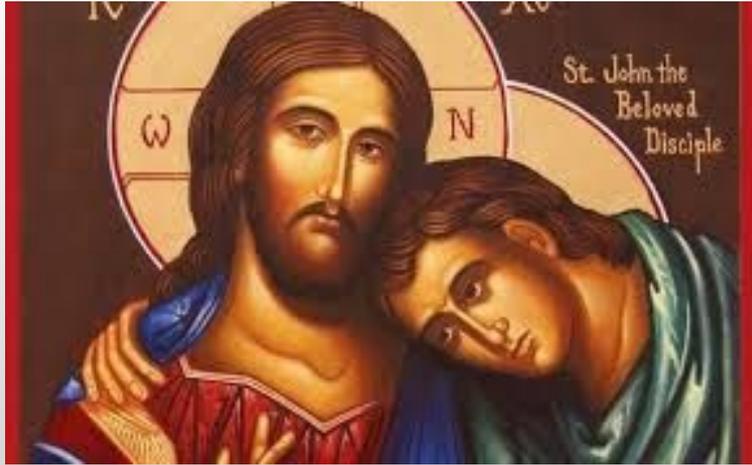


‘Thou Desirest Not the Death of a Sinner’
Mystery of Holy Confession and Repentance



“If you **love Me**, keep my **commandments.**” - **John 14:15**

“This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that **God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.** If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. **If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**”

- **1 John 1:5-10**

Christ calls us to walk in His Light by being joined to Him in Holy Baptism and our lives being conformed to His Image.

If we are honest with ourselves and before God, we all fall short of the “stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). To think otherwise is delusion.

It Is NEVER Too Late.



“God does not judge Christians because they sin, but because they do not repent.”

- **St. Niphon of Constantia**

“If the Lord only cleansed sins in baptism, few indeed would be saved. But in His mercy He has given us a second cleansing, also called a second baptism: the baptism by tears.”

- **Fr. Daniel Sysoev**

The path of repentance is always open to all human beings.

Baptism completely and irrevocably washes away all the sins of our lives and recreates us in Christ. Holy Baptism cannot be repeated, but God in His mercy offers us in some sense a ‘second baptism’ of tears through repentance, by which our baptismal purity is renewed.

Holy Communion with Holy Confession forms the central rhythm of Christian life.



“To repent is not to look downwards at my own shortcomings, but **upwards at God’s love**. It is not to look backwards with self-reproach, but **forward with trustfulness**. It is to see not **what I have failed to be**, but **what by the Grace of Christ I might yet become.**”

- **St. John Chrysostom**

“Every genuine confession humbles the soul. When it takes the form of thanksgiving, it teaches the soul that it has been delivered by the grace of God.”

- **St. Maximos the Confessor**

Repentance (*metanoia / μετάνοια*) means a change of mind, a change of heart, and ultimately a change of the entire person.

Repentance is not to be confused with mere psychological guilt. Christ calls us not to be entrapped by guilt, but to take His hand and walk the path of repentance with hope and love.





“There is more mercy in God than there are sins in us.
Confess your sins at once, whatever they may be.”

- **St. Tikhon of Zadonsk**

“Those, who have realized how dangerous and evil is the life they lead, the devil succeeds in keeping in his power, mainly by the following simple but all-powerful suggestion: ‘Later, later; **tomorrow**, tomorrow.’ **This is the net of the devil**, my brother, with which he catches a great many, and holds the whole world in his hands.

I shall start spiritual life this moment, and not later; **I shall repent now**, instead of tomorrow. **Now, this moment is in my hands, tomorrow and after is in the hands of God.**”

- *Unseen Warfare*

“Today is the day of salvation” (II Cor. 6:2) - not yesterday to despair, and not tomorrow to delay.





“He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. **If you remit the sins of any, they are remitted them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.**’”

- **John 20:22-23**

“[The power of absolution in Holy Confession] penetrates to the soul and reaches up to heaven.”

- **St. John Chrysostom**

Christ mercifully gave to the Holy Apostles the authority on earth to remit sins, to act as His hands in the world.

This authority is conferred through apostolic ordination by the laying on of hands to the bishops and priests in the Orthodox Church. It is the same Christ who ordains through the hands of the bishop, and who absolves by the hand of the priest.

Priests/bishops confess with each other, normally before the Holy Altar (priests traditionally kneel if hearing the confession of a bishop).





“Put aside your shame so that you will not be ashamed at the Dread judgement before everyone. Here, apart from me and the angels, nobody will know anything, and you will not shock your brother the priest by your sin; in a single day we have heard such things that nothing can astonish us any more.”

- **Met. Anthony (Khrapovitsky)**



Confessions cannot be revealed by the priest-confessor. This ‘seal of confession’ requires the priest who receives confessions not to reveal them until his last breath (Canon 27 of St. Nicephoros the Confessor).

There is a strict seal on the part of the confessor, but also an expectation of discretion on the part of the person confessing (the penitent typically should not publish the specifics of his confession/penance).



“Behold, my child, **Christ stands here invisibly and receives your confession.** Wherefore be not ashamed or afraid and conceal nothing from me, but **tell without hesitation all things which you have done,** and so **you shall have pardon from our Lord Jesus Christ.** Lo, His holy image is before us, and I am but a witness, bearing testimony before Him of the things which you have to say. **But if you shall conceal anything you shall have the greater sin.** Take heed, therefore, lest having come to the physician, you depart unhealed.”

- **Service of the Mystery of Holy Confession**

In Holy Confession, one lays open his soul and all the sins he has committed, repenting of them all, without concealing anything. Christ stands invisibly present to receive us.



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- **Service of the Mystery of Holy Confession**

Upon coming forward for Holy Confession, the believer should venerate either the Icon or Cross and Gospel which is before them, and then confess whatever is on their conscience - whatever ways they have sinned against the Lord. The priest may ask some questions for clarification, or offer some words about the spiritual life.



In Holy Confession, every sin is remitted and the person is re-united fully to God's Holy Church.

“O Lord God, the Salvation of thy servants, gracious, bountiful and longsuffering, who repentest thee concerning our evil deeds, and desirest not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from his wickedness and live: show thy mercy upon thy servant, *N.*, and grant unto *him* an image of repentance, forgiveness of sins, and deliverance, pardoning *his* every transgression, whether voluntary or involuntary. Reconcile and unite *him* unto thy Holy Church, through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom also, with thee, are due dominion and majesty, now and ever and unto ages of ages.”

- Service of the Mystery of Holy Confession

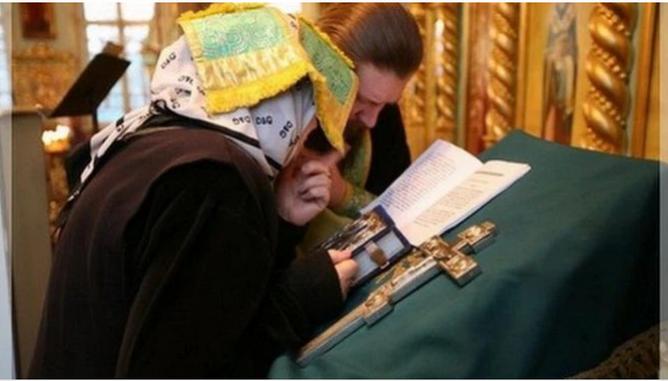
The priest then places his hand on the head of the person confessing over the stole (epitrachelion), reads the prayer of absolution, and makes sign of the cross over the head of the penitent. The person confessing then venerates the Icon or Cross and Gospel, and customarily receives the blessing of the priest.

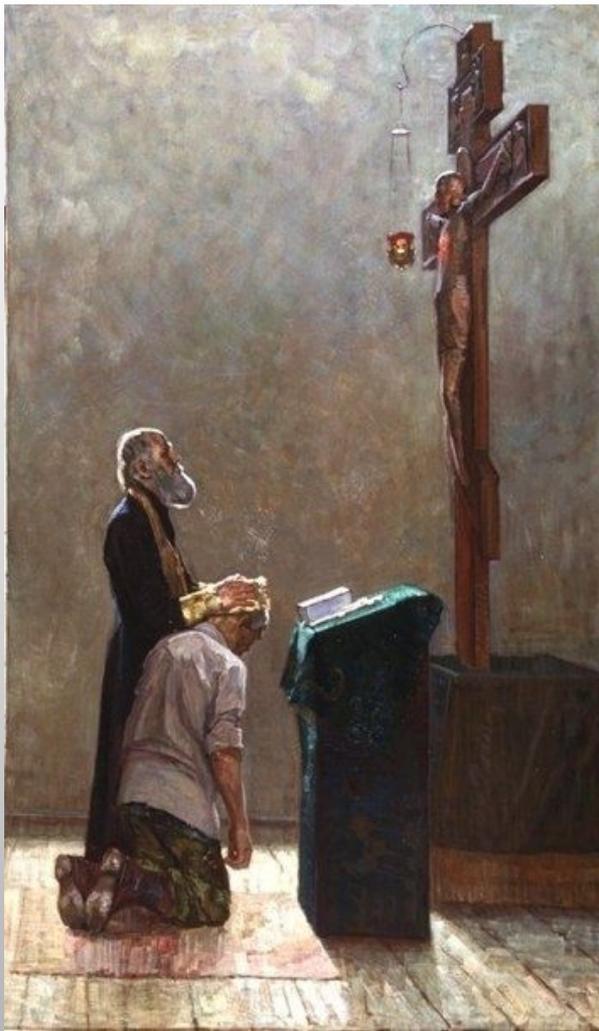
“If a grave sin has been committed, by way of treatment the priest imposes a spiritual medicine, called a penance, upon the sinner, to treat the symptoms of the sinful ailment.”

- Fr. Daniel Sysoev

The priest may, at his discretion, require an *epitimia* (penance). This may perhaps consist of actions to rectify the effects of one’s past sins, prayers, prostrations, abstaining from Holy Communion for a period of time, or any combination of such things (or none of these). This is at the discretion of the priest. The priest may read the prayer of forgiveness at that time, or may ask the person to return after completing the penance to read the prayer.

A penance, if given by the priest, must be performed by the person who has confessed. If one has any issue in performing the penance, he should inform the priest and/or in some cases seek counsel from a trusted father in Christ - however, under no circumstances should he simply disregard it.





“Brethren, obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

- Hebrews 13:17-18

In Holy Confession, one should not have a disposition of ‘sitting in judgment’ upon the advice of his confessor. Rather, one should have an open heart to receive the words, advice, and any direction or *epitimia* given to him.

By openness to receive the word given to him, one will receive in his heart an answer from God, and God will give life to his efforts to follow the word from his confessor.

Likewise, one should not seek out the advice of many different priests on a particular issue in an effort only to receive the answer he wants to hear.



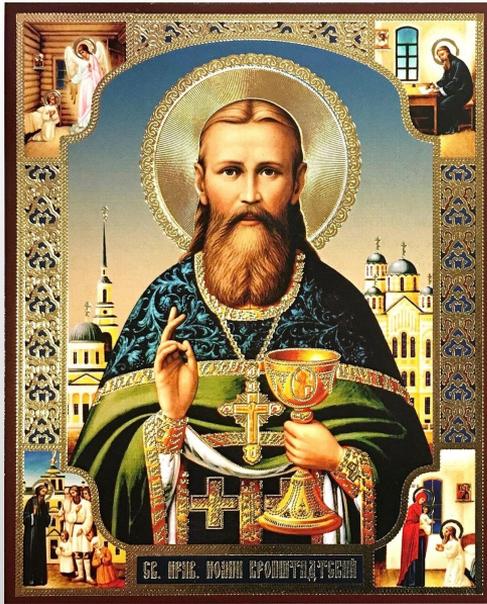
“The Grace Divine, which always healeth that which is infirm and completeth that which is wanting, elevateth, through the laying on of hands (*Name*), the most devout Deacon, to be a Priest. Wherefore, let us pray for him, that the grace of the All-Holy Spirit may come upon him.”

- **Service of Ordination of a Priest**

In the Russian tradition, all priests generally hear confessions. In the Greek/Antiochian tradition, priests are specifically endowed with the office of confessor/spiritual father (*pnevmatikos*). This is marked by the wearing of the *epigonation* (triangular-like vestment symbolizing the Sword of the Spirit). This may be bestowed at ordination, or possibly at some later time, at the discretion of the bishop.



The forgiveness of God through Holy Confession is not dependent upon the individual holiness of the priest.



“The longer we remain without confessing, the worse it is for us, the more entangled we become in the bonds of sin, and therefore the more difficult it is to give an account.”

- **St. John of Kronstadt**

Holy Confession is a prerequisite for Holy Communion. In many or most parts of the Orthodox world, confession may be required each time one receives Holy Communion.

In the Greek/Antiochian tradition, confession may be made according to conscience, but should be made regularly (approx. age 8+) if one is receiving Holy Communion.

For those who receive Holy Communion regularly, confession may be made weekly, monthly, or generally at least during the four major fasting periods of the year (Lent, Apostles, Dormition, and Nativity). All Orthodox should confess before Holy Pascha.

If a serious sin has been committed, one should confess before receiving Holy Communion.





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Children should form the blessed habit of Holy Confession from an early age, which will confirm them in the Holy Orthodox Faith throughout life.



Teens and young adults need guidance that comes with Holy Confession, but they will be less likely to confess if the habit has not been established at a young age. They should not wait until they face a major crisis in their lives or are faced with a serious sin or temptation before coming to Holy Confession. They must learn to confess *before* they face serious trials and difficulties.

If you want your children to remain in the Church, gently bring them to Holy Confession from an early age, and show them the importance through your own example of regular confession. No youth programs, seminars, conferences, etc. compare in value with regular confession.

Lack of regular participation in Holy Confession by children and youth is an inestimable tragedy.



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Many Orthodox have a ‘spiritual father’ - that is, a particular priest whom they seek out for Holy Communion and spiritual counsel.



The parish priest-confessor is the primary spiritual father for his church congregation. In the event that one has a ‘spiritual father’ who is not the same as his parish priest and who resides far away/with whom he cannot confess with sufficient frequency, he should discuss this with his parish priest and still confess regularly with one of the priests at the parish where he receives Holy Communion.

It is the prerogative of the priest distributing Holy Communion to receive the confessions of the persons whom he is communing and/or to determine that they have confessed recently.

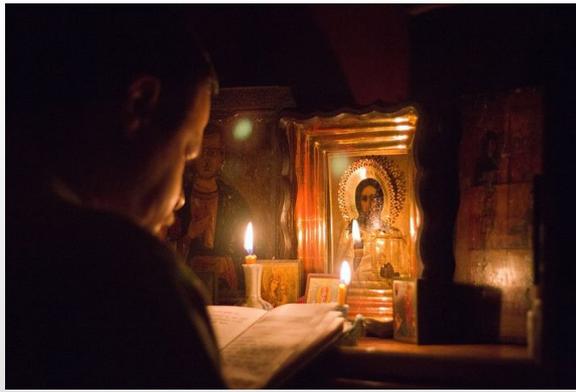
“Cleanse thou me from all stain of body and soul and teach me to fulfill holiness in thy fear, that with the witness of my conscience pure, I may receive a portion of thy Holy Gifts”

- Prayers of Preparation for Holy Communion

Before receiving Holy Communion, one should partake of Holy Confession (or have confessed recently), forgive those who have wronged him, pray the Prayers of Preparation (*metalepsis*), and fast/abstain at least from the middle of the night (exception for those requiring medication / infants or young children / those with health issues).

In the Antiochian tradition, one should pray at least the Prayers of Preparation for Holy Communion (approx. 15 min.). Traditionally, the Canon of Preparation for Holy Communion is also prayed with Compline the night prior (approx. 20-30 min).

In the Russian tradition, three canons (to the Savior, Theotokos, and Guardian Angel) are prayed in addition to the Canon and Prayers of Preparation for Holy Communion, as well as often the Canon of Repentance and the Akathist to Jesus Christ (1.5 - 2+ hours).





“And having obtained the good Communion of the life-creating and mystic Gifts, straightway give praise and great thanksgiving, and fervently, from thy soul, cry unto God, ‘Glory to Thee, O God, Glory to Thee, O God, Glory to Thee, O God.’”

- **Service of Thanksgiving for Holy Communion**

“[Holy Communion is] the medicine of immortality, the antidote we take in order not to die but to live forever in Jesus Christ.”

- **St. Ignatius of Antioch**

Upon receiving Holy Communion of the Life-Giving Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, one should give heartfelt thanks to God and pray the Prayers of Thanksgiving.

Questions / Discussion