

# Many Confess, But Few Repent

by Monk Moses

## What is repentance and confession?

Confession is a God-given commandment, and it is one of the Sacraments of our Church. Confession is not a formal, habitual ("to be on the safe side", or, "in view of upcoming feast-days"), forced and unprepared act, springing from an isolated duty or obligation and for psychological relief only. Confession should always be combined with repentance. A Holy Mountain Elder used to say: "Many confess, but few repent!" (Elder Aemilianos of Simonopetra Monastery, Mt. Athos)

Repentance is a freely-willed, internally cultivated process of contrition and sorrow for having distanced ourselves from God through sin. True repentance has nothing to do with intolerable pain, excessive sorrow and relentless guilty feelings. That would not be sincere repentance, but a secret egotism, a feeling of our "ego" being trampled on; an anger that is directed at our self, which then wreaks revenge because it is exposing itself and is put to shame—a thing that it cannot tolerate.

Repentance means a change in our thoughts, our mentality; it is an about-face; it is a grafting of morality and an abhorrence of sin.

Repentance also means a love of virtue, benevolence, and a desire, a willingness and a strong disposition to be re-joined to Christ through the Grace of the almighty Holy Spirit.

Repentance begins in the depths of the heart, but it culminates necessarily in the sacrament of divine and sacred Confession.

During confession, one confesses sincerely and humbly before the confessor, as though in the presence of Christ. No scientist, psychologist, psychoanalyst, psychiatrist, sociologist, philosopher or theologian can replace the confessor.

## The father-confessor

No icon—not even the most miracle-working one—can provide what the confessor's stole can: the absolution of sins. The confessor takes the person under his care; he adopts him and ensures he is reborn spiritually, which is why he is called a "spiritual father".

Normally, spiritual paternity is lifelong, sacred and powerful—even more powerful than a family bond. Spiritual birth is a painful process. The confessor must keep track of the confessing soul, with a fear of God (as one who is "accountable to God"), with understanding, humility and love, and guide him with discretion in the ever-upward course of his in-Christ life.

The confessor-priest has been given a special blessing by his bishop for the undertaking of his confessional opus. However, the gift of "binding and un-binding" sins is initially acquired through his ordination as presbyter, when he is rendered a successor to the Apostles. Thus, validity and canonicity in Apostolic succession, through bishops, is of central and great importance. Like all the other holy sacraments of our Church, the sacrament of Confession is performed (and it bestows Grace on the faithful), not in conjunction with the skill, the science, the literacy, the eloquence, the energy and the artfulness of the priest—not even with his virtue and holiness—but through the canonicity (validity) of his priesthood and through the "Master of Ceremonies"—the Holy Spirit.

The possible sins of the priest do not obstruct divine Grace during the Sacraments. Woe betide, if we were to doubt (on account of the unworthiness of the priest) that the bread and the wine actually become the Body and the Blood of Christ during the Divine Liturgy! This of course does not mean that the priest should not have to constantly concern himself with his own "cleanliness".

Thus, there is no such thing as "good" or "bad" confessors. Each and every confessor provides the exact same absolution. However, we do have the right to choose our confessor; and of course we have the right to turn to the one who truly makes us feel at ease with him spiritually. To constantly change our confessor however, is not a very sober decision; this kind of tendency does not reveal spiritual maturity. But confessors should, respectively, not fret excessively—or even create problems—when a spiritual child of theirs happens to depart from them.

This may mean that they were morbidly attached to each other (sentimentally, to the person, and not to Christ, nor to the Church). They may also regard that departure as an insult; one that is demeaning to them and makes them think there is no-one better than them, or, it may give them a feeling that the other "belongs" to them exclusively and they can therefore dominate them and in fact even behave forcibly towards them, as if they were repressed and confined subordinates.

We did mention that the confessor is a spiritual father, and that spiritual fatherhood and spiritual childbirth entails labor.

Thus, it is only natural for the confessor to feel sorrow upon the departure of his spiritual child. However, it is preferable for him to pray for his child's spiritual progress and his union to the Church, even despite his disengagement from him. He must wish for, and not against that child.

The confessor's work is not just the superficial hearing of a person's sins and the reciting of the prayer of absolution afterwards. Nor is it restricted to the hour of confession. Like a good father, the confessor continuously cares for his child; he listens to him and observes him carefully, he counsels him appropriately, he guides him along the lines of the Gospel, he highlights his talents, he does not place unnecessary burdens on him, he imposes canons (penances) with leniency and only when he must, he consoles him when he is disheartened, weighed down, resentful, exhausted, and he heals him accordingly, without ever discouraging him, but constantly pursuing the struggle for the eradication of his passions and the harvesting of virtues; constantly shaping his eternal soul to be Christ-like.

This ever-developing paternal and filial relationship between confessor and spiritual child eventually culminates in a feeling of comfort, trust, respect, sanctity and elation. When confessing, one opens his heart to the confessor and discloses the innermost, basest, and most unclean—in fact, all—of his secrets, his most intimate actions and detrimental desires, even those that he would not want to confess to himself, nor tell his next-of-kin or his closest friend. For this reason, the confessor must have an absolute respect for the unlimited trust that is being shown to him by the person confessing.

This trust most assuredly builds up with time, but also by the fact that the confessor is strictly bound (in fact to the death) by the divine and Sacred Canons of the Church, to the confidentiality that confession entails.

In Orthodox confession there are of course no general instructions, because the spiritual guidance that each unique soul requires is entirely personalized. Each person is unprecedented, with a particular psychosynthesis, a different character, differing potentials and abilities, limitations, tendencies, tolerances, knowledge, needs and dispositions. With the Grace of God and with divine enlightenment, the confessor must discern all these characteristics, in order to decide what

he can utilize best, so that the person confessing will be helped in the best possible manner. At times, leniency will be required, while at other times, austerity.

The same thing does not apply to each and every person. Nor should the confessor ALWAYS be strict, just for the sake of being called strict and respected as such; and he should likewise not ALWAYS be excessively lenient, in order to become the preferred choice and be regarded as a "spiritual father of many". What is required of him is a fear of God, discernment, honesty, humility, deliberation, understanding and prayer.

"Economy" (Oekonomia: to make allowances for something, exceptionally) is not demanded of the person confessing, nor is it proper for the confessor to make it a rule. "Economy" must remain an exception.

"Economy" must also be a temporary measure (Archmandrite George Gregoriates). When the reasons for implementing it no longer exist, it must naturally be retracted. The same sin can be confronted in numerous ways.

A canon (penance) is not always necessary. A canon is not intended as a form of punishment. It is educative by nature. A canon is not imposed for the sake of appeasing an offended God and an atonement of the sinner in the face of Divine Justice; that is an entirely heretic teaching. A canon is usually implemented during an immature confession, with the intent to arouse awareness and a consciousness of the magnitude of one's sin. According to Orthodox teaching, "sin" is not so much the transgression of a law, as it is a lack of love towards God. "Love, and do whatever you want", the blessed Augustine used to say...

A canon is implemented for the purpose of completing one's repentance in view of confession, which is why Fr. Athanasios of Meteora rightly says:

"Just as the confessor is not permitted to make public the sins being confessed to him, so must the person confessing not make public the particular canon that the confessor has imposed in his specific case, as it is the resultant of many parameters."

A confessor acts as the provider of the Grace of the Holy Spirit. During the hour of the Sacrament of Confession, he does not function as a psychologist and scientist. He functions as a priest, as an experienced doctor, as a caring father. When listening to the sins of the person confessing, he prays to God to give him enlightenment, to advise him what the best "medication" for cure will be, and to gauge the degree and the quality of that confession.

The confessor does not place himself opposite a confessing person with curiosity, suspicion, envy, excessive austerity, power and arrogance; but equally not with indifference, thoughtlessly, carelessly and wearily. The humility, love and attention of the confessor will greatly help the person confessing.

The confessor should not ask too many, unnecessary and indiscreet questions.

He must especially interrupt any detailed descriptions of various sins (especially the carnal ones) and even the disclosure of names, to safeguard himself even more. But the person confessing should also not feel afraid, or hesitate and feel embarrassed; he should feel respect, trust, honor and show reverence to the confessor. This climate of sanctity, mutual respect and trust must be mainly nurtured, inspired and developed by the confessor.

### **The benefit of confession**

Our holy mother the Orthodox Church is the Body of the Resurrected Christ; She is a vast infirmary for the healing of frail, sinning faithful from the traumas, the wounds and the illnesses

of sin; from pathogenic demons, and from the venomous demonic traps, and influences of demonically-driven passions.

Our Church is not a branch office of the Ministry of Social Services, nor does She compete with various social welfare organizations. This does not mean that She does not acknowledge their significant and well-meaning work, or that She Herself does not offer such services bounteously, admirably and wondrously. But the Church is mainly a provider of meaning in life, of redemption and salvation of the faithful, "for the sake of whom Christ died," through their participation in the sacraments of the Church.

"The priest's stole is a planing instrument," as Elder Paisios of the Holy Mountain used to say, "that planes and straightens out a person. It is a therapeutic scalpel that excises passions, and not a trowel for workaholics, or a symbol of power. It is a servant's apron intended for ministering to people, for providing therapy and salvation."

God uses the priest for the forgiveness of His creature. It is plainly stated in the absolution blessing: "May God forgive you—through me the sinner—everything, in both the present and future age, and may He render you blameless before His awesome Seat of Judgment. Having no longer any worry for the crimes that have been confessed, may you go forth in peace." Sins that have not been confessed will continue to burden a person, even in the life to come.

### **How to confess**

Confessed sins should not be re-confessed; it would be as though one doesn't believe in the grace of the Sacrament. God is of course aware of them, but it is for the sake of absolution, humbling, and therapy that they need to be outwardly confessed. As for the occasional penance imposed for sins, one must realize that it does not negate the Church's love for the person, but that it is simply an educative imposition, for a better awareness of one's offenses.

According to Saint Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, "confession is a willed, verbal revealing of one's evil deeds and words and thoughts; solemn, accusatory, direct, without shame, decisive, to be executed before a legitimate spiritual father." This God-bearing saint has succinctly, fully and meaningfully clarified that confession must be willed, free, effortless, without the confessor straining to extract the person's confession. It should be solemn; in other words, with an awareness of the sorrow that the sinner caused God with his sin, and not with sentimental, hypocritical, fainthearted tears.

Genuine "solemnity" implies an inner compunction, remorse, hatred of sin, love of virtue, and a feeling of gratitude to the Gift-Giving God. "Accusatory" implies a responsible confession, without attempts of justification, subterfuge, artifice, irresponsibility and seeking of scapegoats; with sincere self-reproach and genuine self-humiliation that bears the so-called "joy producing sorrow" and the "joyous grief" defined by the Church. "Direct" implies a confession with all sincerity, directness and precision, valour and courage, severity and bravery.

It often happens that during the hour of confession, one avoids admitting his defeat, fall and weakness, and by means of eloquent and long-winded descriptions attempts to deflect his share of responsibility, with twists and turns and half-truths—or even by accusing others—all for the sake of preserving (even at that hour) a prim and proper ego. A confession "without shame" implies a portrayal of our true, deplorable self.

Shame is a good thing to have prior to sin and not afterwards, and in the presence of the confessor. It is said that the shame felt during confession will free us from the sin at the Last Judgment, because whatever the confessor absolves will not be judged again. A "direct"

confession implies that it should be clean, specific, sincere, and accompanied by the decision that the faithful will never repeat the sins he has confessed.

Furthermore, confession should be continuous, so that the "willfully recurring" passions (according to Saint John of the Ladder) are not strengthened, but rather are more speedily cured. Thus, old sins will not be entirely blotted out from the memory—there will be a regular self-monitoring, self-observation, self-awareness and self-reproach. Divine Grace will not abandon the penitent; demonic entrapment will be averted much more easily, and remembrance of Death will not seem so horrid and terrible. <...>

### **Modern problems that hinder pure confession**

A basic prerequisite for partaking in the holy Sacraments and for an upward spiritual course is a purity of heart; a purity that is devoid of various sins and the spirit of avarice and blissfulness inspired by today's hyper-consumerist society, the spirit of God-despised pride in a world of narcissism, individualism, lack of humility, misanthropy, and arrogance, the demonic spirit of mischievous thoughts, fantasies, imaginations, and unclean suspicions and envy.

Purity of heart has become a rare ornament—in brotherly and conjugal relations, in obligations towards colleagues, in friendships, in conversations, in thoughts, in desires, in pastoral callings. The so-called Mass Media have lapsed and become mere sources of contamination.

Forgotten are neptic awareness, ascetic sobriety, traditional frugality, simplicity and gallantry. This has led to a polluting of the soul's rationalizing ability, an arousal of its desirous aspect towards avarice, while its willpower has become severely blunted, thus drawing a weakened person towards evil, without any impediments or limitations.

Nowadays prevalent are self-justification, excuses for our passions, beautification of sin, and its reinforcement through modern psychological supports. The admission of mistakes is regarded as belittlement, weakness and generally improper. The constant justification of our self, and the meticulous transferal of responsibilities elsewhere have created a human being that is confused, divided, disturbed, worn-out, miserable and self-absorbed, taunted by the devil, and captured in his dark nets.

There is a prevalence of foolish rationalism nowadays, which observes evangelical virtues and Conciliar canons according to its liking, preference and convenience, on important issues such as fasting, abstinence, childbearing, morality, modesty, honesty and precision.

In view of all the above—none of which I believe has been exaggerated—it is our belief that the job of a confessor is not an easy one. Ordinary coercion to repent and the cultivating of humility are nowadays inadequate; the fold requires catechesis, re-evangelizing, spiritual training, as well as a spiritual about-face, in order to acquire powerful antibodies. Resistance, reaction and the confronting of the powerful current of de-sanctification, of secularization, of denegrating heroism, of eudaemonism (a theory that the highest ethical goal is happiness and personal well-being) and of amassing wealth are imperative. The young generation is in need of special attention, instruction, and love, because their upbringing has not proven to be of any help to make them aware of the meaning and the purpose of life, or of the emptiness, indecency, lawlessness, and the darkness of sin.

Another serious problem—even for our Christians—is the often over-zealous quest for a labor-free, toil-free and grief-free life. We are in search of Cyreneans to carry our crosses. We refuse to lift up our own personal cross. We have no idea of the depth and breadth of our own cross. We bow in reverence before the Cross in church, we cross ourselves, but we do not embrace our

personal cross. In the long run, we would like a non-crucified Christianity. But there cannot be an Easter Sunday without a Good Friday.

We honor martyrs and saints, but we ourselves do not want to suffer any hardships or difficulties. Fasting is too difficult a task to accomplish, we feel resentful during an illness. We cannot tolerate any harsh words, not even when we are to blame; therefore how could we possibly tolerate injustice, slander, persecution and exile, the way our saints did? It is an indisputable fact that the contemporary, secular spirit of convenience, leisure and excessive consumerism has greatly affected the measure of spiritual living. Generally speaking, we demand a non-ascetic Christianity... Orthodoxy however has the ascetic Gospel as its basis.

One other serious problem of our time is man's morbid and undue reliance upon logic, intellect, knowledge, and personal judgment—we are referring to over-fed and ultimately tiring rationalization. Neptic Orthodox theology teaches us to consider our Nous a tool, and to lower it, into the Heart. Our Church does not cultivate and produce intellectuals. To us, rationalization is not a philosophical mentality, but a clearly sin-oriented life view—a form of atheism—since it goes contrary to the commandment of placing our faith, hope, love, and trust in God. A rationalist judges everything using the filter of his own, finite mind, with himself and his sovereign ego as the epicentre, and does not place any trust in divine Providence, divine Grace and divine Assistance in his life.

By often regarding himself as infallible, a rationalist does not allow God to intervene in his life and therefore judge him. Thus, he is convinced that he is not in need of confession. Saint Simeon the New Theologian says, however, that for one to believe he has not fallen into any sins is the greatest of falls and fallacies, and the greatest sin of all. Certain modern-day theologians speak of "missing the target" instead of "sinning" in their desire to blunt the natural protest of one's conscience. The self-sufficiency displayed by certain churchgoers and fasting Christians can sometimes be hiding a latent pharisaic stance, i.e., that "they are not like the others" and therefore are not in need of confession.

### **Pride.**

According to the holy fathers of our Church, the greatest evil is pride; it is the mother of all passions, according to Saint John of the Ladder. It is the mother of many offspring, the first ones being vainglory and self-justification. Pride is a form of denial of God; it is an invention of wicked demons, the result of too much flattery and praise, which in turn results in a person's debilitation and exhaustion, God-despised censure, anger, rage, hypocrisy, a lack of compassion, misanthropy, and blasphemy. Pride is a passion that is formidable, difficult, powerful and hard to cure.

Pride is also strong in many ways, and has many faces. It manifests itself as vainglory, boastfulness, conceit, arrogance, presumptuousness, pompousness, insolence, self-importance, megalomania, ambition, self-love, vanity, avarice, pampering of the flesh, desire for first place, accusations and arguments. It also manifests itself as smugness, favouritism, insolence, disrespect, outspokenness, insensitivity, contradiction, obstinacy, disobedience, sarcasm, stubbornness, disregard, indignity, perfectionism and hypersensitivity. Finally, pride can lead to impenitence.

The tongue often becomes the instrument of pride through unchecked, long-winded, useless talking; gossiping, and silliness; through vain, insincere, indiscreet, two-faced, beguiling, affected, and mocking conversations.

Out of the seven deadly sins many other passions spring forth. Having mentioned the offspring of Pride, we then have Avarice, which gives birth to the love of money, greed, stinginess, lack of

charity, hardheartedness, fraud, usury, injustice, deceitfulness, simony, bribery, gambling. Fornication manifests itself in myriads of ways; for example, envy, with its underhanded and evil spite, insatiable gluttony, anger, as well negligence and lack of care.

### **Elements of family life**

Special attention should also be paid to many un-Orthodox elements in family life, which we believe should be examined carefully by confessors and the persons involved. The avoidance of childbearing, the idolizing of one's children (when parents regard them as an extension of their ego); overprotecting them, or constantly watching their moves and savagely oppressing them.

Marriage is an arena for exercising humility, mutual yielding and mutual respect, and not the parallel journey of two selfish egos, no matter how long they have been together. The devil dances for joy whenever there is no forgiveness for human weaknesses and in everyday mistakes.

Parents will help their children significantly not by excessive courtesy outside the home, but by their peaceful, sober and loving example in the home, on a daily basis. The participation of the children together with the parents in the sacrament of confession will fortify them with divine Grace in an experiential life in Christ.

When parents ask for forgiveness with sincerity, they simultaneously teach their children humility, which destroys all demonic plots. In a household where love, harmony, understanding, humility and peace bloom, there the blessings of God will be bounteous and the home becomes a castle that is impervious to the malice of the world around it. The upbringing of children with the element of forgiveness creates a healthy family hearth, which will inspire them and strengthen them for their own futures.

### **Self-justification**

One other huge matter that constitutes an obstacle for repentance and confession is self-justification, which also plagues many people of the Church. Its basis is, as we mentioned earlier, demonic Pride. A classic example is the Pharisee of the Gospel parable.

The self-justifying person has seemingly positive traits, which he himself will praise excessively, and which he would like others to honor and praise. He is happy to be flattered and to demean and humiliate others. He has excessive self-esteem, he excessively justifies himself, and believes that God is obligated to reward him. In the final analysis he is a poor wretch, who in his miserable state makes others miserable. He is overcome by nervousness and agitation and is overly demanding, thus imprisons himself, for these are tendencies that will not allow him to open the door to divine mercy through repentance.

An offspring of Pride is censure (fault-finding), which is unfortunately also a habit of many Christians, who tend to concern themselves more with others than themselves. This is a phenomenon of our time and of a society that pushes people into a continuous observation of others, and not of ourselves.

Modern man's myriad activities never allow him to remain alone to study, contemplate, pray; to attain self-awareness, self-critique, self-control, and remembrance of death.

The mass media are incessantly preoccupied with scandal-seeking, with human passions, sins, and peoples' crimes.

Such things provoke and leave impressions, and even if they do not tempt, they nevertheless burden the soul and the mind with filth and ugliness. They actually reassure us by making us believe that "we are better" than those described. Thus, a person becomes accustomed to the mediocrity, lukewarmness, and transience of superficial day-to-day life, never comparing himself to saints and heroes. This is how censure prevails in our time—by giving others the impression that he is justly imposing a kind of cleansing by slinging mud at others. Meanwhile he is contaminating himself by generating malice, hatred, hostility, resentment, envy and coldness.

Saint Maximus the Confessor says that the one who constantly scrutinizes others' sins, or condemns his brother based on no more than suspicion, has not even begun to repent, nor has he begun any attempt to discover his own sins.

### **Conclusion**

Many and various things can be said; but in the end, only one thing is significant and important: our salvation, to which we are not attending. Salvation is only attained through sincere repentance and pure confession.

Repentance not only opens the heavenly Paradise, but also the earthly one, with the foretaste—albeit incomplete—of the ineffable joy of the endless heavenly reign, and the reign of wonderful peace in the present time. Those who continually practice confession are potentially truly and genuinely happy people; peace-loving and peace-bearing; heralds of repentance, of resurrection, transformation, freedom, grace, with the blessing of God in their souls and lives. "God's bounteous Grace turns the wolf into a lamb," says Saint John the Chrysostom.

No sin can surpass God's love.

There is not a single sinner who cannot become a saint, if he so desires. This has been proven by innumerable names recorded in the Lives of the Saints.

The confessor listens to confessions and absolves those confessing, under his blessed stole. He cannot, however, confess himself and place the stole over his own head to obtain forgiveness in the same manner. He must necessarily kneel underneath another stole to confess and be absolved.

That is the way the spiritual law functions; this is what God's Wisdom and Mercy have ordained. We cannot confess others while never submitting ourselves to confession; we must practice what we preach. We cannot talk about repentance, but never repent; or talk about confession, but not go to confession ourselves regularly. No one can cast himself down, and no one can absolve himself. The unadvised, the disobedient, and the unconfessed are a serious problem for the Church.

Dear brothers and sisters! The confessor's stole can be a miraculous scalpel for the removal of malignant tumors; it can raise the dead, renew and transform the indecent world, and bring joy to earth and heaven. Our Church has entrusted this grand ministry, this sacred service, to our priests and not to the angels, so that we might be able to approach our confessor easily and fearlessly, as fellow-sufferers and corporeal counterparts.

All the above has been delivered sincerely and not at all pretentiously by a co-sinner who does not aspire to play the teacher, but who is a co-struggling, co-student with you. It was his sole desire to remind you in simple and artless words of the Tradition of our holy mother, the Church, on the ever-relevant matter of divinely-conceived and divinely-blessed Repentance, and the God-given, God-pleasing, blessed Sacrament of Confession.



*From the book Repentance and Confession,  
Monk Moses of the Holy Mountain*