and desires to enter beneath the roof of our soul. He is made manifest among us in the ineffable Mystery of Holy Communion (the Eucharist). He knocks at every door; He thirsts to enter every house; He wishes to converse with every heart; He desires to gladden every believing soul and to bestow upon it His heavenly gift.

But how do we receive Him? Can He dwell in each of us as He would desire?

Behold: one approaches Holy Communion and invites the Lord into the secret chamber of his heart: “Come, Lord Jesus, and abide in me!” he whispers in the prayers before Communion. “Enter, I pray Thee, beneath my roof, into the house of my soul! I will open the door of my unworthy mouth! Abide in me!”

Yet Jesus Christ recoils with disgust from that seemingly hospitable, open mouth. From within there issues an unbearable spiritual stench. There is the odour of fornication and malice, of love of money and envy, of pride and self-will... And the heavenly Guest withdraws. He cannot enter such a house where man and the demons—those spiritual swine—live together under one roof.

Behold another: they urge him to fast and to receive Communion; they beseech him to receive into his heart Jesus Christ, Who brings the great and all-saving grace of God—the greatest gift ever bestowed upon mankind. But he will not hear of it. For him the heavenly holy things are unpleasant; they hinder him from living as he wishes. Why should he need the Eucharist? He lets loose the dogs to meet the heavenly Guest and to prevent Him from even approaching the gates of his soul.

A third, for his part, has fasted, prayed, and prepared for Holy Communion, yet he has not forgiven the offenses done to him by his neighbours; he has not ceased from his intrigues; he has not humbled his soul. Within him everything is in disorder. Sins, like dust and soot, cover his outward piety. Rubbish and cobwebs have imperilled his faith. And he, in such a state, allows himself to invite the heavenly Guest into the chamber of his heart! Does he not fear that he will grieve Him, instead of gladdening Him with such senseless “hospitality”?

The fourth hears that there is a knocking at the door of his conscience, yet until now he has not thought to cleanse it. There, great stains of vice have darkened the once-clear windows of the soul. Many sinful habits have piled up rubbish in the hidden corners of the heart. Wretched man! The parasites of evil—the

evil spirits—have attacked him and are sucking the living juices of his spiritual life. If he opens the doors and, amid such unclean “household goods” and disorder, invites the Most High heavenly Guest, does he imagine he will offer Him a pure and joyful rest?

But who could say of his spiritual home that it has been set in flawless order and that he can receive the heavenly King?

All of us, more or less, are unworthy for the Redeemer from the heavens to come to us. And yet, behold—He knocks at our gates (Revelation 3:20). He Himself thirsts to enter into us, because we were created for Him, and because without Him we are endlessly miserable. He comes to bring to all His heavenly gift.

Is there, then, a way for us to become worthy of Him? With great joy we must say: there is! That way is repentance and Confession. Through Confession—when it is sincere and deep, joined to loathing of oneself and a desire to begin a new life—the chamber of our heart is cleansed from all the refuse of sin. Through Confession the windows of the soul are opened, so that through them may enter the fair fragrance and freshness of the grace of God. Through Confession all the confused thoughts and notions, all the chaotic feelings and desires of the heart, are once again brought into order. Finally, through Confession the soul is adorned, and it becomes worthy to receive the most beautiful Guest—Jesus Christ.

SIN

Dear readers, we were created for God, and only in Him do we find the supreme blessedness for which our heart longs. Nothing else, apart from God, can make our soul truly glad. Give a person everything he may desire—he will rejoice in it for a time, but afterwards he grows indifferent, because he senses that something else is lacking—something far more exalted. Does not a child rejoice in a new toy only until he becomes hungry? Then he throws the toy aside and asks for bread. Even amid life's loudest pleasures, and even amid the world's greatest achievements, an inextinguishable inner hunger for righteousness and for "peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17) torments our soul and grants it no rest.

That blessed hunger is hunger for God. Blessed Augustine is right when, in his *Confessions*, he says before God: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in Thee."

The only Guest Who can make our soul glad is God. And since God is our highest blessedness and our greatest good, it is true that whatever obstructs our path to God is, for us, the greatest evil. Such an evil is sin.

In vain do some unenlightened people seek the greatest evil for man elsewhere, outside of sin. Some consider illnesses the greatest evil; others, poverty; others, death. Yet neither illness, nor poverty, nor death—nor any earthly misfortune whatever—can be for us a greater evil than sin. For those earthly misfortunes do not separate us from God if we sincerely seek Him; on the contrary, they draw us nearer to Him.

The holy Apostles were poor, yet they “made many rich” (2 Corinthians 6:10). Even in poverty they were rich, because they possessed the wondrous gift of God—the heavenly grace, which even in this life made them immeasurably blessed. For them poverty could have seemed a great evil, yet they acquired treasure in eternal life.

Illnesses are not the greatest evil for man either, because bodily sickness, endured with humility, faith, and patience, can heal a soul sick with sin and draw it nearer to God—the greatest wealth of man.

And death, for those who believe, is not dreadful, because through it, as through a door, one goes to God—Whom we love and Who loves us—Who for those who love Him has prepared that which “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man” (I Corinthians 2:9).

Sin, however, is the greatest calamity of the heart: separation from the treasure of grace. Sin is a deadly disease of the soul—a disease that deprives us of earthly and heavenly joys. Sin is a fearful, unrelenting spiritual death that cuts us off eternally from the joy of the inhabitants of Paradise and buries us in the darkness of hell.

No—there is no greater evil for man than sin. It destroys both body and soul. It embitters this present life and the life to come. It causes divisions in families, quarrels among neighbours, misunderstandings among relatives. It kindles the fire of malice among peoples. It inflates the soul with pride and hardens it. It poisons the heart with envy. It drives from our breast the sense of holiness and invites demons to dwell there. It tears us away

from God. It extinguishes everything that still shines within our hearts. It teaches us lying, gluttony, selfishness, and love of money. It drives us to speak ill of our neighbours and to judge them. It stirs the hand to steal. It fills us with anger and wrath. It whispers to us to take revenge. It is the source of every violence, fornication, and transgression. It is the cause of all diseases, sufferings, injustices, violences, bloodshed, and wars. It has filled the souls of all of us with an unbearable spiritual stench—and it pours out that stench into our dealings with one another.

Have you ever asked yourselves why the world feels suffocating? Why life is so hard to bear? Why we cannot endure one another? The answer is this: sin has rotted the very atmosphere of life. All of us are sick with sin. And if untreated wounds of the body produce an unbearable stench, how much more dreadful is the stench of sin.

Just as bodily illnesses may be outward (visible) and inward (hidden), so also sins, as diseases of the soul, may be visible and invisible. We often soothe ourselves with the thought that we can hide the sinful wounds of our soul from the eyes of those around us. In the eyes of others we appear to be good and respectable people. But from God we can hide nothing. His eyes are brighter than the sun and penetrate everywhere. If we could photograph—or with some kind of spiritual “X-ray lens” behold—the hidden spiritual state of each one of us, or of the whole human race, then horror would seize us.

Sin is an immeasurable evil, because it is an offense against the infinite God. The Lord has commanded us not to sin, yet we sin—and by doing so we offend the infinite majesty of the Creator.

The Word of God says: “Sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4). That is to say: sin is the transgression of God’s law. Every violated law, whether civil or natural, entails punishment. Sin, as the trampling of the highest law—the holy will of God—leads to the gravest punishments. Those punishments may be temporal or eternal. The temporal God sends for our sobering and correction. If we repent and are reconciled with God, we shall be delivered from eternal punishments. But if we remain in our sins with hardness of heart—if we do not wish to repent of them, if we persist in a disposition contrary to God—then God will leave us to go where we ourselves choose.

The end of sin is a final rupture with God; and since God is the joy of man’s heart, the rupture with God is deprivation of that joy—that is, eternal torment. If sin in its very essence is so terrible, and by its consequences so ruinous an evil, how then do we all sin so thoughtlessly? How have we come to be so intimately “friends” with our sins, to grow accustomed to them to such an extent that many—if not all—prefer to think that sin is something inevitable in life? And how have we been able, and still are able, to endure the filth, the dust, and the cobwebs in the chambers of our hearts—living with dull insensibility amid such disorder, in the stench of our lawlessness? All this is simply inexplicable, yet it is a fact.

Coarsened and morally dulled, we have become deaf to the calls of our own conscience and to concern for our salvation. And this numbness has reached the point that we belittle the weight and the fatefulness of our evil deeds. We imagine that when we sin, we do nothing particularly serious. Oh, if only we could measure the full weight of our sins, and if we could clearly feel that this burden drags us toward the depths of hell—sooner would we

agree that the earth should swallow us and the rocks fall upon us, than that we should sin and provoke God to anger.

If we imagine a set of scales, and on one side place human sins, and on the other side the holiness of all the bright spirits in heaven and of all the righteous who have lived on earth, then that total holiness of heaven and earth would not be able to raise the pan weighed down by human sinfulness. Only the power of God can raise it. Therefore God sent into the world His Only-begotten Son, that He, by His Golgotha sacrifice, might redeem human sin. From that time onward, all sins—of all people, in all ages—can be forgiven; only repentance must be offered for them. From that time onward, there is no sin heavier than the weight of God’s mercy.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His Only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

“And behold the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world.”

Hasten, sinners! There is deliverance even for us! Jesus Christ—Who bore upon His shoulders the sin of all mankind, and Who by His death on the Cross paid our debts to God—can bear our sins as well upon His shoulders.

Is this not why Saint Andrew of Crete, speaking in the name of all of us who have sinned before the Lord, prays: “Take from me my heavy burden, and grant me tears of repentance!” Yet we must shed true tears of repentance. For there are only two kinds of water that wash away the filth of sins: the water of Baptism and the tears of repentance.

Moreover, as Saint John Climacus teaches:

“Although these words may sound somewhat bold, the fountain of tears after Baptism is greater than Baptism. For Baptism cleanses us from earlier transgressions, whereas tears cleanse us from sins committed even after Baptism. Since we received Baptism in childhood, all of us have defiled it; but through tears we cleanse it again. And if the love of mankind of God had not granted us such tears (of repentance), it would be hard to find people who could be saved.”

THE FORGOTTEN REMEDY

The Holy Mystery of Confession may with full right be called “the forgotten remedy.” The whole world lies in evil. Each one of us, individually, is infected with the deadly disease called sin—yet each one of us can be healed of that disease.

The medicine has been given—and it is wondrously effective. Once you take it, you are restored. Yet we do not reach for it, to be healed and to lighten our conscience. Why? Because we have forgotten it and have underestimated it.

“Why will you die, O house of Israel?”—the holy Prophet Ezekiel cries out with sorrow. (cf. Ezekiel 33:11) Why will you die in your sins, O Christians?—our Redeemer Jesus Christ cries out with even greater sorrow. Is there no deliverance for you from death? Why do you gladden the enemy of your salvation—Satan? Did I not establish in My Church the all-powerful repentance?

“I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways!” (Ezekiel 33:11)

Repentance—that boundless good gift—has been granted to you:

“At whatever moment of life it may be, and whatever the sins may be, it acts with equal power: it cleanses from every sin, it saves all who flee to God, even if this is in the final moments before death.”

For bodily sicknesses there are earthly medicines. For the most fearful sickness—sin—the all-powerful heavenly Physician has

a heavenly remedy. That Physician is Jesus Christ. Since every sin is a violation of God's holy law, God alone, by His wondrous omnipotence, can forgive sins. And He can do this in such a way that sins are healed as though they had never existed.

“Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isaiah 1:18), He promises. Yet for this to take place, one condition is required of us: that we truly repent.

“No one is as good and merciful as the Lord,” says Saint Mark the Ascetic, “yet even He does not forgive the sins of the one who does not repent,” and again: “We are not condemned for the multitude of our evils, but because we do not wish to repent.”

Thus, the Lord's omnipotence can forgive the sins of men. But behold how unfathomable is the mercy of God: God has given His authority to forgive sins to men—to the Apostles and to their successors in the persons of bishops and priests.

Why did God act in this way? So that repentance—and consequently the forgiveness of sins—might be nearer to us, more accessible, and less hindered.

“Receive the Holy Spirit,” Jesus Christ said to His Apostles: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:22–23). And again: “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:18).

How is the forgiveness of sins accomplished? Through the Mystery of Repentance, that is, Confession. The Christian who

is burdened by sins, with deep repentance in his soul and a sincere desire to amend his life, goes to the priest and, in a fully open and complete confession, discloses to him the secrets of his heart and conscience. The priest, once he is assured of the Christian's sincere repentance, after the appropriate prayers, reads over him the prayer of absolution: "May our Lord and God, Jesus Christ..."

At the very moment the priest forgives on earth, forgiveness is granted also in heaven. Is there any mercy greater than this? We would not have believed it possible, had it not been spoken to us by Him "Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth" (1 Peter 2:22).

Sin is an immeasurable evil with immeasurably heavy consequences—eternal torments in hell. And yet its healing, established by Jesus Christ, is so easy! This is truly wondrous.

Just as Jesus Christ said to the ten lepers: "Go and show yourselves to the priests" (Luke 17:14), and as they went, they were cleansed—so it is as if He says also to us, the sinful:

"You are sick with spiritual leprosy? Do not be afraid—you will be cleansed! Only do this: go and show yourselves to the priests."

If we ignore such mercy of God, tell me—how much greater punishment shall we deserve, for not doing even that little which has been commanded us for our salvation, and which is so easy?

Holy Scripture tells us that Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, was sick with leprosy. When he heard that in the land of Israel there was a prophet of God—Elisha—who could

heal him, he went to him with many servants and gifts, and stood at the entrance of his house. The holy Prophet did not come out to meet him, but sent word to him:

“Go, wash seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean” (4 Kingdoms / 2 Kings 5:10).

When Naaman heard these words, he was enraged and said: “Behold, I thought he would come out, stand, and call upon the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place and remove the leprosy—but he sends me to bathe in the Jordan! Do we not have better rivers in Syria?” And he departed in anger.

But his servants approached him and said: “My father, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he says to you only: ‘Wash, and you shall be clean’?” (4 Kingdoms / 2 Kings 5:13) In other words: will you not do what is easy?

Naaman listened to his servants and washed seven times in the Jordan, and his body was cleansed and restored like the body of a little child.

How dreadful an illness leprosy is—and yet how easily the man of God healed it. Does not the healing of the most dreadful disease—sin—happen in the same easy way? Immerse yourself in the depths of deep repentance, and the grace of God will cleanse you from every sin. You will come out of the spiritual bath of the Holy Mystery of Confession with a renewed and clean soul—like the soul of a child.

Sin cast down the first angel, the Daystar, from heaven.

Sin drove Adam and Eve out of Paradise.

Sin brought the Flood upon the world.

That same sin threatens us as well—to separate us eternally from God and to send us into the abyss of hell forever.

If God were to demand of us that we distribute all our possessions to the poor; if He were to demand that we spend our entire life in fasting; if He were to demand that we immediately renounce all earthly comforts and joys in order to atone for our sins and to be delivered from their dread consequences—then we ought to agree to everything, only to be rescued from the eternal torments toward which sin drags us.

And now behold what an easy salvation God has established for us:

“Go and show yourselves to the priests. Confess your sins before them. Repent from the heart, and you will be freed from the chains of evil.”

After all this, what reasonable person would ignore Confession? We can save our souls in only two ways: either never to sin, or to repent of our sins. But since among men there is none who has not sinned, if we desire to be reconciled with God—Whom we anger daily by trampling upon His holy will—then only one thing remains: to repent sincerely and honestly. Otherwise we shall not behold the face of God, for nothing unclean will enter the radiant heavenly City.

OBJECTIONS AGAINST CONFESSION

How great is our impiety! For it is not merely that we have forgotten Confession as a miracle-working remedy and do not resort to it; even when we know it, we still do not practise it! What could be more unreasonable than this?

Confession is so necessary for us sinners that we may boldly say: without Confession there is no salvation for us. Abba Isaiah expressed the same thought in this way: “If there were no repentance, no one would be saved.” Just as Baptism washes us from ancestral sin and from all sins committed before it, so also Repentance—inseparable from the confession of sins—washes us from all lawlessness committed after Baptism.

Yet we do not confess because we have objections against Confession. What are the objections we most often raise?

1) **“I am too sinful—can God forgive me? I do not believe it. So there is no point in confessing.”**

But if a person repents sincerely, every sin can be forgiven. “The power of repentance rests upon the power of God. The Physician is almighty, and the remedy has been given by the Almighty” (Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov).

Saint John Chrysostom, reflecting on the wondrous consequences of sincere repentance, says:

“Repentance is a medicine that destroys sin. It is a heavenly gift, a miracle-working power which, by the grace of God, conquers the force and strictness of the laws. It does not turn away from the fornicator; it does not abandon the adulterer; it does not

shrink from the drunkard; it is not disgusted by the idolater; it does not overlook the slanderer; it does not pass by the blasphemer, nor the proud man. It renews all, for it is a flame for the cleansing of sins. The wound and the medicine—these are sin and repentance (Confession).

Do not tell me: ‘I have sinned greatly—how can I be saved?’ You cannot; but your God can—and in such a way that He will destroy all your sins. Hear my words carefully: your God destroys your sins so that there remains neither stain nor scar; rather, He restores you to health. He grants you beauty of soul when He delivers you from the sentence of death; He gives you righteousness, and he who sinned He makes equal to one who did not sin—because He destroys sin and makes it vanish as though it had never existed.

‘But,’ you will say, ‘is it possible for the one who repents to be saved?’ It is entirely possible! ‘But I have spent my whole life in sin—if I repent, will I be saved?’ Of course. How is this shown? By the love of mankind of your Lord. Do I trust that your repentance will annihilate your grievous sins? If it were only your repentance, then you would indeed have reason to tremble. But with repentance the mercy of God is joined—and God’s mercy has no limit; words cannot express His goodness. Your malice has a measure, but the remedy against it is measureless. Your malice is human; God’s mercy is ineffable. Therefore hope that He will overlook your sins.

Imagine a spark falling into the sea: will it set it on fire? Will it even appear again? What the spark is to the sea, that is sin to the love of mankind of God—indeed, not even approximately so,

but something far less. The sea, however great, has an end; but the love of mankind of God is without bounds.”

2) “Why should I confess? I do not have any particularly serious sins. Let those confess who have murdered, robbed, ruined others, or committed some other great sin.”

This objection is the complete opposite of the first. There, because of a terrifying awareness of his sinfulness, a person does not believe he can be forgiven. Here, all awareness of sinfulness dies.

“I do not have any serious sins...” But is that truly so? When a person stays for a long time in a closed room, he becomes accustomed to the stale air in it and no longer senses how unpleasant it is. But if someone comes in from outside, he cannot endure the accumulated stench and will flee.

Let those who say, “I do not have any particularly serious sins,” answer this: do they have Christ in their heart? And are their hearts pure? Hardly. They imagine that they are clean—but imagination is not yet reality. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). And where there is falsehood, Christ is not.

What then should we do? We should confess. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

The holy Fathers teach us that it is very difficult for a person to see his own sins. This is explained by the blindness the devil brings upon us. Abba Isaiah says:

“When a man separates himself from those who are on his left—that is, from living in communion with the demons and participating in their abominations—then he will see his sins before God in all their fullness; then he will come to know Jesus. But a man cannot perceive his sins until he separates himself from them through a state filled with pain and sufferings. Those who have attained this state have given themselves over to tears and prayer; and when they remember their deceitful companionship with the passions, they dare not lift their eyes toward God, but remain in continual contrition of spirit.”

If it were easy to see one’s own sins, Saint Ephraim the Syrian would not have prayed: “Lord, grant me to see my transgressions.” Nor would Saint John of Kronstadt have said: “It is truly a gift of God—to see one’s sins in all their multitude and in all their foulness.”

The conclusion is that those who think they have no serious sins are, in fact, blind. They must pray that the Lord grant them to see their sins and to be delivered from the utterly ruinous spiritual delusion that they have no serious sins. Even if their sins are as small as dust, if they are not cleansed by constant confession, they accumulate and defile the room of the heart, so that the great heavenly Guest cannot enter.

Small sins are often more dangerous than the greatest transgressions. The latter weigh heavily upon the conscience and press a person to seek forgiveness—to confess, to make amends, to be healed. But small sins do not weigh heavily upon the soul; yet they have the ruinous property of making it insensitive to the grace of God and indifferent to salvation.

Far fewer people have perished from savage beasts than from tiny microorganisms invisible to the eye. “Small” sins, because they seem insignificant, are most often passed over without attention. They are easily forgotten; and by burying right awareness they form in a person the most dreadful habit—the habit of sinning. Thus the unrepentant sinner falls into self-deception, imagining that he is not sinful, that everything is “fine,” even though he remains an unrepentant and pitiable slave of sin.

Small sins produce a true deadness in a man’s spiritual life. Just as a mechanical clock stops from the accumulation of fine dust, so too the spiritual pulse of a person gradually dies beneath the thick layer of accumulated “minor” sins. For the clock to run again, the dust must be blown out. For a person to come alive to spiritual life, he must confess even his smallest sins.

3) “All this is true—but why should I confess when I know I will sin again tomorrow? Does such a confession make sense? I understand confessing, but then never sinning again!”

This objection contains something right—and something wrong. The desire not to sin again after Confession is right. But we are weak people; we cannot at once attain such firmness that falling into voluntary sins becomes impossible.

So then, because we cannot instantly reach such steadfastness in virtue, should we give ourselves over to vice? Should we stop confessing? Which is better: to lie in the mud of the spiritual swamp, or to rise after every fall and go forward, with hope that one day you will reach the firm and beautiful shore of virtue? If

you do not confess, you remain in the mud. If you confess, you rise from the mud and wash it off.

You say: “But why should I rise, when tomorrow I will fall again?” If you fall—rise again! Begin anew every day! This is surely better than becoming unaccustomed to rising.

A young monk once complained to the great ascetic Abba Sisoës: “Abba, what should I do? I have fallen!” The Elder replied: “Rise!” The monk said: “I rose, and I fell again!” The Elder replied: “Rise again!” And the young monk asked: “And how long must I keep rising when I fall?” “Until your end,” answered Abba Sisoës.

This brief dialogue must be remembered by all of us who desire to amend our lives, yet, deceived by the devil, keep falling again into our former sins. Every time we fall into some transgression, we must rise. And that “rising” is Confession.

“But why should we play at falling and rising?” some ask. Oh, this is not a game, but a struggle—one that has great meaning. If, as weak men, we fall but rise again, there is a great likelihood that death will find us standing. Then we are saved. But if we decide not to rise, death will surely find us lying in the mud. Then we are surely lost forever.

Saint John Chrysostom says:

“Repentance opens heaven for man; it leads him into Paradise; it conquers the devil. Have you sinned? Do not despair! If you sin each day, offer repentance each day. When there are rotten places in old houses, we replace them with new ones—yet we do not stop caring for the house. So you too must decide for

yourself: if today you have defiled yourself with sin, at once cleanse yourself through repentance.”

For washing bodily dirt God has given water; for washing the defilements of the soul God has given the grace of the Holy Mystery of Confession. Everyone who soils his hands washes them, and does not say: “I will not wash my hands, because I will dirty them again.” Why then do many say: “I will not confess, because tomorrow I will sin again”? It is because the enemy of our salvation suggests to us that we should not wash our souls, so that he may gain power over them.

But we must not listen to such satanic suggestions. Rather, we should confess more frequently, because frequent washing plants within us a love for purity.

Leave your house for one year unswept, uncleaned, and unventilated—will it not become a true pigsty? And now imagine into what the soul has turned of the one who has not cleaned it by Confession—not for one year, but for twenty, forty, sixty, or seventy years.

4) A fourth, however, says: “I confess to God. What need do I have to go to a priest?”

Well then—if there is no need to go to a priest, do not go to him! Then turn to God and let Him, directly from heaven, baptize you; let Him chrismate you; let Him crown you in marriage; let Him perform Holy Unction for you; let Him commune you directly, without any heavenly Liturgy, and so on. Yet you do not do that. Why are you inconsistent? Why, for all the other Mysteries, do you turn to a priest, but only for the Mystery of Confession do

you say: “I have no need of a priest; I confess directly before God”? Do you not sense that the enemy is deceiving you?

God has appointed the priests to minister the Holy Mysteries, and through them we receive the heavenly and all-saving grace. Confession, too, is a Mystery. If you confess before God, you do well, because you stir your conscience, you remember your sins, and perhaps you even shed tears for them. Yet with all this you still do not receive forgiveness by the grace of God.

It is as when you sit and ponder how, in the unwaning day of the Kingdom of Heaven, the saints partake of the heavenly Communion that is beyond us. However much such thoughts fill you with joy and compunction, in reality you do not commune until you receive the actual Holy Communion. So here as well: until you go to the priest—upon whom Jesus Christ Himself has bestowed the authority to bind and to loose—however much you “confess” before God, you still do not receive forgiveness of your sins. For concerning the priests God Himself has been pleased to say: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them” (John 20:23).

Moreover, confession before a priest has immense formative value. It humbles us. It heals our pride. It makes us blush in a saving way. It fills us with shame and fear, and it preserves us from future sins. When we sin, we sin before the all-powerful God, yet we are not ashamed, because we do not see Him. The same is true when we “confess” before God: we do it with ease, because we do not see God, and it seems to us that it hardly matters what we say about ourselves. But what shame overwhelms us when we confess before a priest!

The one who has submitted himself to the order of the Church—to confess to a spiritual father—will with difficulty decide to repeat his sins again, when he remembers that he will have to disclose them again in Confession (cf. Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder*, 7th ed., Sergiev Posad, 1908, p. 41). Jesus Christ wisely ordained that repentance should be made before the priestly minister, who is God’s witness.

“But how can the priest forgive sins?” you ask. If God has so ordained, then it can be so. “But is not the priest himself a sinful man?” If he is sinful, what do you lose by that? He is sinful for himself, and before God he will answer for his own sins. The Holy Mysteries he has performed do not cease to be effective for you because of his sinfulness, provided you receive them with faith and humility.

Does a ray of sunlight that falls upon mud become soiled by it? So also the grace of God loses nothing of itself by being transmitted through a minister stained by sin. He himself, because of his unworthiness, may even be deprived of grace on the very next day. But you, receiving through him the grace of God, if you yourself prove worthy, will not be deprived of it.

“Will the priest not reveal my secret sins spoken in Confession?” No. No priest has the right to recount what he has heard in Confession. He is bound to carry the seal of Confession with him to the grave. Therefore do not be troubled that the shame of your sinfulness might be spread through society.

Remember: if you flee Confession out of zeal for your reputation, you yourself will draw the attention of others to yourself. If you are ashamed to acknowledge your weaknesses

before one man, everyone will begin to speak of them! Such is the spiritual law. No matter how skilfully we try to hide them, people sense our shortcomings. If you confess them before one, God, for your humility before that one witness, will cover you with His grace before the rest.

If, before the confessor, you cling to your “good name,” your authority will collapse before everyone. Repent before one alone. Your confession will teach you to wage war against your passions. And if you truly wage war against them, the multitude will not learn of them. And you, with God’s help, will be healed before you ever draw the attention of others to yourself. But if you do not wish to be healed through Confession, then even here you will expose your honour to mockery—and at the Dread Judgment you will draw upon yourself the attention of the whole universe!

5) A fifth says: “I go to the priest so that he may read over me the Prayer of Absolution.”

This is the greatest profanation and abuse of Confession!

What does “Prayer of Absolution” mean? It is a prayer for the loosing of sins. A Christian goes to the priest and, without repenting, asks: “Father, read me the prayer of absolution,” or “a prayer of forgiveness!” And the priest places the epitachelion over the head of the one who supposedly “repents” and forgives the lawlessness that he has not confessed but has concealed.

Stop, O servant of God! What are you doing? Do you know what sins are hidden in that soul, that you forgive so carelessly? Do you know what responsibility you bear before God? And what if some mortal sin is concealed from you, and you so lightly permit

the Christian to approach Holy Communion—will you not thereby hasten the ruin of that soul? Are you unaware of the words of the holy Apostle Paul: “Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord” (I Corinthians 11:27)? Why do you not examine the believer? Why do you allow him to eat and drink his own eternal condemnation? Why do you give the Holy Thing to an unrepentant sinner?

Judas too, at the Mystical Supper, received Communion together with the other holy Apostles; but because he was an unrepentant sinner, instead of grace Satan entered into him. Do you wish, from a careless Christian—who without confession, and only by an “absolution prayer,” approaches Christ—to make a second Judas? Better do not allow the unprepared to approach Holy Communion until he repents and confesses, than to give him fire and condemnation.

To read the Prayer of Absolution in such a way is the greatest irrationality. It is lying to God and lying to ourselves. Ananias and Sapphira paid with their lives for their dishonest attempt to lie to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1–10). Christian, do not deceive yourself! The priest cannot forgive sins until he has heard them in Confession. He cannot loose the knots of your conscience until he reaches them; and no soothing “absolution” prayers can help. Either you have confessed your sins and have received forgiveness for them, or you have not confessed, and they remain in your soul. If you can wash yourself without touching the water, then you will also be able to cleanse yourself from your lawlessness without confessing.

Reading an “absolution prayer” merely to quiet the conscience is a sin both for the priest and for the layman, because at its root lies delusion and falsehood. This practice does not lead us to spiritual healing, but to even greater sinning.

Someone is gravely ill. It is known with certainty what the illness is; it is known exactly what remedy can defeat it. But sometimes the remedy is bitter, and the sick man asks for something more pleasant. Then the doctor gives either morphine to dull the pain, or some sweet but useless syrup. Will the sick man be healed? Never. And who bears responsibility for his death? The sick man himself, because he wanted sweet syrups in order to deceive himself; but also the doctor, who knew what he ought to give him, yet out of man-pleasing did not give it.

Not long ago a good and zealous Christian woman confided to me the following:

“I was preparing for Holy Communion. I went to the church and asked for the parish priest to confess. The priest was very busy, and as I could tell, he was not in a good mood. He received me with a kind of impatience and said: ‘Well, what are you here for again? The same little sins? You don’t have serious transgressions before God. Come here; I’ll read you the prayer of absolution!’

‘But I want to confess—something weighs on my soul!’

‘No need! Kneel here!’

I obeyed, and he read the prayer of absolution over me. I stood up and left. But in my soul—no relief at all. The heaviness

remained and began to torment me even more. From the middle of the church I went back to the priest, but he was already occupied with other worshippers. The time for Communion came. I did not dare to commune, because I did not feel that my conscience was at peace.

The following week I went to another church. There I confessed and received Communion. I felt great joy from Confession. Only then did I find relief.”

RULES FOR A SALVIFIC CONFESSION

All Christians without exception must confess if they wish to be saved. Yet how should a true, proper confession be made? Many do not know. That is why we are obliged to examine this question more closely. Here we shall dwell on the following three moments of Confession:

- a) What we should do before we go to the confessor;
- b) What we should do when we are with the confessor;
- c) What we should do after we leave him.

a) What should we do before we go to the confessor?

Among Christ's Apostles, both the first and the last sinned grievously: Peter denied Christ, and Judas betrayed Him. Yet Peter was forgiven, while Judas perished. Peter was restored to the apostolic dignity, while over Judas to this day there hangs a curse throughout the ages. What saved Peter, and what destroyed Judas? What ought that wretched man to have done?

After committing his sin, should he have confessed? Formally speaking, he did confess when he went to the scribes and Pharisees and said: "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (Matthew 27:4), and together with this "confession" he returned the thirty pieces of silver. Is that not enough? Clearly not. A hollow confession does not save. Besides contrition of heart, there must also be a living faith in God's mercy. Judas despaired of his salvation; therefore, after "confessing," he went away and hanged himself. His body hung upon a tree, and his soul went to hell for eternal torments.

Did Peter not act in a similar way? In the courtyard of Caiaphas he denied Christ three times—his Benefactor and Teacher—saying: “I do not know the Man” (Matthew 26:74). But at the third denial, when he heard the rooster crow, he remembered what Christ had told him; he recognized his sin; his heart was crushed; he immediately went out of the courtyard, separated himself from the evil company of the high priest’s servants, and—most importantly—began to shed bitter tears: tears of sincere, living, deep repentance.

According to one tradition, throughout his whole life, whenever Peter heard a rooster crow, he would remember his grievous sin, and his eyes would become as two fountains of deeply penitential tears. Peter did not fall into despair; he believed in God’s mercy, and therefore he was saved.

Thus Saint Peter has left us a living example of the greatest condition we must fulfil when, after falling into sin, we wish once more to turn to God: faith in God’s mercy, which drives away every despair. God is love. However heavy our sin may be, He will forgive it—provided only that we humble our heart. Even if our sins are as high as mountains, they will sink into the ocean of God’s mercy. But he who despairs is lost. Despair is joy for the devil. Therefore, above all, we must guard ourselves from despair; for if we fall into despair, no one will be able to save us.

After this, let us imitate Saint Peter also in other things. When he recognized his sin, he immediately went out of the accursed courtyard of the high priest, where he had denied Christ. And you too, brother or sister, when you wish to confess and to return to God, go out of the accursed courtyard of sin where you have dwelt until now and where, for various reasons, you have denied

Christ not three times, but—so to speak—thirty-three times each day. Go out—both with your body, and with your heart, and with your mind! Peter withdrew from the servants of the high priest; and you also, leave the company of those people who teach you sins, or who—perhaps without intending it—become for you a temptation and a stumbling-block.

But the most important lesson from the conduct of the repentant Apostle is this: when he was left alone, Saint Peter reflected within himself; he relived the horror of his sin; and from deep sorrow he wept bitterly. So you too, when preparing to go to your spiritual father, do not approach him without prior preparation. Withdraw from the “noise” of daily life; set aside every other care; gather your thoughts; say a short but heartfelt prayer; remember all your sins—and even write them down on a sheet of paper, so that when you go to confess them, you will not forget them in your confusion and remain unpurified of them.

Recall the Ten Commandments; see which of them you have transgressed; recall whether you have committed any mortal sin; examine your conscience; condemn yourself; weep for your fall; and with such a disposition go to the spiritual father. Then be assured that you will receive true forgiveness, for “a broken and humbled heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise” (Psalm 50/51:17).

If we desire to receive God’s forgiveness, sorrow for the sins we have committed is absolutely necessary. For that is precisely what repentance is: to shed tears, to feel deep contrition for one’s falls. According to the testimony of Saint Isaac the Syrian, God receives our penitential humility as an ascetic labour.

This, then, is what we must do before we go to the confessor.

b) What should we do when we are with the confessor?

We must take heed of the following:

Remember that we have come to Christ's hospital: here the priest is the visible physician, and the invisible Physician is Christ Himself.

Do not confess sins with a false shame.

Do not seek excuses for them.

Do not intentionally conceal anything at all.

Do not confess with general phrases that mean nothing.

Briefly, yet clearly and precisely, state the character of each sin.

Do not expose the sins of others, and as far as possible do not mention the names of those who led us into sin, or who, through our fault, sinned together with us.

Do not boast before the spiritual father of any virtues.

Do not shift the blame onto others, but only onto ourselves.

Have a sincere desire not to sin again.

1) Confession is Christ's hospital

When we go to Confession, we enter Christ's hospital. God Himself is the Physician, for only He can put to death and make alive, judge and show mercy, punish and forgive. The priest is only a witness and God's authorized minister. Therefore,

standing visibly before the priest, but invisibly before Christ Himself, we must approach the great Mystery of spiritual cleansing with great trembling. The priest will examine our soul, and God will heal it. The priest will write the prescriptions, and God will accomplish the miracle of spiritual renewal.

Take heed, Christian, what kind of hospital you have come to—lest through thoughtlessness or negligence, through inexperience or misplaced fear, you depart unhealed!

If you truly fear God, then be fearless when you stand to confess your sins. Do not be afraid. The Judge before Whom you stand is infinitely merciful. He is terrible only for those who do not fear Him and who thoughtlessly renounce repentance.

2) Confess without false shame

Your confession must be without false shame. In this world we live, above all, in a pharisaical hypocrisy: we are one thing, yet we wish to appear as something else; outwardly we do not show what we are inwardly. We want people to think well of us; therefore we hide bad traits and display good ones—and if we do not have good ones, then we boast of invented virtues. Thus not rarely in life we meet people whose face seems to radiate goodness, but whose heart does not. Do we not all deceive one another in this way? But should we lie when we have come to Confession?

Indeed, it is not easy to reveal one's sinfulness before the spiritual father, when before people you present yourself as "good." You are ashamed to uncover your shortcomings. But how will you be healed if you conceal your sickness? You overcome shame when you go to a doctor and allow him to examine you—

you are healing your body. Why then are you ashamed when you go to the spiritual father to heal your soul? Do you not see that shame becomes an obstacle to your salvation?

Therefore cast off false shame and embrace resolve. You should be ashamed when you sin, not when you confess your sin. God has bound shame to sin, and resolve to confession. Do not listen to the devil who overturns God's order and suggests that you should be ashamed when confessing sin, but "bold" when committing it. He has turned everything upside down in order to destroy you.

When the learned Socrates once walked down a street in Athens, he saw one of his students coming out of the house of a prostitute. The young man was ashamed before his teacher and wanted quickly to hide back inside. "O young man," Socrates said to him, "it is not so shameful to come out of such a house; it is shameful to remain in it!" O Christian, I too will say: it is not shameful to come out of your sin through Confession; it is shameful to remain in it—that is, to hide it from your spiritual father.

Saint Basil the Great says: "A concealed sin is an unhealed disease of the soul." How can you be healed of the disease if you hide it from the physician?

Some are ashamed to confess because they hold high positions and consider themselves "important" people. But look at the example of Bishop Potamius. He was advanced in years, renowned for his virtues, a model of chastity. Yet it happened that he fell into sin. But he rose again at once and resolved to

repent before the council of all the bishops who were soon to gather in his city.

When the council began, the universally respected Bishop Potamius was chosen as its president. Because of this, within his heart he felt a fierce struggle between shame and heartfelt contrition. “Potamius,” shame said to him, “there is no need to confess publicly.” “Potamius,” humility said to him, “why do you delay? Why do you not do what you intended?” “Are you not ashamed before men?” shame suggested. “Be ashamed before God!” humility counselled. “But you are an archpastor—you will become a scandal!” shame insisted. “Precisely because you are an archpastor, you must give the world a great example!” humility replied.

In the end humility prevailed and shame retreated. Potamius rose from his chair and confessed his sin before all. And the angels of heaven marvelled at such a confession!

If a hierarch was not ashamed to confess his sin before an entire council, why should we be ashamed—privately, before a single minister of God—to confess our sins? Once we speak them, they cease to be sins. When David confessed his sins before Nathan, he immediately heard the consolation: “The Lord has put away your sin” (2 Samuel 12:13).

But an unconfessed sin remains an unhealed, deadly wound of the soul. Therefore let us confess boldly!

3) Do not justify yourself

When we have already stood before the tribunal of voluntary confession, we must not seek excuses for our sins. Let us endure

a little voluntary self-accusation—this labour is redeeming! Let us blush with salutary shame! In the flames of self-reproach our sins are burned away. But if we begin to look for explanations, to seek justifications, then the saving power of our confession is finished.

What is Confession? Repentance. And he who truly repents knows only one thing: to weep and to ask for mercy. The moment he begins to excuse himself, to rationalize, the whole penitential disposition evaporates. In the Mystery of Confession, the repentant disposition is something essential.

We must remember this, because many Christians, when they confess, somehow try to justify themselves. Even while naming the sin, they attempt to diminish it, soften it, and find “reasons” so as to appear less guilty. They must understand that the heavenly court differs from the earthly one. Before an earthly judge the accused tries to appear as innocent as possible in order to be acquitted; but before God it is the opposite: the more one reproaches himself, the more he is justified.

Is it not precisely for this that Jesus Christ calls us to Himself—to forgive all our voluntary and involuntary sins? No faith proclaims a God so full of love for mankind as ours!

It is told that blessed Jerome, when he lived in Palestine and laboured in the cave of Bethlehem where the Saviour was born, had a strange vision on the Feast of Christ’s Nativity. Jesus Christ appeared to him as a Child and asked: “Jerome, now that everyone is bringing Me something as a gift, what will you give Me?”

“My virtues and my prayers!” answered Saint Jerome.

“Good—but what else?”

“My heart, my soul, my whole self!”

“That too I will accept—but I want yet something more from you!”

“But what else can I offer Thee, O Lord?” the ascetic asked in perplexity.

“Give Me your sins!”

Blessed Jerome wept in contrition. Through tears he asked: “Why do You want my sins, O Lord?”

“I want to take them upon Myself!”

Did you hear? “Give Me your sins!” Jesus Christ asks from us our sins—so that we may give them to Him in the Holy Mystery of Confession, and He will forgive them!

4) Conceal nothing deliberately

Before the spiritual father we must deliberately conceal absolutely nothing. If, without intending it, we forget to confess some sin, then we should confess it the next time. But to hide something which clearly accuses our conscience means to make our sin double: double, because first we committed it, and second we concealed it!

Do not hide sin in your soul. It is a deadly disease. It is a pain which, if not “operated on,” can carry you to the grave. By concealing sins we render the greatest service to the devil: he

incites us to commit lawlessness, and then to keep it in the soul as his hiding place—so that later it may serve him as evidence against us.

Confess whatever torments your soul. The more refuse you yourself carry out of the soul, the more it will be cleansed by God's grace. He who sins enters into alliance with the devil; but he who confesses breaks friendship with the demons. Confession is a betrayal—when it concerns the devil; it is the only justified betrayal.

Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov teaches beautifully:

“By the confession of sins, fellowship with the demons is dissolved. Freedom from sins is a sign of true repentance and of a man's resolve to live a virtuous life. If you have acquired the habit of sinning, confess your sins more often, and soon you will be freed from the slavery of sin. You will follow the Lord Jesus Christ easily and with joy. To one who constantly betrays his companions, they become enemies; they withdraw from him as from a traitor who continually seeks their ruin. And from the one who confesses his sins they withdraw, because sins are founded and strengthened by the pride of the fallen person and do not endure exposure and attention.”

5) Avoid vague phrases

In Confession we should not use general phrases that mean nothing. Many people, especially those confessing for the first time, rehearse what to say before they go. Whether from shame or inexperience, they often say things that are out of place—and leave Confession without benefit.

A Christian woman decided to confess but did not know what to do. She asked another woman for advice, and that woman instructed her: “Just say: ‘I am guilty of everything!’—and that’s all.”

“Well, that’s very simple,” thought the first woman. Encouraged, she stood before the priest. When he asked about her sins, she calmly said: “Father, I am guilty of everything!” and thought the confession was finished.

“Have you stolen horses?” he asked her unexpectedly.

“Stolen horses?!” she exclaimed in surprise. “It never even occurred to me to commit such a sin!”

“Then you are not guilty of everything,” the wise confessor said. “There are people who steal horses. But you have not done that. Let us look more carefully at what you have sinned in.” Thus he led her to true confession.

6) State each sin briefly, clearly, and precisely

When we confess we must briefly and clearly state the character of each sin. We have seen that vague phrases do not help the one who confesses. He must name each sin separately before God.

Of course, this does not mean telling long and detailed stories. A confessor is constantly a busy man. During fasts, and especially before Communion, many are waiting their turn. Therefore brevity, precision, and conciseness are necessary. To achieve this, it is recommended to write one’s sins down on a sheet of paper beforehand and read them during Confession.

Do not wait for the priest to question you. It is of great benefit when you yourself state your sins. If the confessor stops you to clarify a spiritual condition and asks something, you are obliged to answer exactly and without evasions.

Some “reason” during Confession, imagining they can outwit God. Instead of defining the sin briefly—for example: “I hate my neighbour”—they begin, out of an ill-judged desire not to “soil” themselves, to tell long and unnecessary stories about how the neighbour hated them, harmed them, and so on. Or instead of saying: “I stole such-and-such,” they begin to explain how a “strange impulse” appeared in them. That is not confession; it is foolish self-justification before God.

7) Do not reveal others’ sins

In Confession we should not expose other people’s sins, but only our own; and as far as possible, we should avoid naming those who led us into sin, or whom we have tempted into sinning with us.

Many do not keep this essential rule, and then an absurdity follows: they go to confess their sins, yet all the while speak only of others’ sins:

“She—my daughter-in-law—did this and that! My husband is a dreadful tyrant!”

Or: “My wife doesn’t listen to me; she has a very bad character and is always quarrelling with me and the household. And a friend of mine—his name is so-and-so, Father, you know him—he really angered me. And another one, Father, did this and that...”

That is not confession. To accuse others instead of oneself is more like judging. Such people go to the spiritual father sinful—and they leave even more sinful!

8) Do not boast of virtues

Some, when they come to Confession, instead of exposing themselves—which is what is essential, necessary, and beneficial—unexpectedly begin to boast:

“Father, I have not killed anyone, nor have I stolen! I am not a drunkard! I live very quietly. My neighbours and friends respect me! And as a man, perhaps I have sinned at times, but now I do not even remember it. My conscience is at peace!”

This terrible self-satisfaction is a greater sin than the grievous sins that such a person boasts he has not committed—because he has already sealed the abyss of sin with the heavy lid of complacent pride.

Many people reach a dulling of natural feeling and the conviction that they are not sinners because they have lived long without the grace of God, which is given through the Mysteries of Christ’s Church. Concerning such a man, the zealous servant of Christ from the village of Chepelare—the late Protopresbyter Eustathius Yankov—told me:

“My parishioner Bocho was a drunkard. He quarrelled with the Church and was always in the tavern. For a long time he did not come either to confess or to commune. One evening his sister called me; she was a very devout Christian woman.

‘Come, Father, to confess and commune Bocho. He is not ill, but since I know he will not come to you, come to him!’

I went. I explained to him how good it would be for him to confess. But he only kept silent. I asked what lay on his conscience—did anything trouble him?

‘Nothing. My conscience is at peace,’ he said.

‘How can you have nothing? Are you not a sinful man?’

‘I have done nothing bad.’

‘Do you want to receive Communion?’

‘Why not? I will commune,’ he answered indifferently.

‘Very well. Tomorrow I will come to you with Holy Communion.’

I returned home, but something weighed heavily on my soul—
heavily!

Bocho’s sister prepared him for Communion: she helped him wash, gave him clean clothes to change into.

The next day I brought the Holy Gifts to Bocho’s house. But acquaintances met me and said:

‘Last night Bocho died suddenly!’

I was seized with terror. It seems God did not allow him to approach Holy Communion, because he did not want to confess and humble himself before God—just as he did not want to admit that he was a sinner.”

9) Place the blame on yourself, not on others

When we confess, we must place the blame upon ourselves, not upon others.

In Paradise our forefathers Adam and Eve sinned: they ate from the tree with the forbidden fruit. God, ready to forgive them, called out: “Adam, where are you?” “Eve, what have you done?” Oh, had they confessed their sin virtuously! Had they acknowledged their guilt! Had they not shifted the blame onto one another!

If Adam had said: “God, forgive me! I am guilty!” And if Eve had hastened to confess: “No, Lord—Adam is not guilty, for I gave him the forbidden fruit!”—then they would not have been driven from Paradise.

But what did they do instead? When God questioned them, they began to justify themselves and to shift the blame onto one another:

“Adam, what have you done?”

“Not I, Lord, but the woman—she is guilty!”

“Eve, what have you done?”

“Not I, Lord, but the serpent—he deceived me!”

Both hid their guilt, and therefore they were expelled from Paradise.

Do not many among us act like Adam and Eve? When we go to Confession, the spiritual father asks us, in effect: “Adam, what is your condition?” “Eve, what have you done?” And we justify

ourselves, we conceal our sins, we cast the blame upon others. That is not confession.

True confession is voluntary self-exposure before the confessor: fearless self-accusation, fervent self-reproach, virtuous self-disclosure, deep contrition, unfeigned sorrow for sins, and a true desire—by God’s help—to amend our life.

10) The crown of true repentance

The crown of true repentance is a firm resolve henceforth not to sin.

There are people who confess only so that they may receive Holy Communion. They proceed from the thought that to partake of Communion without Confession is a grave sin against the soul, yet in their heart they do not resolve to begin a new life. They think: I will sin until the next confession, and then I will repent again. Since there is confession, sin is no longer so terrible! Some even hurry to commit the sins they desire but have not yet committed before they confess, so that they can “tell them” at the coming Confession.

All this is vile and base before God! Confession is of no benefit to the one who knowingly walks the paths of sin according to his twisted will and deliberately tramples God’s commandments. Such a man, who forms sinful habits within himself, then wonders in vain why—after he has confessed—he cannot later correct himself. He cannot correct himself because he does not truly want it.

Saint Basil the Great says:

“Not he who says, ‘I have sinned,’ confesses his sin while continuing to remain in sin, but he who, according to the words of the Psalm, has seen his sin and hated it. What benefit will the physician’s care bring to the sick man, if the one suffering from the disease firmly clings to what is destructive to life? Likewise, there is no benefit from the forgiveness of injustices for the one who continues to commit them. And the remission of the sin of licentiousness brings no profit to the one who continues to live licentiously. ... The all-wise Steward of our life, through Repentance, desires that the one who has lived in sin and then has given a promise to begin a new life should put an end to the past and, after committed sins, begin anew—as one renewed for a new life.”

In order for Confession to be truly beneficial, it is necessary that we firmly resolve not to sin any further. True repentance, according to the Holy Fathers, consists precisely in this: not to repeat the sin.

“He who sins deliberately with the hope that he will repent,” says Saint Isaac the Syrian, “acts basely toward God. Death overtakes him unexpectedly, and he does not reach the time he intended to devote to virtue.”

Therefore, if we want genuine benefit from Confession, we must firmly resolve not to sin any further. True repentance, according to the Holy Fathers, consists precisely in this: to stop repeating the sin.

For this to happen in us, at Confession we must desire with all our heart to begin a new life. If we have such a salvific desire, then let us be sure that God will certainly help us.

c) What should we do after we leave the confessor?

After we have confessed properly, we must fulfil what has been said to us and prescribed: prostrations, more frequent prayer, fasting, diligent reading of the Word of God, almsgiving, visiting the sick, caring for the elderly, and so forth. In particular, we should give attention to the following three things:

1) If you are at enmity with someone, forgive from the heart—so that God may forgive you (Matthew 6:14–15). Otherwise your confession will be in vain.

Themistocles and Aristides, prominent Athenian statesmen, were constantly at odds with one another. Yet the state charged them to carry out a task together. How were they to set aside their quarrel? Then Aristides said: “Do you wish, Themistocles, that we leave the quarrel here at the boundary? We shall go, accomplish the task, and if you wish, when we return we can continue quarrelling!”—and so they did. After successfully completing the work, they returned and began to quarrel again.

Does not something similar happen among Christians who are in hostile relations? They confess, they commune from the one Chalice, they “leave” their quarrels at the threshold of the xрам—but once they step outside, they resume the quarrel... And is this confession? In fact, they commit an even greater sin when they confess and commune while refusing to renounce discord with their personal enemies. Therefore, let us put an end to quarrels!

2) Others, who at Confession have admitted that they have violated chastity or family honour, must immediately abandon their evil path. For one cannot love both sin and God!

A philosopher once set out to take a small boat onto the sea. A violent storm arose that threatened to overturn the boat. By some miracle he was saved. He returned home and immediately bricked up the window that faced the sea, so that he would not again be tempted to desire such a voyage.

O Christian, how many times have you nearly lost both life and soul in the sea of shameless love! You were saved by a miracle. Avoid the causes! Do not walk that path anymore! Do not enter that house! Do not look again through that “window”! Close your eyes, lest temptation enter your heart—otherwise you will perish!

3) Finally, if you have taken what belongs to another—if you have stolen from someone—return what is чуждо, otherwise there is no forgiveness for you!

If you blaspheme the Name of God, if you renounce Orthodoxy, if you are angry, proud, envious, or commit other grave sins—once you repent, all will be forgiven. Why? Because with all other sins you offend God, and for those sins which offend God, God has appointed the priest as His authorized minister. If you repent, the priest, as God’s helper, can forgive you the sins committed against God.

But if you possess something that is not yours, and you confess it yet do not return it, the priest will not forgive you. If you hold in your hands the property of a poor man, how can the spiritual father forgive you for that? The poor man has not appointed the

priest as his representative, nor has he given him authority to forgive in his name what you have stolen from him.

“But,” you will say, “I give alms to monasteries and to the needy!” Neither God’s law nor human law permits someone to donate another man’s clothing. Therefore, in order to receive forgiveness from God, return what is not yours.

Thus we have seen the rules of a salvific confession:

Before we go to the spiritual father, we must thoroughly examine our conscience.

When we are with the spiritual father, we must confess sincerely and with contrition, without shame and without self-justification.

After we leave the spiritual father, we must fulfil the prescribed epitimia, cease quarrelling, abandon an unchaste or dishonest life, and return what belongs to others.

According to the words of Saint Basil the Great, the one who does not amend his life through Confession is not truly confessing—he is merely speaking empty words.

CONSEQUENCES OF TRUE CONFESSION

Abba Isaiah promises: “Let us do what is necessary according to our strength, and the great power of our Lord Jesus Christ will help us... He knows that a man has repented, and therefore He grants him repentance throughout the whole time of his earthly life.”

How wondrous are the fruits of true confession! “He who has truly repented receives forgiveness of his sins, is reconciled with God, with the Church, and with his own conscience, and thus regains his former filial boldness toward God as toward his Father, and partakes of all the gifts of His fatherly love and goodness.”

The consequences of true confession are reflected not only in the soul of the repentant, but also in heaven. Great is the joy there over a repentant sinner (Luke 15:10). The angels rejoice, the saints exult, and God Himself delights, because the lost sheep has been found; the drachma of God has been found—that precious coin upon which the royal image of God is stamped.

Through Confession, every sin is healed, and the repentant sinner is granted the countenance of righteousness.

It was reported to a righteous bishop that two women had lived unchastely. He prayed to God to reveal the truth to him, for he desired to help them unto salvation. God heard his prayer.

During a Divine Liturgy, when the faithful began to approach the Holy Gifts to receive Communion, the bishop’s spiritual eyes were opened by the power of divine grace. Through people’s outward faces he began to perceive their spiritual state: some

appeared dark and hideous, others bright and fair. When those two women—who had been accused of immoral conduct—approached the Holy Chalice, the bishop saw that their faces were radiant and that they were clothed in beautiful white garments. After they had received Communion, they shone even more. The bishop marveled at this and prayed that God would resolve his perplexity. Then an angel of the Lord appeared. When the bishop asked whether what had been said against the two women was true, the angel answered that it was.

“But how then,” the bishop asked, “did they appear before the Holy Mysteries with such bright faces, and after receiving them shine even more?”

The angel replied:

“Do you marvel at this? You rightly marvel, for you are a man, while our Master is God—loving mankind and good by nature. Those who renounce their sins and, through Confession, turn back to Him, He not only does not burden with afflictions, but He also ends His wrath toward them and counts them worthy of honor. For God so loved the world that He even delivered up His Only-begotten Son for the world. If the Son of God willed to die for His enemies, will He not all the more grant forgiveness of sins and eternal delight to those who have become His children and who repent of their sins? Know with certainty that no human sin can conquer the love of God for mankind—provided only that a man wash away the evil he formerly did through repentance. God, Who loves mankind, knows the weakness of our race, the power of the passions, and the devil’s cunning. Therefore, when men fall into sin, God is long-suffering and waits for them to repent. And toward those who confess, toward

those who seek His goodness, He shows compassion as toward the weak: He swiftly releases them from their anguish and grants them the good things prepared for the righteous.”

Countless examples assure us that all sinners who confess their sins with sincere and deep repentance receive full forgiveness and salvation from God.

The Venerable Niphont had the grace-filled gift of seeing the spiritual world as simply and clearly as we see physical objects. One day he came to the church to pray. And behold—the heavens were opened above him; the roof of the church vanished, and he saw a path stretching from earth to heaven. Along that path the angels were carrying the soul of a departed man, while behind them the demons followed, shouting furiously:

“Why are you taking that soul from us? Or do you not know that while it lived on earth it committed various sins and submitted itself to fornication, robbery, and love of money? It is guilty of many sins!”

“We know,” answered the angels. “We know that this soul is very sinful, but we also know that it wept much for its sins and confessed before death. Therefore, the merciful Lord forgave it all its sins.”

“But if this soul has received forgiveness from God,” the demons cried, “then take all sinners to yourselves as well! Why, then, do we labor at all?”

“Know this,” replied the angels: “All sinners who confess their sins with a contrite heart will receive forgiveness from God. But

whoever dies without repentance—God will condemn him to eternal torments together with you!”

Concerning the power and fruits of true confession, the renowned Russian spiritual writer, the holy bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, relates the following event from his own time:

“In the environs of Vologda, Russia, there is a large village called Kubenskoye, in which there are several parishes. One of the parish priests fell ill, and as he drew near to his end, he saw his bed surrounded by demons preparing to seize his soul and drag it down to hell. Then three angels appeared. One of them stood by the bed and began to dispute for the soul with the most loathsome of the demons, who held open a book in which all the priest’s sins were written.

At that time a second parish priest arrived to confess and commune his brother. They began the confession. The sick man, as he fixed his gaze upon the book, began to speak his sins as though the words were being drawn out of him of themselves. And what did he see? He saw clearly that as soon as he confessed a particular sin, that sin immediately vanished from the book: what had been written disappeared, leaving an empty space. Thus, through confession he wiped away all his sins from the demonic book, and soon he recovered.

The remainder of his days he spent in deep repentance. For the instruction of his neighbors, he recounted his vision to them—his swift recovery also bearing witness to it.”

Some who read this example will shake their head skeptically and say: “It is beautiful—but it is written only for a book. Why do I not immediately feel, in real life, the renewing power of

confession? I have confessed more than once, yet I see that I am still the same—indeed, I even become worse. Why do I not have such grace-filled events to assure me of the benefit of the Mystery of Repentance?”

To this question the best answer is found in the following patristic account:

“Two monks went to the great elder Abba Zenon. Each of them, privately, confessed his sins. Not long afterward a conversation began between them. One asked:

‘When we were with the elder at confession, did you gain any benefit from it?’

‘Yes,’ replied the other. ‘Through his prayers God healed me.’

‘But I,’ complained the first, ‘although I confessed, felt no relief.’

Then the other asked:

‘How did you confess before the elder?’

The first answered:

‘I said to him: “Abba, pray for me. If only you knew what thoughts trouble me.”’

‘And I,’ said the second, ‘when I confessed my sins, I washed his feet with my tears—and through his prayers God healed me.’”

He who confesses insensibly, coldly, and merely formally receives no benefit from confession. What is needed is humility, contrition of heart, tears, and ardent sorrow that we have been friends of demons and at enmity with God.

When the Prophet David sinned grievously before God, he sought a sacrifice worthy of atonement according to the magnitude of his sin—and he found no better sacrifice than humility, lowliness, and a repentant heart (Psalm 50:17 [51:17]). If we too humble ourselves, abase our hearts, and confess sincerely, it is impossible not to feel the fruits of repentance—of which the sweetest peace of conscience and the burning, renewed love for God are felt most readily, making the heart glow with joy.

QUESTIONS AT THE END

Some ask: to which priest may a person confess?

The answer is: to any Orthodox priest who, through ordination, has received the grace to serve the Holy Mysteries. One may confess to a young priest or an elder. Of course, it is recommended to find an experienced, mature clergyman who—whether by age, experience, or personal spiritual authority—may more beneficially influence the one who confesses. Yet if such a priest cannot be found, we must not, for that reason, deprive ourselves of the spiritual gifts that confession brings. Grace acts with the same power through a young priest as through an older one.

Others ask: when should we confess?

Some answer too hastily: “During Great Lent. That is the time for confession.” But is that truly the right answer? If someone were to fall gravely ill and asked you when to call a doctor, would you say: “Wait for Great Lent”? Of course not—you would call the doctors at once. If you care for the body, all the more you must care for the soul.

It is best never to postpone confession. If today a ray of God’s light has entered the chamber of your soul and shown you how much dust is flying within it and how much refuse lies in its corners—do not delay Confession, for by it you may cleanse your spiritual home. If today a word of God has struck your heart and made you loathe your impurity—wash yourself as soon as possible in the bath of repentance. If today God has knocked at your conscience—hasten to the spiritual father and be

reconciled with your Lord. Do not put it off until tomorrow. Who knows what unexpected thoughts may cover you tomorrow? And will you even have the same repentant disposition tomorrow? God has promised to forgive you if you repent today, but He has nowhere promised that you will live until tomorrow. On the contrary, He tells you that you do not know the day or the hour of your death. Therefore, confess immediately when you feel the need.

There are people who say: “In old age I will repent.” But do they consider how fragile the ground on which they stand is? How many will reach old age? Many leave this life young. And there are many who have been called suddenly and unexpectedly. The Psalmist, beholding human destinies from the heights of heaven, says of men that all descend into the dust and cannot preserve their life. And if you cannot preserve your life—though you cling to it so strongly—then while there is time you must take care, through Confession, to be reconciled with God. For “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31).

Brother, do not agree with the opinions of friends who, wishing to soothe you, say: “Leave confession for when you fall ill. Then the priest will come to confess and commune you.” But answer them: “Many times the priest is called to a sick man only after his tongue has become numb and his mind has grown dark. Then it is very late. Then, even if the sick man wishes to confess, he cannot. And what if that happens to me? What if my tongue is paralyzed? What if senile sclerosis or some other illness clouds my mind, so that I cannot remember and speak my sins? Then no friend will be able to help me. Therefore I will confess now, while I am strong and my memory is clear.”

Such a resolve is salvific. And you—do not postpone confession.

Of course, the Church has also appointed specific periods for repentance and confession: the four fasts throughout the year, during which the Christian is obliged to fast and to prepare to receive Holy Communion. If it is recommended to turn to repentance whenever there is need, it is all the more required before receiving Holy Communion.

What is Communion?

It is the receiving of the Savior Himself, the Lord, into our heart. When we expect an honored guest, we clean the rooms, air them out, set everything in order—and then we joyfully welcome the guest. With how much greater care must we prepare our souls when we are preparing to receive the greatest Guest from heaven—Jesus Christ! He who confesses in order to commune invites the Lord into a quiet, pleasant, and joyful corner of his heart. But he who does not confess before communing invites the heavenly Guest into the foul and unclean room of his soul—thus grieving Him. By this negligence toward the heavenly Guest, he drives Him away from himself. And then, amid cobwebs and refuse, the demons come and settle.

Holy Communion is a two-edged sword: it sanctifies and it burns; it justifies and it condemns; it gives life and it puts to death. Only those who confess beforehand benefit from it. Those who approach unworthily bear great guilt: they eat and drink their own condemnation. Some of them, according to the words of the holy Apostle Paul, fall into various weaknesses and illnesses, and others die suddenly, to depart into eternal torment. And all this happens because they did not first

examine themselves—that is, they did not confess (1 Corinthians 11:27–31).

Is Holy Communion to blame for this?

It is not to blame—our negligence and thoughtlessness are.

Give the most exquisite foods to a sick stomach and the man will become even worse. The foods are not at fault, but the one who uses them before being healed. If someone has a wound and, before cleaning and disinfecting it, applies ointment, the wound will inflame even more. So too, he who has not confessed before Communion sins even more. Confession washes the sinful wound of the soul; Holy Communion places the healing balm upon the wound. The wise Christian, hearing the Church's call, "With fear of God, faith, and love draw near," must not immediately display faith and love toward Christ in Holy Communion before he is filled with the saving fear of God and has made it real in the Holy Mystery of Repentance.

The ultimate aim of confession is that the soul be cleansed, adorned, and made beautiful like a bride, so that she may worthily receive her heavenly Bridegroom, for Whom she was created. The soul that regularly confesses is like a house continually cleaned. Before such a house the conscience stands ever watchful, like a vigilant guard, so as not to allow anything unfit to enter. And if the unclean spirit that once departed from that house, seeing it empty, swept, and put in order (Matthew 12:44), envies the virtuous purity of that renewed soul and seeks to enter again—conscience no longer lets him in. It rejects all that is foreign, base, vile, and sinful—and then Jesus Christ Himself knocks at the door:

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him” (Revelation 3:20).

“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (John 14:23).

The vigilant conscience of the one who continually confesses hears Christ’s knocking, opens the doors, and says:

“Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20).

“My soul longs for You! It has waited for You a long time! Come and dwell in me!”

And the divine Guest enters such a soul and remains to dwell there forever.

“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered” (Psalm 31:1 = Psalm 32:1]). The barrier between him and God has fallen, and he is in full, good, and eternal unity with his Lord.

AMEN!



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