

Saint Sophia Greek Orthodox Church

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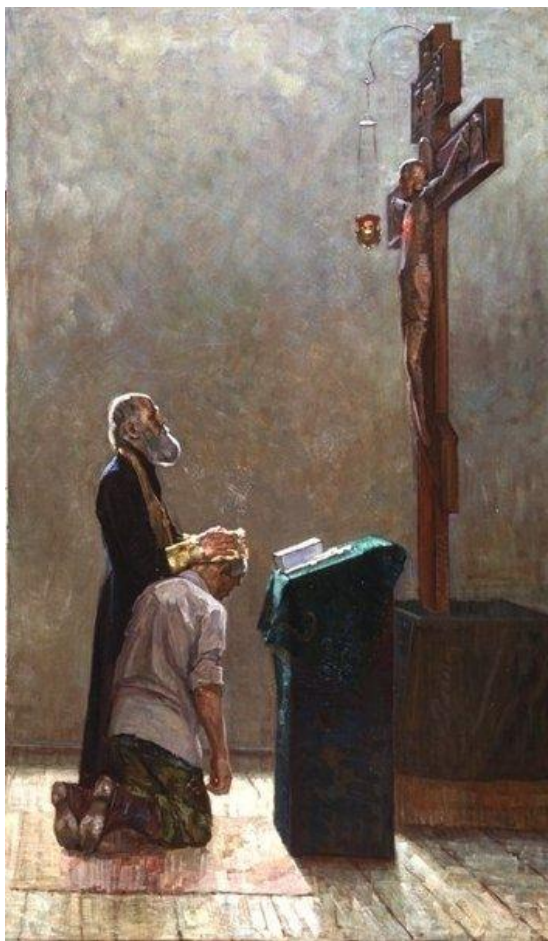
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PREPARING FOR HOLY CONFESSION

He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (*John 20: 22-23*)



WHAT IS THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY CONFESSION?

Perhaps the most misunderstood sacrament of the Christian Church is confession.

How did it originate? What role does a priest play? Is there a special procedure for confession? The Scriptures hold answers to these questions.

Concerning our sins, God's Word gives a marvelous promise. "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 faithful are to bring their sins to God in repentance and receive cleaning and forgiveness.

The early Christian community had a specific practice in this regard. People would stand and confess their sins to God in the presence of the whole congregation! Had not Jesus encouraged His followers to walk in the light together, to confront problems corporately, to "tell it to the church" (Matt. 18:17)? Thus James writes, "Confess your trespasses to one another" (James 5:16). But as time went on and the Church grew in numbers, strangers came to visit and public confession became more difficult. Out of mercy, priests began to witness confessions of sin privately on behalf of the Church.

Jesus gave His disciples the authority to forgive sin. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:23; see also Matt. 16:19). From the beginning, Christians understood that the grace of ordination endowed the shepherd of the flock with the discernment and compassion to speak the words of remission, on behalf of Christ, regarding the sins of those who confess and turn from sin. For God has promised the removing of sin from us "as far as the east is from the west" (Ps. 103:12).

"You did not choose Me," Jesus told the Twelve, "but I chose you and appointed [ordained] you." (John 15:16). To these same disciples Jesus promised, "It is not you who speak but the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11). Whom God calls, He equips. Paul writes to Timothy, "Stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Tim. 1:6). It is the grace of the Holy Spirit which enables the priest to serve God and the people.

Thus the Church has encouraged her faithful: If you know you have committed a specific sin, do not hide it but confess it before coming to the Holy Eucharist. St. Paul wrote, "Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor. 11:28), and "If we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged" (1 Cor. 11:31).

King David learned a lesson regarding his sin which is recorded for our benefit. For about a year, he had hidden his sins of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband (2 Sam. 11:1-12:13). Then, confronted by Nathan the prophet, David repented from his heart and confessed his sin in a psalm which is used for general confession to this day (Ps. 51). The joy of salvation was restored to him.

People ask, "Can't I confess to God privately?" Certainly, though there is no clear biblical basis for it. Even general confession occurs in the Church. In His mercy, God provides the sacrament of confession (more properly called the sacrament of repentance) to give

us deliverance from sin and from what psychologists call denial. It is easy to pray in isolation, yet never come clean. It is far more effective to confess aloud to God before a priest, and benefit from his guidance and help.

Thus we come before the holy icon of Christ, to whom we confess, and are guided by the priest, our spiritual father, in a cleansing inventory of our lives. When we tell God all, naming our sins and failures, we hear those glorious words of freedom which announce Christ's promise of forgiveness of all our sins. We resolve to "go and sin no more" (John 8:11). *(Text reproduce from the Orthodox Study Bible 2008 page 1698)*

PREPARING FOR THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY CONFESSION

The gift of God's forgiveness is received through private prayer, corporate worship, the disciplines of prayer and fasting, penitential services and above all through the sacrament of Holy Confession.



The value of Holy Confession is twofold. First, through this sacramental act of the ordained priest and the Christian believer we have the assurance of divine forgiveness, according to the words of Christ (Jn 20:23). Secondly, Holy Confession provides the opportunity to talk about one's deep concerns, to receive counsel and to be encouraged toward spiritual growth, all of which are universally recognized as extremely beneficial to personal life.

Holy Confession is appropriate whenever an Orthodox Christian feels the need for it. It is also a part of our total spiritual preparation during the fast periods leading up

to the great feasts of Easter, Christmas, the Falling Asleep of the Theotokos and the Feast of Twelve Apostles. However, Holy Confession is especially necessary:

- when a serious sin has been committed;
- when a habitual sin has overwhelmed a Christian, or
- when a Christian has stopped growing spiritually and needs a reexamination of priorities.

We confess our sins to God and the power of forgiveness is God's. However, the gift of God's forgiveness, although assured, is not magical. It does not automatically spare us from spiritual struggle - the continual vigilance against evil and the unceasing warfare against sin. Holy Confession will bear fruits in the Spirit only when the believer hates evil, utterly rejects sin and patiently cultivates positive habits of the life in Christ. "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to Christ Jesus. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as those

who have been brought from death to life" (Rm 6:11, 13)

How can one prepare for Holy Confession? Preparation for Holy Confession is a prayerful examination of feelings, thoughts, words, acts, attitudes, habits, values, priorities, goals, direction and way of life. This prayerful self-examination includes not only the personal religious life, but also family relationships, social activities, job conduct, business dealings, political commitments and even recreational pursuits, because our entire existence should be lived in under the light of the Holy Spirit, not to condemn ourselves, but to affirm our true selves in Christ who has given us access to God's mercy and forgiveness and who has taught us to live for God's glory.

Pray and think and your confession over several days. Ask God to help you perceive your sins and to make a thorough confession of them. Sometime before the sacrament of Holy Confession, offer selected prayers from the following Confessional Prayers, Psalm 51 or the following prayer of repentance:

PRAYER OF REPENTANCE

O Lord my God, I confess that I have sinned against You in thought, word and deed. I have also omitted to do what Your holy law requires of me.

But now with repentance and contrition I turn again to Your love and mercy.

I entreat You to forgive me all my transgression and to cleanse me from all my sins.

Lord, fill my heart with the light of Your truth. Strengthen my will by Your grace. Teach me both to desire and to do only what pleases You. Amen.

Now, without justification or self-pity, make a prayerful examinations of your conscience regarding all things. As a help, reflect on your life in the light of the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes. Take pencil and paper (or on your phone) and specify your sins so that, at the time of the sacrament, you will be able to make a thorough confession from the list, without confusion or lapse of memory. Remember to keep that list in confidence and shred it after confession.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

I. I am the Lord your God, and you shall have no other gods before me.

- Has God been the source, center and hope of my life?
- Have I put myself, others or things before God?
- Have I failed to trust in God's existence, love and mercy?
- Have I failed to pray to God, to worship Him and to thank Him for His blessings?
- Have I tried to serve God and keep His commandments faithfully?
- Have I murmured or complained against God in adversity?
- Have I praised and glorified God through my words and deeds?

II. You shall not make for yourself a graven image in order to worship it.

- Have I valued anyone or anything above God?
- Have I given to anyone or anything the love, honor and worship that belongs to God alone?
- Have I made an idol of any person, idea, occupation, or thing?

III. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

- Have I blasphemed God's holy name in any way?
- Have I sworn a false oath?
- Have I broken any solemn vow or promise?
- Have I entered into an agreement, promise or contract against God's law?
- Have I cursed or used foul language?

IV. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

- Have I worshiped regularly on Sundays and major feast days and have I helped others to do the same?
- Have I worked unnecessarily on Sundays or major feast days or caused others to do so?
- Have I spent the Lord's Day in a wholesome and edifying way?

V. Honor your father and mother

- Have I loved and respected my parents as I should?
- Have I neglected them or failed to help them?
- Have I disobeyed them, deceived them or caused them pain by my words or deeds?
- Have I treated all my family members with patience and love?

VI. Thou shall not kill.

- Have I caused the harm, injury or death of anyone?
- Have I wished my own or anyone's harm or death?
- Have I been cruel to animals or destroyed any life?

unnecessarily?

proportion to my means?

VII. You shall not commit adultery.

- Have I committed any immoral acts alone or with others?
- Have I caused others to commit immoral acts?
- Have I committed immoral acts in my heart?

VIII. You shall not steal.

- Have I taken anything that was not mine from anyone or from anywhere?
- Have I cheated anyone?
- Have I caused others to steal or cheat?
- Have I tried to find the owners of lost things I have found?
- Have I damaged or destroyed anything that belonged to another?
- Have I defrauded anyone of rightful wages?
- Have I paid my debts?
- Have I given to the poor and to philanthropic causes in

IX. You shall not bear false witness.

- Have I given false testimony against anyone?
- Have I spoken evil, told lies or spread rumors about anyone?
- Have I disclosed to anyone the sins and faults of another?
- Have I made careless statements or done anything else to harm the name and reputation of another?
- Have I engaged in idle gossip?

X. You shall not covet.

- Have I looked with envy jealousy or hatred toward the possession talents or achievements of others?
- Have I desired the downfall or loss of others out of evil intent that I might benefit?
- Have I grieved that God has bestowed greater blessings on others than on me?

THE BEATITUDES

I. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

- Have I truly recognized my complete dependence on God?
- Have I been proud arrogant and self-righteous in my ways?
- Have I been selfish, possessive and self-seeking?
- Have I sought after status power and wealth?

II. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

- Have I endured difficulties and afflictions with faith and patience?
- Have I felt sadness for the sufferings of the poor, the hungry, and addicted; the sick, the lonely and the sinful of the world?
- Have I truly been sorrowful for

my sins and faults?

IV. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

- Have I tried to serve or rather to dominate others at home, school, work, office, Church and elsewhere?
- Have I nursed against anyone?
- Have I been resentful, bitter, unforgiving or insulting and abusive to others?
- Have I loved my enemies?

V. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

- Have I truly yearned for God's will to be done in all things?
- Have I worked for justice in my family, society and the world in ways within my reach?
- Have I tried to cultivate a righteous life through prayer, fasting, worship, receiving Holy Communion and deeds of love toward others?

VI. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

- Have I shown compassion and help toward the poor, hungry, lonely and needy around me?
- Have I tried to understand and forgive others?
- Have I been indifferent judgmental or legalistic?

VII. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

- Have I loved goodness, purity and holiness?
- Have I succumbed to evil motives and intentions?
- Have I given way to impure thoughts, words or deeds?
- Have I been guilty of bias and prejudice?
- Have I been hypocritical, pretentious or self-indulgent to sinful passions?

VIII. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

- Do I have God's peace in my heart?
- Have I been unfairly angry, aggressive or impatient?
- Have I worked for peace at home, work, Church and in society?
- Have I been irritable, polemical, or divisive?

IX. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

- Have I complained when persecuted for God's sake?
- Have I prayed for my persecutors?
- Have I failed to defend anyone in the truth for fear of humiliation or persecution?
- Have I had the courage to stand up for what is right despite criticism, ridicule or persecution?

X. Blessed are you when they re-

vile you and persecute you on my account; rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven

- Is the joy of Christ in my heart even in trying moments?
- Have I been pessimistic despondent or despairing?
- Have I truly delighted in the promise of God's treasures in heaven?

PRAYERS TO CHRIST

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, Shepherd and Lamb, You offered Your life on the cross to take away the sins of the world. You granted forgiveness to Peter and to the harlot who turned to You in tears. You forgave the debts of the two debtors and also said, "him who comes to me I will not cast out." Lord, receive me, a sinner, and hear my prayer of repentance (Confess to the Lord your specific sins.) I acknowledge my sins and transgressions, voluntary and involuntary, known and unknown. I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace, to turn away from my sins and to amend my life according to Your teachings. Help me to walk in the way of the righteous and to offer praise to Your glorious name forever. Amen

Sweet, Jesus, my Lord and Master, through Your holy passion You have healed my evil passions, and through Your sacred wounds You have cured my sinful wounds. Grant me, compunction. Purify my body with the fragrance of Your life-giving Body, and casting out the bitterness with which the adversary has fed me. Lift up my earth bound mind to You and take me out of the pit of perdition. I have no sincere repentance, I have no true compunction, I have no consoling tears to lead me as a child of God to my spiritual inheritance. My mind has been darkened through worldly passions. I cannot look up to You in grieving remorse. I cannot warm myself with tears of love for You. But, Lord Jesus Christ, the treasury of blessings, grant me through repentance and a diligent heart to seek You. Grant me Your grace and renew in me the form of Your image. I have forsaken You; but, Lord, do not forsake me. Come out to seek me; lead me to Your pasture; number me among the sheep of Your chosen flock and nourish me with the food of Your sacred mysteries, through the



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