

A Guide to Preparing for Holy Confession¹

For those who wish to make a serious and saving confession, heartfelt preparation is required! Above all else, anyone preparing for confession must ask God to help strengthen his resolve to see and to confess all his sins. A penitent should prepare for confession and collect his thoughts regarding his sins at least a day before confession—do not simply approach confession unprepared, hoping to forge a good confession out of the air! We must begin by examining our heart in honesty and humility. The most valuable thing in the eyes of God is the confession of the sin which weighs most on the conscience.

Preparing for Confession can at times be aided by referring to a listing of common sins, which helps us combat our forgetfulness and see dimensions of our behaviour that we sometimes overlook, or to which we have become desensitized. The questions listed here are intended to help the Orthodox Christian examine himself and identify the symptoms of his spiritual ills; however, they should not be taken as some kind of test to ascertain how well we are doing as if there was a certain ‘pass-mark’! Nor should they simply be taken on board without careful probing of our heart (for example, simply confessing ‘I am guilty of all these sins’—without truly seeing which are our serious problems, our serious and specific troubles). Before God’s perfections, we always fail. It is for that reason that, as believing Christians, we throw ourselves on the mercy of the Lord and do not trust in our own righteousness.

Remember that our sins can never outweigh God’s love towards us! Even if we should seem to have failed with regard to all the points mentioned above and more, we should not lose heart but confess our sins unshamefacedly; we should regret the wrongs we have done, be resolved to make amends and receive whatever remedy our confessor should be guided to lay upon us.

¹ The present document has been assembled from various resources on preparation for confession, in wide circulation amongst Orthodox Christian parishes for many years. The origins of the core listing of sins provided here originates from the Orthodox Christian Information Centre (www.orthodoxinfo.com), with additions from *The Whole Armour of Truth* by St Nicolas Varzhansky, as well as substantial corrections and changes for the benefit of the faithful at St. Tikhon’s Parish.

Most of all, one should be assured of the blessing of God which these endeavours will bring upon you.

Remember that the listing of sins below is intended to be a help and aid, not a legalistic formula. Use it to help see through your forgetfulness and insensitivity, so that the real burdens of your heart can be disclosed and healed.

Sins against God

1. Do you believe in God, the Holy Trinity, and in the divinity of Christ? Do you respect the Holy Virgin Theotokos, the saints, and the angels? Do you believe in the Church and its Mysteries (Sacraments)? Do you believe that heaven and hell exist?
2. Do you trust yourself always, and especially during the difficult times of your life, to the care and Providence of God? Or do you despair and show a lack of faith?
3. Perhaps in the problems, afflictions, sicknesses, and trials of your life you moan and complain against God and lose your faith and confidence? Do you give thanks to the Lord for all things?
4. Do you pray morning and evening and before and after each meal? Are you embarrassed to make the sign of the Cross in the presence of others, for example, in a restaurant or outside a holy church when you are passing by? Do you not make your cross properly?
5. Do you read the holy Scriptures as well as other Orthodox spiritual books daily?
6. Do you go to church on Sundays and on the major Feast Days? (If you do not go to Church on Feast Days due to work, have you considered whether you are truly unable to get away from work for these days, or simply using work as an excuse?²)
7. Do you follow the Divine Liturgy carefully and reverently from the start until the end, or do you arrive late and leave before the end?³ Do you let your mind wander in

² There may be circumstances where it is truly not possible to be absent from work for a Feast, and on such occasions this may be a 'reason worthy of a blessing'; yet oftentimes we know that we could take a day off without too much difficulty, but do not do so because we want to save holiday time for other occasions, or we do not view the Church Feast as very important, etc. These are the kinds of distinctions we should examine in our preparation for Confession.

³ This is an important matter in our times. We are called by the Church to be in the holy Temple from the opening blessing until the concluding benediction. If we are late: what are the causes? Have I used

church?

8. Do you go to church dressed in a proper and dignified way? Are you careful not to laugh or talk, even if it is a wedding or baptismal service?
9. Have you ever left church after the Divine Services, and particularly after receiving the Holy Mysteries, and immediately engaged in light talk and thus forgotten the blessings and graces you have received?
10. Do you prevent or restrict your spouse or children from going to church? Or do you tell your acquaintances not to go to church?
11. Do you commune regularly, or only once a year—and then without holy Confession?
12. Do you believe in mediums, fortune-telling, tarot card reading and the like? Do you tell other people to believe in such things and go to such people? Do you engage in superstition? Or believe that the events of life are ordered by ‘luck’ rather than by God?
13. Do you blaspheme the Name of God, the Virgin Theotokos, and our saints by speaking irreverently of them?
14. Do you fast (unless you have a serious health problem) on Wednesdays and Fridays and during the appointed periods of the year?
15. Have you made a show of your piety?

Sins against your brethren and neighbours

1. Do you have hatred and ill-feelings towards someone who did you wrong or insulted you in their anger?
2. Are you suspicious and do you without reason suspect that everyone supposedly talks about you, that they don’t want you, and that they don’t love or like you?
3. Are you jealous and upset over the progress, fortune, possessions and beauty of others?
4. Are you unmoved by the misfortune and needs of your fellow men?
5. Have you criticized or slandered your fellow man, wrongly accusing them?
6. Have you used your Orthodox Faith or its teachings merely to browbeat others or

children/family as an excuse to be slack in my arrival at Church? Have I planned to leave home ten minutes before the service, knowing full-well that traffic will cause me to be late? Etc.

- belittle them?
7. Have you forgiven those who have offended you?
 8. Are you sarcastic and patronizing towards believers, or towards those who fast and endeavour to live a Christian life, or towards those who have physical/mental problems and/or disabilities?
 9. If you heard some information or criticism against someone, did you pass it on to others and harm (even unwillingly) their reputation and respect? Have you gossiped in any way, or on any occasion?
 10. Did you criticize the conduct, actions, faults and mistakes of another person when they were not present, even if what you said was the truth? Do you gossip about and criticize the personal lives of others?
 11. Did you listen to someone blaspheming God or a holy person, and not protest?
 12. Do you curse those who have harmed you, or curse yourself in difficult moments of your life, or curse the day and hour in which you were born?
 13. Do you respect your parents? Do you look after them? Do you put up with their elderly weaknesses? Do you help them with their bodily and spiritual needs? Are you mindful of their spiritual needs by making sure they go to church and partake worthily of holy Communion? Have you abandoned them?
 14. Perhaps in your anger did you hit anyone with your hands or injure them with your words?
 15. Do you perform your job or occupation properly and with a good conscience? Or are you unfair to others? In your transactions with your business partners, co-workers, and clients, are you honest and forthright?
 16. Do you steal? Perhaps you have encouraged or helped another person to steal? Have you agreed to cover up a theft? Have you bought or accepted goods known to be stolen?
 17. Do you give oaths without need, or lie in your dealings with others? Did you perhaps not fulfil your oath, vow, or promise? The Scriptures forbid oaths completely, saying that our 'yes' should be our 'yes', and our 'no' be our 'no' (Matthew 5:7).
 18. Are you ungrateful towards God and generally towards your helpers and beneficiaries? Do you grumble and murmur against them?
 19. Do you keep company with bad and sinful people or associates? With your words or

- example, have you ever pushed anyone to sin?
20. Have you ever committed murder, in any way?
 21. Do you entangle yourself in the lives of others or in their work or their families and become the cause of strife, quarrels and disturbances?
 22. Do you have mercy and compassion on the poor, on orphans, on the elderly, on families with many children struggling to make ends meet?
 23. Have you lied or added or subtracted from the truth? Do you flatter others in order to get your own way?
 24. Have you ever sent an anonymous or cruel letter or e-mail to anyone?
 25. Have you taken pains, before approaching for Confession, to be reconciled with all?

Sins against yourself

1. Do you care for and seek first the salvation of your soul, the spiritual life and the Kingdom of God, or have you put earthly considerations in the first place?
2. Are you a slave to materialism and worldly goods?
3. Are you greedy or a lover of money? Are you stingy?
4. Are you wasteful? Do you live by the Gospel command that whatever you have leftover and above your needs belongs to the poor?
5. Are you conceited, arrogant or proud? Do you talk back to your elders and superiors?
6. Have you been lazy? Have you done your duties heartily?
7. Do you like to show off with your clothing, wealth, fortune, and the academic achievements of your children or of yourself? Or with your ecclesiastical position, dress, knowledge or responsibilities?
8. Do you seek attention and glory from people—whether by word or deed, dress or adornment?
9. Do you accept compliments and praise from others too readily? Do you get upset when others reveal your faults and do you get offended when others examine you and when your seniors make comments about you? Do you get angry?
10. Are you stubborn, high-minded, egotistical, proud, or cowardly? (Be especially careful with these sins, as the diagnosis and solution to them are difficult!)

11. Have sexual sins polluted your body, mind, or soul? For example, have you engaged in fornication (sexual intercourse before or outside of marriage), or masturbation, prostitution, homosexual activities, etc.?
12. Do you watch dirty shows on television or at the movies? or read pornographic, immoral books and magazines?
13. Have you ever considered committing suicide?
14. Are you a slave to your stomach (i.e. gluttony)?
15. Are you lazy, careless and negligent? Do you not help out when you can?
16. Do you say improper, dirty, and immoral words or use swear words for the sake of humour or to insult or humiliate others?
17. Do you have a spirit of self-denial?
18. Do you expel from your mind bad or sly thoughts that come to pollute your heart?
19. Are you careful so that your eyes don't gaze or stare at provocative pictures or people?
20. Are you careful what you ears hear? Do you like to hear sinful music and conversations?
21. Do you dress immoderately or even immorally? Do you come to holy places (e.g. church) without being properly attired in dress and conduct?
22. Are you a drunkard? Do you abuse 'recreational' or pharmaceutical drugs?
23. Do you smoke? Smoking destroys your God-given health and is also wasteful of money, and therefore is a sin.
24. Do you talk excessively about meaningless things?

For couples

1. Do you remain faithful to each other? It is tragic when one of you is unfaithful to the other.
2. Did you embarrass or criticize your spouse publicly or privately?
3. Do you not endure the apparent weakness of the other? Do you show harshness?
4. Do you or your partner permit the other to follow fashions or trends which are opposed to the law of God? Do you encourage one another to live a worldly, rather than Godly, life?

5. Do you take into consideration the struggle the other has outside and inside the home, so that you both help each other bodily and spiritually in your struggles?
6. Does each of you love and respect the parents of the other?
7. Have you ever considered divorcing your partner?
8. As a partner, have you had excessive demands and degraded your relationship? Do you abstain from sexual relations on Wednesdays, Fridays, Sundays, Feast Days (including the eves of Feasts), and on the days of the Holy Fasts of the Church?
9. Do you prevent your partner from going to church, spiritual gatherings and talks?
10. Do you bring up your children “in the instruction and counsel of Christ”? Do you only concern yourself with their intellectual growth and not with the nature of their character and spiritual development?
11. Do you direct your children to go to church regularly, to go to Confession, to frequently partake of holy Communion (properly prepared), and to go to Church/Sunday school? Do you teach holy virtues by word and example? Have you taught them to pray in the morning, evening and before and after at each meal? Have you taught them to pray with respect and reverence?
12. Are you careful of the things they read?
13. Do you watch with whom they keep company and who their friends are?
14. Do you lead them to sinful shows and entertainment or allow them to fall into opportunities for sin due to your neglect (e.g. allowing children to watch television unsupervised)?
15. Do you teach them humility and meekness and are you careful that they dress in a dignified way?
16. Do you curse them when they upset you?
17. Do you as a parent believe that the responsibility of raising and educating your children rests only with your partner? Or with someone else entirely?
18. Do you scorn your children by giving them insulting hand gestures and reprimand them with improper language?
19. Are you fair and just with your family, considering and respecting their views and wishes, or do you behave like a dictator?

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So that we can better come to examine the depths of our conscience, we should strive in our lives to read several books on the Sacrament of Confession, helping us to understand the nature of this divine Mystery in which we are called to participate.⁴ Also, you must feel welcome to discuss any uncertainties that you may have surrounding confession with your spiritual father-confessor. The greatest ‘science’, or knowledge, is to come to know oneself; and we must not deny ourselves the greatest thing that every human soul thirsts for: a peaceful conscience and eternity with God.

This joy is only granted by the God-Man, our Lord Jesus Christ. He Himself instituted the single path to salvation for the repentant sinner within his Church: the holy Sacrament of Repentance and Confession. This is why, friend, you must overcome any obstacle whatsoever that blocks the road to holy Confession! Here awaits you with genuine Christian love the good Confessor, the representative of Christ, who as a fellow human being can understand and have compassion on his brethren who are also sinful.

Cast far away, brethren, any thought of embarrassment or fright. Why be seared or frightened when your soul frets and pains from the deadly consequences of multi-faceted sin? If sickness tortured your body, would you avoid the hospital or doctor because of embarrassment? But at the same time, do not be led astray by certain people who wish to have read on them a ‘blessing only’, without having previously confessed. Whenever this happens, from ignorance or neglect, it is a terrible sin and an insult to God. With faith, then, and honesty, proceed to holy Confession.

Be certain also that the infinite love of the crucified and resurrected Lord will welcome you and transform you, removing the weight that burdens you! He Himself said, ‘Come to me all ye that are heavy laden and I will grant you rest.’

⁴ Recommended are: *Repentance and Confession*, by St. Nektarios (Roscoe, NY: St. Nektarios Greek Orthodox Monastery, 2002); *The Forgotten Medicine: The Mystery of Repentance*, by Archimandrite Seraphim [Aleksiev] (Wildwood, CA: St. Xenia Press Skete, 1994).

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Some concluding remarks from St. John of Kronstadt

“He who is accustomed to give account of his life at confession here will not fear to give an answer at the terrible judgment-seat of Christ. It is for this purpose that the mild tribunal of penitence was here instituted, in order that we, being cleansed and amended through penitence here below, may give an answer without shame at the terrible judgment-seat of Christ. This is the first motive for sincere confession, and, moreover, it must absolutely be made every year. 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. The second motive is tranquillity: the more sincere has been our confession, the more tranquil will the soul be afterwards. Sins are secret serpents, gnawing at the heart of a man and all his being; they do not let him rest, they continually suck his heart; sins are prickly thorns, constantly goading the soul; sins are spiritual darkness. Those who repent must bring forth the fruits of repentance.”

“Consciousness, memory, imagination, feeling, and will are helps to penitence. As we sin with all the powers of our soul, so penitence must be from our whole soul. Penitence in words only, without the intention of amendment and without the feeling of contrition, may be called hypocritical. Should the consciousness of sins be obscured, it must be cleared up; should the feeling be smothered and dulled, it must be roused; should the will become blunt and too weak for amendment, it must be forced; ‘the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force’ (Matthew 11:12). Confession must be sincere, deep, and full.”

—St John of Kronstadt (*My Life in Christ*, p. 280)