

Preparation for Confession – An Orthodox Guide



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What is confession?

According to the website of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese Holy Confession has a twofold purpose:

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).

This we have from Scripture when St John tells us; *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."* 1 John 1:9

The authority for the absolution of sin are given by our Lord when He says; *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven"* (Matthew 16:19).

The keys of binding and loosing sins were given not only to one apostle but to all Christ's disciples, and—in a sacramental sense—to any priest who has his bishop's blessing to hear confessions.

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.

Why should I confess?

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 the Church. Unfortunately, many Orthodox who have grown up in Protestant America have a negative perception of the sacrament of Holy Confession. In general, this perception centers around five objections each of which should be examined.

Objection #1 – Only God can forgive sin.

The Catholic and Orthodox Church teach that a priest can forgive sin, but a priest is only a man. Isn't it true that only God can forgive sin?

Reply to Objection #1:

This is true and is acknowledged in the following two prayers said by the priest's to the penitent during the sacrament of confession:

Before Confession *My spiritual child, inasmuch as you have come to me and to God, be not ashamed, for you speak not to me but to God, before whom you stand.*

After Confession *My spiritual child, who has confessed to my humble person, **I humble, and a sinner, have no power on earth to forgive sins, but God alone;** through that divinely spoken word which came to the Apostles after the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ saying, "Whosoever sins you remit, they are remitted, and whosoever sins you retain, they are retained," we are emboldened to say whatsoever you have said to my humble person...**may God forgive you** in this world, and the world to come.*

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*May God Who pardoned David through Nathan the Prophet when he confessed his sins, Who pardoned Peter who wept bitterly for his denial, the Harlot who wept at His feet, the Publican and the Prodigal, **forgive you all things, through me a sinner**, both in this world and in the world to come, and set you uncondemned before His terrible Judgment Seat.*

The idea of confession and forgiveness been given only by God is emphasized as these prayers as read while the penitent is facing the icon of Christ. Note also that these prayers also indicate the Orthodox concept of a spiritual father who is responsible for the spiritual welfare of his parishioners.

Objection #2 – The bible does not teach that a man can forgive sin.

Reply to Objection #2:

The priest prayer from the previous paragraph provides the Biblical source of priests being able to forgive sins as these are the words directly from the Gospel of John (20:22). After His resurrection Jesus Christ came to the disciples in the upper room and after breathing on them saying “Receive the Holy Spirit,” He told them “*Whosoever sins you remit, they are remitted, and whosoever sins you retain, they are retained.*” *This authority, in the Orthodox faith, is passed down to each canonical priest through direct succession (or laying on of hands) traceable from the original Apostles.*

Objection #3 – But I don’t need a priest, I can go directly to God and ask forgiveness.

I have a personal relationship with the Lord and thus I can go to him in prayer, asking him to forgive my sins. Why would I need a priest to get in the way?

Reply to Objection #3:

The Orthodox Church would absolutely agree that anyone can go directly to God and pray for forgiveness. Indeed, we should do when we are aware of having sinned. Our Church teaches and the Bible supports that God desires people to confess to Him *through* his priests. Confession, together with the Presanctified Liturgies, is part of our total spiritual preparation during the fast periods preparing us for the great feasts of the Church.

However Holy Confession to another person who is dedicated to the salvation of those placed in his care, that is the parish priest, is necessary in three particular cases.

1. *when a serious sin has been committed*
2. *when a habitual sin has overwhelmed a Christian*
3. *when a Christian has stopped growing spiritually due to other priorities.*

In case number 1), the problem is not asking for forgiveness, it is more about the person’s ability to discern what is and isn’t serious sin (this will be defined later), so Confession is there to help a person make this crucial discernment.

In the case of item 2) the person engaged in that habitual behavior is often blind to the sin. Examples are addictions such as alcohol, video gaming, drugs, or pornography and in these cases it is very difficult for the person to admit that they have a problem and outside intervention is necessary to help them recognize and acknowledge the adverse effects and consequences of their actions on both themselves and others who love them.

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In the case of number 3) these include people who have become disillusioned with the Church, angry at certain people in the church, or those whose work or family situations have taken them away from the life of the Church. In these cases, as with case 2) an intervention is vitally important. The Church, of whom the priest is the face, is there to reach out and help identify the cause of these issues and work to resolve those issues, where possible. Sometimes this will require the priest to suggest another church or congregation better suited to the needs of the individual.

The sacrament of Holy Confession is not only about forgiveness of sins but for the physical and spiritual improvement of the individual. And this requires someone to intervene and help them to recognize and acknowledge their sins, weaknesses or the lack of spiritual growth. Some Protestant Churches are somewhat returning to the idea of Confession by using the term “accountability partner.”

Objection #4 – If you are saved, nothing more is required.

When a person is saved, he cannot lose his salvation so what purpose does confessing to a priest serve?

Reply to Objection #4:

This reveals a misunderstanding of how we are saved. First, the sacraments are not works (in the Protestant sense), but channels of Grace through which God works. While God will never withdraw Himself from us, we can withdraw from God. Our free will gives us the ability to choose to draw nearer to our Lord or to move further away. That move away from Him jeopardizes our salvation. St John Chrysostom reminds us of this when he says:

“I am saved, I am being saved, I will be saved.”

In this statement St John shows us that salvation is a constant endeavor and that we should never take our salvation for granted. All Protestants will agree that we continue to sin daily, often without realizing we are doing it. Through sin we reject this freely offered gift of salvation from God, however we can once again receive this gift through the sacrament of confession. Confession is the vehicle by which we are reminded of this on a regular basis and without this reminder we are lulled into a false sense of salvation security.

This modern notion of “once save, always saved” is not only not found in scripture, St Paul warns against believing this.

“Now I am reminding you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you indeed received and in which you also stand. Through it you are also being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:1-2)

*“Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall. No temptation has come to except what is common to Mankind. God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with the trial he will also provide **a way out**, so that you may be able to bear it.” (1 Corinthians 10:12-13)*

This **way out** for us as Orthodox Christians includes Holy Confession.

Objection #5 – Confession is nothing more than a permission slip to keep on sinning. People keep on sinning after going to Confession, so it doesn’t work.

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Reply to Objection #5:

This statement again reflects a lack of understanding of the full purpose of the sacrament of confession. As was stated earlier, the sacrament of Holy Confession is not only about forgiveness of sins but for the physical and spiritual improvement of the individual. And this requires someone to intervene and help them to recognize and acknowledge their sins.

For those people that use confession as a “get out of jail free” card it is even most vital for someone to show to that person that they have a habitual problem which must be recognized and acknowledged so that this person may begin again their journey of spiritual growth towards salvation.

Holy Confession as a Healing Sacrament

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann provided a wonderful summary of the three key relationships that Holy Confession is meant to heal:

1. Relationship to God: Questions on faith itself, possible doubts or deviations, inattention to prayer, neglect of liturgical life, fasting, etc.
2. Relationship to one’s neighbor: Basic attitudes of selfishness and self-centeredness, indifference to others, lack of attention, interest, love. All acts of actual offense—envy, gossip, cruelty, etc.—must be mentioned and, if needed, their sinfulness shown to the penitent.
3. Relationship to one’s self: Sins of the flesh with, as their counterpart, the Christian vision of purity and wholesomeness, respect for the body as an icon of Christ, etc. Abuse of one’s life and resources; absence of any real effort to deepen life; abuse of alcohol or other drugs; cheap idea of “fun,” a life centered on amusement, irresponsibility, neglect of family relations, etc.

So How often should I go for confession?

Although the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese does not mandate a specific schedule for Confession as do some other Orthodox Churches, it is certainly very helpful in preparing during the fast periods leading up to the great feasts of Pascha, Christmas, the Assumption of the Theotokos and the Feast of the Apostles. Also, anytime you encounter the aforementioned situations; *when a serious sin has been committed, when you are overwhelmed by a habitual sin, or when you feel you have stopped growing spiritually.*

How should I confess?

When you come to confession, you should confess your sins sincerely, remembering that you are not confessing them to the priest, but to God Himself, Who already knows, but wants you to admit your wrongs and your guilt. You should not feel embarrassed before your spiritual father, because, he, first of all, knows human weaknesses and the inclination that all people have towards sin, and thus he cannot judge you harshly when you come to confession.

While you should confess what is weighing most heavily on your conscience you should not add anything extra, or blame yourself for what you have not done by simply saying, “Everything I have done is sinful,” or some such catch-phrase. With regards to details, only give the amount of detail necessary to allow your spiritual father the background he needs

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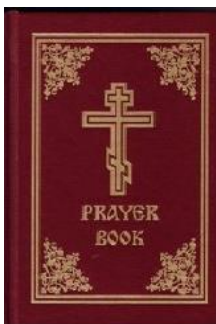
in order to give you good and relevant advice. In this way the priest can better help you understand the negative consequences of something you have done, whether you intended that outcome or not.

Confess your sins fully but don't make a story of them! That in itself can be an evidence of pride. If your spiritual father feels that you need to confess any particular sin in fuller detail, he will ask you about it. However, if you feel that it will help you can add the details regarding special circumstances, such as some particular temptation or outside pressure, which it would be useful for your spiritual father to know, so that he can advise you how to deal with it.

Do not mention sins that you have not committed, nor good deeds that you have done. If you are asked whether you have committed some sin and have not, simply say "No."

Do not mention the sins of others in your confession, unless this is necessary for your spiritual father to understand how and why you yourself have sinned. If you have a personal problem involving other people, which you would like to discuss with your spiritual father, or if you are in need of advice or some consolation for some unkindness that has been done to you, your spiritual father can offer help or just be there to talk.

Also, do not excuse your sin by saying *that many people commit some sin that you have committed*. Remember, you have come to confess your own sins, not those of others. Pay no heed to the sins of others. Oftentimes we imagine the motives and intentions and sinful inclinations of others, but in reality no-one knows the heart of someone else.



Before going to confession make a thorough preparation, and examine yourself. The next section offers some possible questions you can ask yourself and discuss with your parents. If you wish you can write out a list. The best place to start is the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, or any of the prayers of repentance available in most any Orthodox Prayer Book. Be very sensitive to include those sins which have become habitual, as these sins become so much a part of our life. Examples of this include sins like gossip, lying, vanity, disobedience and laziness. Also be cautious about committing sin by a careless word or action which has upset someone and perhaps caused them to sin.

You must be truly sorry for the sins you have committed. Unless you really regret having done them, and intend to try to avoid them in the future, you lack true repentance, without which your sins are not forgiven.

It is also necessary to confess with faith in Jesus Christ and to trust in His mercy. Only if we believe and trust in Jesus Christ can we receive remission of our sins. Judas Iscariot, for example, repented of his sin, not before one man, but before all, and he returned the pieces of silver. But instead of believing in Jesus Christ and trusting in His mercy, he fell into despair and seeking no remission, he ended his life in a terrible and lonely death. Contrast this with the confession and the tears of repentance of St Peter who after denying our Lord

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three times went back to our Lord confessing with tears of repentance and who was then given the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

If after your confession you are hoping to receive a blessing and partake of the Holy Communion, it is best to come for the confession a few days before the Sunday Divine Liturgy.

Here are some aids in preparing for confession. This comes from no single source but is drawn from a number of places.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

1. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.
2. Thou shalt not make any graven image, or bow down before any creation in heaven or on earth.
3. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
5. Honor thy father and thy mother.
6. Thou shalt not commit murder.
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
8. Thou shalt not steal.
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's possessions.



COMMANDMENTS OF THE CHURCH

1. To attend Divine Liturgy on Sundays and Holy Days.
2. To fast and pray on the days appointed by the Church.
3. To confess our sins and to receive Holy Communion at least three times a year.
4. To pray to God every day, especially at morning and evening.

SEVEN DEADLY SINS

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------|
| 1. Pride | 4. Anger |
| 2. Covetousness | 5. Gluttony |
| 3. Lust | 6. Envy |
| | 7. Sloth |

ACCESSORIES TO SIN - Counseling, consenting, or provoking another to sin. Defending that which is wrong or being silent when a wrong is committed upon another.

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QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF AS YOU PREPARE FOR CONFESSION

- Have you complained about having to work or attend services or say prayers?
- Have you taken time each day to praise and thank God for your blessings?
- Have you given up hope or not having faith in God that He can and will change you?
- Have you been fully prepared to go to Church to worship?
- Have you conversed during the services about things not having to do with the service?
- Do you try to pay attention during the services?
- When in Church, are you attentive and keep idle talk to a minimum?
- Have you prayed to God upon rising and before eating and sleeping?
- During prayer do you try to focus and avoid being distracted by other thoughts?
- Did you make the sign of the Cross carelessly?
- Have you been ashamed to make the sign of the Cross in front of others?
- Have you failed to remember that God's is the source of all of our success?
- Do you show your parents proper respect? Have you been rude to them, talked back or otherwise offended them?
- If your parents are reposed, have you prayed for them?
- Have you been disrespectful to members of the clergy, your parents, elders, teachers or superiors?
- Have you asked forgiveness of those you may have offended?
- Have you donated to the needs of the Church?
- Are you properly attired when you come to church?

Idle speech

- Have you spoken without thinking? or spoken too much? or spoken anything that is impure? or shameless? or without need or order? or unreasonable? or unclean?
- Have you thought or said angry words or foul words?
- Have you participated with or sung worldly shameless songs in word or thought?
- Have you used the name of the Lord in swearing or in a joking way?
- Have you sworn or murmured against God?
- Have used the name of God without reverence?

Lying

- Have you failed to keep oaths or promises to God?
- Have you falsely confessed your sins or were you insincere about, your desire to repent, or kept silent about your sins during confession?
- Have you lied?
- Have you been sly or secretly mischievous, deceptive or hypocritical?
- Have you honestly obeyed your parents?

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- Have been argumentative or stubborn?
- Have you told falsehoods, distorted the truth, cheated, judged others or gossiped?

Speaking ill of others

- Have you spread rumors or gossiped in thought or in word?
- Have you joked of the faults of others, or exposed the faults of another to make yourself the better?
- Have you slandered anyone wanting to or intending to injure the reputation of another?
- Have you given bad ideas or words to people?
- Have you laughed at other's deficiencies or misfortunes?
- Have you treated anyone with malice or shown hatred toward or abused, insulted, or injured or anyone?
- Have you condemned anyone, made fun of people in thought, word, or action or mocked in a hurtful way?
- Have you taunted, teased, or tempted anyone?
- Have you laughed about things that you shouldn't have?

Gluttony



- Have you eaten before you pray and make the sign of the cross?
- Have you eaten too much at one time or became too full during the fasts?
- Have you eaten without having thankfulness to God?
- Have you respected the feasts and fasts as much as you could?
- Have you eaten foods merely for the enjoyment of them?

Stealing

- Have you stolen anything or thought seriously about stealing something?
- Have you taken something without asking?
- Have you failed to return a book or other thing that you have borrowed?

Love of money and possessions, and Envy

- Have you been content with what God gave you?
- Have you wished in your mind that you had more things than you do already?
- Do you have an unhealthy attachment to material things?

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- Have you been greedy or selfish?
- Have you acquired something that belonged to another?

Bearing grudges

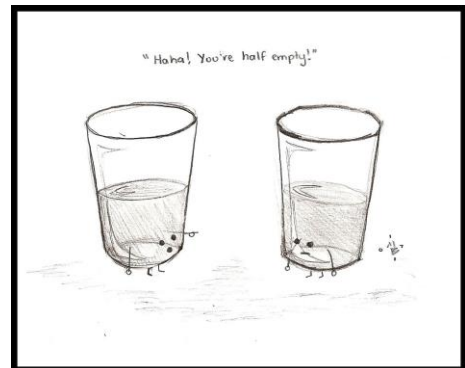
- Do you hold on to wrongs that someone did to you in the past?
- Do you bear any grudges against people instead of understanding and forgiving?
- Have you imagined ways you could have revenge on anyone?
- Do you envy others for what they are or have, or been jealous of them?

Injustice

- Have you judged anyone?
- Have you accused an innocent person of committing an act that they did not do?
- Have you rejoiced at the misfortunes of other's?
- Have you failed to give aid to someone in need, especially when asked?
- Does your inner peace disappear when others are unfair to you or judge you?

Pride

- Have you thought of yourself as better than anybody else?
- Have you considered yourself worthy while considering others unworthy?
- Have you had a high opinion of yourself or sought glory or praise for yourself?
- Have you talked down to anyone?
- Do you compare or measure yourself up to anyone?
- Have you looked out for other people's faults rather than your own?
- Do you speak of the shortcomings of others while trying to conceal yours?
- Have you been critical of other people or criticized anyone?
- Have you been arrogant, vain, or conceited?
- Do you rely completely on yourself rather than God?
- Have you bragged or boasted of things that you have accomplished?
- Have you been prideful of the good deeds that you have done?
- Have you failed to be respectful to your parents or superiors?
- Are you overly concerned with your appearance?
- Have you thought yourself self-important?
- Have you been self-willed instead of trying to do the will of God?



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- Have you self-justified your sins?
- Have you been impatient or anxious about anything in which you shouldn't be?
- Have you been prejudice towards anyone for any reason?

Anger, Lack of compassion, and cruelty of the heart

- Have you said anything unfeeling or hurtful things to anyone?
- Have you hurt anyone's feelings in any way?
- Have you carried on arguments with someone in your head?
- Have you had any harmful thoughts aimed towards anyone?
- Have you wished evil upon anyone?
- Have you been angry with people without a just cause?
- Have you been unfriendly to anyone or been cruel?
- Have you ridiculed anyone?
- Have you had abusive or violent thoughts?
- Have you been cruel to animals?
- Have you lacked mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and love for anyone?
- Do you put the needs of other before your earthly possessions?



Magic, sorcery, and incantations



- Have you seriously considered magic and things relating to magic?
- Have you imaged Holy things, such as icons, having some sort of magical properties?
- Do you have a serious belief in astrology, superstitions, fortune-tellers or the like?