

A Brief Catechism on Confession

The core of the text that follows is originally from The Shepherd, published by the Brotherhood of St. Edward the Martyr, London, England. It has been substantially modified for the use of parishioners at St. Tikhon's parish, San Francisco.

General advice on confession. When preparing to go to confession, every Orthodox Christian should try to remember all the sins that he has committed, whether voluntary or involuntary, and should examine his life in detail. If there are sins that were committed before his last confession, but which he then forgot to confess, he should mention these also.

Do not let embarrassment hinder the opening of your heart. 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, being a man like yourself, he knows human weaknesses and the inclination that all people have towards sin, and thus he cannot judge you harshly when you come to confession. But maybe you are embarrassed to confess your sins before your spiritual father because you are afraid of losing his good opinion? On the contrary, if you value his good opinion, you should understand that he will respect you all the more for the sincerity of your confession. Also, if you are ashamed and afraid to lay bare your sins before your spiritual father, how will you bear it when at the Dread Judgment your sins—if you have not been freed of them by true repentance—will be revealed before God Himself, His angels, and all mankind, both people you know and strangers? If you remember this, you will want to free yourself from your sins and from the punishment that they bring upon you, and will confess them in all sincerity before your spiritual father.

Confess openly and fully, but not generically. You should hide nothing wrong that you have done, but at the same time you should not add anything extra, and should not blame yourself for what you have not done by simply saying, “Everything I have done is sinful,” or some such catch-phrase. Nor should you admit every sin you are asked about, whether you have done it or not, as some people mistakenly think they should. Your confession must be realistic and therefore true.

Another reason why you should not simply say, “I have sinned in everything, word, deed, and thought, and by omission,” without giving further details, is because your spiritual father needs to know exactly what you have done in order to give you good and relevant pastoral advice. Also such a short, un-detailed confession means that you are avoiding what confession is intended to achieve, i.e. to bring you to admit what you have done, to admit that you were wrong in doing it, and to help you—by God's grace and the counsel of your pastor—to change your life for the better. Your spiritual father already knows that you are a sinner, for no man is without sin! Even the holy Apostle Paul described himself as the “chief of sinners.” Rather, each sin that one can identify should be mentioned in turn, just as you would enumerate all your symptoms to a doctor. You should not just think of a couple of

main trends to “discuss,” and neglect to mention the innumerable other sins.

Confess your own sins, not the sins of others. 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, make an appointment to see your spiritual father at some other time—these are not matters for confession itself! Also, do not use the fact that many people commit some sin that you have committed as an excuse for it. Still less say, “but everyone does that.” For one thing, you have come to confess your own sins, not those of others. How can you be sure that without exception every human being commits any given sin? Or even though you might know of their sin, how can you be sure they have not repented of it in their heart? Pay no heed to the sins of others. Oftentimes we imagine the motives and intentions and sinful inclinations of others, for no man knows the heart of another.

Confess your sins fully but concisely; one does not have to make a story of them! That in itself can be an evidence of pride. Particularly regarding carnal sins, do not go into detailed descriptions of sin. If your spiritual father feels that you need to confess any particular sin in fuller detail, he will ask you about it, and then you should not hesitate to describe it fully and to answer all his questions.

Ready yourself for a good confession by heartfelt preparation. Before going to confession make a thorough preparation, and examine your life so that you recognize your sins. If you wish you can write out a list, or keep a list day by day; many people find this a helpful practice. One can use the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, or the list of sins in the prayer of daily confession of sins read before going to sleep each day, or that in the prayer at the end of the Canon to the Guardian Angel in the Prayer Book. Such checking against a list is very beneficial, otherwise one tends to remember only the most serious sins, or the most noticeable or most extraordinarily, and to forget, perhaps deliberately, the underlying ones, the ones that have become habitual, and the things that we have forgotten even to remember as sins because they have become so much a part of our life. Sins of neglect, omission, and laziness often fall into this category, as do the ones that are seemingly respectable: pride, vanity, etc. However, do not allow such lists to make your confession formulaic or legalistic: you should consider them solely as a help and aid to help you see the parts of your heart often forgotten, not as a ‘formula’!

Confess without excuses, striving to understand the reality of your sin. Do not try to make excuses for your sins, for the more that you justify yourself, the less your heart is truly able to receive God’s forgiveness. It is important that you yourself should fully realize how wrong each sin you have committed is—for the more you understand the wrongfulness of any sin, the easier it will be for you to make an effort of will to avoid committing it in the future. However, you may mention if there is any special circumstance, such as some particular temptation or outside pressure, that it would be useful for your spiritual father to know, so that he can advise you how to deal with it.

It is important not to overlook any sin, but to mention all the sins that you have committed. If you are asked whether you have committed a particular sin, it is not good enough to reply, “I can’t remember.” This is, of course, much less likely to happen if you go to confession regularly. It is good at the end of your confession to admit that there may be other sins which you have forgotten or have not realized that you have committed—such a sin might be by a careless word or action which has upset someone and perhaps caused them to sin.

Unless your spiritual father asks you about them, 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 say, “I have committed no serious sins,” because this means that you do not realize how sinful what you have done is, and how sinful your insensitivity is.

Choosing to make your confession at a fitting time. Do not be insensitive to the feelings and weaknesses of others, including your fellow parishioners and your confessing priest. If you have not confessed for some time, or have some particular difficulty and are likely to need a long confession, try not to come on the eve of a great feast or when there will be many other people going to confession, but come on a day when there are likely to be few, or make a special arrangement with the priest. Also, unless it is otherwise completely impossible (because, for instance, you live far from the church), do not come for confession either immediately before the Divine Liturgy (when the priest will be preparing the gifts) or during the service, when you will cause the entire congregation to wait while your confession is heard. If after your confession you are hoping to receive a blessing to partake of the Holy Mysteries, it is best to come for the confession after the evening service on the previous night.

Confess with an open and believing heart, seeking real repentance. 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 penitence, 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, receiving no remission, he died a terrible death. Thus, in addition to careful confession and true repentance, faith and hope are essential for the salvation of a sinner.

Moral guidance or “the opening of one’s thoughts”. It is necessary to distinguish between the mystery of confession itself, and the moral guidance of a spiritual father in “the opening of thoughts” which is a distinct practice very much alive in the Church, especially in monastic communities, but is something quite different from confession. The telling of one’s thoughts and actions before a spiritual elder, from whom one seeks moral guidance, has a vast spiritual significance. It is very useful for moral training, the correction of bad inclinations and habits, and the overcoming of doubts and indecisiveness. In some monasteries this is practiced daily, but it is not a course to be entered upon lightly. St.

Ignatius (Brianchaninov) says, “An indispensable condition of such submission is a Spirit-bearing guide, who by the will of the Spirit can mortify the fallen will of the person subject to him in the Lord, and can mortify all the passions as well.” And he issues dire warnings about heeding “elders” falsely so-called. Nonetheless, some writers suggest that some form of “opening of the thoughts” can form part of Christian family life, so that husband and wife open their thoughts to each other each day. Of course such a practice is far removed from the spiritual discipline of eldership of which St Ignatius writes. Either way, this type of spiritual guidance, although very beneficial when rightly ordered, does not have the significance of a mystery or grace-bearing Church rite like confession, which is why confession itself, the sacrament of penitence, can take place only before a priest.

Penances: their nature and purpose. Penance is a form of discipline or a prohibition administered by the priest (in accordance with the canons or laws of the Church) to those repentant Christians for whom it is necessary, much as a doctor prescribes a suitable medicine or treatment. It is a form of treatment for a moral or spiritual sickness. Examples of penances are: fasting over and above what is required of all Orthodox Christians; special prayers of repentance with prostrations; reading books which will help in overcoming one’s weakness; the performance of good works; etc.

Penances are not given to all who come to confession, but only to those who, by the nature or seriousness of their sins, require this special medicine. An example of this is St. Paul’s excommunication of a Christian of the Church of Corinth for incest; then, because of his penitence, he received him back into the Church (2 Cor. 2:6-8).

Although penance might seem to be a punishment, its purpose is not to make retribution for sins, to pay back a debt, but is rather corrective, medicinal, and instructive—to cure the sinner from his sinful habits, to instruct him regarding both the harmful nature of what he has been doing, and ways to change his life, so that he shall not repeat his sin. Penance is intended to deepen and increase the penitent’s regret for what he has done, and to strengthen the desire of his will for correction. The Apostle says, “For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of” (2 Cor. 7:10). This is upheld by the canons of the ecumenical councils and the teaching of the Church Fathers, who describe penance as a means of spiritual treatment to cure the diseases of the soul. The 102nd canon of the Sixth Ecumenical Council says: “The character of a sin must be considered from all points and conversion expected. And so let mercy be meted out.”