

How to Confess

“Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Matthew 4:17

“And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds.” Acts 19:18

Everyone knows the importance of confession and why we need it, yet many struggle with questions of how Confession is supposed to work. Am I doing it the right way? How often should I confess? And what am I supposed to do in Confession?

The goal of this document is to answer some of the basic questions about Confession. The goal is not to convince you that you need to confess, but rather to show you how Confession is supposed to work. Our lack of desire to confess often stems from a lack of understanding of what confession truly is and how it is supposed to work.

What Confession Is NOT: Counseling vs Confession

One of the key points in understanding confession is making a distinction between *confession* and *counseling*. Often we confuse the two. We think of confession as some type of counseling session. Therefore, because we don't have major issues in need of counseling, we presume that we don't need to confess. That is incorrect.

Counseling is an important component in the development of one's spiritual life. It may be needed on and off at various times throughout one's life – especially during times of transition or tribulation. **However, counseling is NOT the same as confession.** Counseling is important for many; confession is NECESSARY FOR ALL.

“He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.” Proverbs 28:13

What Confession Is: A True Mystery

Confession is a sacrament of the Church. The term sacrament comes from the Greek word “*mysterion*” which literally means ‘*mystery*’. I prefer to use the term ‘*mystery*’ as opposed to ‘*sacrament*’ as it gives a greater emphasis on what is taking place. Every Mystery of the Church is called such because something is taking place which goes beyond what the eye can see. On the surface, the eye sees one thing – but in reality, something much greater is taking place.

For example, in the Mystery of the Eucharist, the eye sees bread and wine; but the reality is the Divine Body and the Precious Blood of Christ. In the Mystery of Baptism, the eye sees a human going into a pool of water; but the reality is that a new man is being born in Christ, given a new nature. In the Mystery of Matrimony, the eye sees two people dressed nicely and smiling for the camera; but the reality is that those two people have become one flesh.

In the same way, the Mystery of Confession is more than meets the eye. The eye sees a man sitting with a priest, struggling to reveal his sins. But the reality is that the man is not sitting before a priest, but really before the throne of the Most High God. And he is not just telling his sins, he is washing his soul. And he is not listening to advice from a mere man, but rather from the Immortal Spirit of God.

His Grace Bishop Benyameen once spoke about the Mystery of Confession. He said that the Mystery of Confession “is where the Holy Spirit takes the action of our Lord Jesus Christ on the

cross and applies it to the sin of the individual" – just as the Lord Jesus spoke about the coming of the Holy Spirit and said "He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you." [John 16:14].

In other words, it is in Confession that the saving action of the Lord on the Cross becomes personal – for me...for my specific sins...for my personal salvation.

Preparing Ourselves for the Kingdom

Before the Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, St. John the Forerunner was sent to prepare the path for Him. And his message was simple "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" [Matthew 3:2]. Our Lord echoed the same message as He travelled all throughout the villages of Galilee [see Matthew 4]. Why? **Because repentance is the primary means by which we prepare for the coming of the Kingdom.**

Every sin must be judged by God. None can be overlooked. It is your choice whether to judge that sin here and allow God to cleanse it, or to wait till after death and allow that sin to be judged before the Throne of God. Your choice.

Confession prepares us for the coming of the Kingdom.

HOW TO CONFESS

Before the Confession

The most important part of the Confession takes place well before you ever arrive at Church. The Mystery of Confession is only as strong as the preparation you do in advance. We prepare for Confession by having **regular time of self examination and repentance.**

We usually think of repentance as a part of the Confession process. However, the opposite is true. Repentance is not part of Confession; Confession is part of repentance. Confession needs to take place regularly – every 3 months is a good starting point. However, repentance needs to take place daily. The goal is that repentance is not an activity, but rather a lifestyle.

This happens by making time for regular self-examination – a process by which you sit with yourself regularly and examine where you have fallen short of God's standards and where you need to repent – see Luke 15:17-19 for an example of what self examination looks like. Your Confession will only be as strong as your investment in self-examination.

Going to Confession

Once we get in the habit of regular self examination, it becomes much easier to prepare for Confession. Try to get in the habit of confessing at least 4 times per year (every 3 months). We have tried to make this easier by being available for confession **EVERY SATURDAY EVENING AFTER VESPERS.**

During that time, you can just walk in and go straight to Confession. No appointment needed. We want to treat the Mystery of Confession just as we treat the Mystery of the Eucharist – as a necessary part of our spiritual life that can be obtained at regular times.

This is not a time for counseling. Counseling needs to be done via appointment at a separate time. This is just for Confession. Again, it is a Mystery [sacrament] like the Eucharist. We want to treat it that way and not allow ourselves to get distracted or interrupted with outside things. Those things need to be done outside of this time.

Choose a Father of Confession

The Orthodox concept of Confession has always stressed the importance of a father of confession. Confession is not just an impersonal listing of sins; it is part of a relationship of discipleship. It doesn't matter who your father of confession is, but you need to choose one and stick with him – even when he doesn't tell you what you want to hear. You can have several spiritual fathers; but only one father of confession, as St. Paul said, *"For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers"* (1 Corinthians 4:15).

Everyone must pray for their father of confession daily. This is a must. If you want him to be God's mouthpiece in your life, then you must pray that God guides him and gives him the spirit of wisdom and prophecy as He did to the Old Testament prophets. In addition, praying for your father of confession will help to establish the spiritual bond of love and fatherhood needed for this relationship to be fruitful.

What Do I Do in Confession

As mentioned above, the goal of Confession is not to meet a priest, but rather to meet the true High Priest, our Lord Jesus Christ. So therefore, it is essential that we have alone time with God both before and after sitting with our father of confession.

How? Do the following:

Step 1: Arrive early

Plan to arrive to church 15 minutes BEFORE you plan to meet your father of confession. That will give you adequate time to prepare.

Step 2: Spend 10 minutes alone with God before going to father of confession

You should never spend more time talking with the priest than you do with God – the goal is to meet Him right? Use this time to confirm your repentance and preparing to meet the Lord in Confession. In addition, this gives you a chance to review your list of sins for Confession. Some good prayers to pray during this time: Psalm 51 [50], Psalm 32, Psalm 130.

Step 3: Confess your sins to father of confession

This step shouldn't take more than 5 minutes [7 minutes at most]. If it takes more time than that, then you need to schedule an appointment for counseling. Confession shouldn't be telling stories. The story isn't important – the sin is. Focus less on the details of the story and more on the sin at the root. Your father of confession will tell you when he needs the details.

Step 4: Listen and Record

After telling all your sins, your father of confession will advise you in some way. Consider bringing a notepad to write down what he says. Remember, it is not him speaking; he is just the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit. Also, please remember that Confession assumes 100% confidentiality – that means both the priest **AND YOU** are bound to keep private what is discussed during Confession.

Step 5: Stand up and receive absolution

The priest will then instruct you to stand up and bow your head. He will then place his hands on your head and pray the absolution over you. In the same way that the priest's hands are used to perform the Mystery of the Eucharist, his hands are also used to administer the Mystery of Confession as well. It is not his hands, but rather God working through his hands to absolve your

sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. You should approach this moment as you would the table of communion – with awe and reverence for being able to partake of this great mystery of forgiveness.

Step 6: Thanksgiving to God

After receiving this great mystery, you need to go spend at least a few minutes alone with God once again, thanking Him for His indescribable gift. Be fully assured that your sins are forgiven and that you have been released from the bondage of sin. You have conquered sin by bringing it to the feet of the Crucified One. Some recommended prayers: Thanksgiving prayer, Psalm 85, Psalm 126, Psalm 103.

After Confession

A wise man once said “we don’t have to work hard to obtain spiritual blessings; we have to work hard to maintain them.”

You didn’t do anything to gain forgiveness. You didn’t fix your sin; you just confessed it. But by God’s grace, He gave you forgiveness and cleansing. Now it is your job to come up with a plan that will protect that newfound grace and preserve that cleanliness on the inside.

After you have confessed, it is imperative that you come up with a plan for how your life is going to be different now. The goal wasn’t just to confess; the goal was to repent and change. Confession was just a part of that. In order for there to be a true change however, you need to spend some time figuring out a new strategy to deal with the temptations of life. Life can’t be the same after true repentance. Something has to change. The results may not change [you will still fall into sin], but at least the method of fighting needs to change.

Spend some time figuring out how I am going to implement the changes that my father of confession told me about. Come up with an action plan and set aside the time needed to do it in my schedule. By the end of this time, you need to have a practical plan for how my life will reflect this repentance.

“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 1:8-9