



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

The Sacrament of Repentance & Confession

A Guide to the Reasons and Means of
Confession

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
WHY CONFESS?.....	3
+ God Wants Us to Confess	3
+ Confession is Love.....	4
+ Confession is a Holy Mystery, a Second Baptism.....	5
+ Confession is Liberation From Sin.....	6
+ Confession is Medication to the Soul.....	6
+ Confession is a Source of Humility.....	7
+ Confession is a Source of Hope.....	8
+ A Cloud of Witnesses.....	8
WHY CONFESS TO A PRIEST?.....	9
+ God Gave Authority to His Priests	10
+ Confession is Discipleship.....	11
+ Spiritual Accountability	12
+ Confession is a Practice of Obedience	12
HOW TO CONFESS?.....	13
+ Sit With Yourself	13
A Quite Setting.....	14
Prayer.....	14
Bible Reading	14
Remember Your Sins.....	15
+ Sit With God.....	16
Contemplate With Hope on the Crucified.....	16
"As Sorrowful, Yet Always Rejoicing"	16
+ Sit With God in the Presence of the Priest	17
Important Guidelines	18
What to Avoid	19
+ After Confession	20
WHEN TO START?.....	21

INTRODUCTION

“Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand”(Matt. 4:17). This was the first message that Jesus preached. It was also the message John the Baptist spoke in preparing the way for Christ; he preached, “Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance”(Luke 3:8). Repentance is the first step in preparing the way for Christ to reign in our hearts, yet it is not just a step; it is a life. The entire Gospel talks about this message, declaring that we have a merciful God who is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance”(2Pet. 3:9). The Church fathers held fast to the message of repentance, stressing its importance. St. Isaac the Syrian has a famous quote that we should always remember, “No sin is without forgiveness, except the one without repentance”. Much can be said about repentance, but we will only focus on one essential and inseparable aspect of repentance, that is confession.

Repentance and confession go together. To fully experience repentance you need to practice confession, and to confess without repentance means nothing. The Church plays an important role in our repentance. St John Chrysostom stressed the role of the Church when he said, “Have you sinned? Enter the church, confess, and your sins will be erased. Repent anytime you sin. If you sin again, repent again and never lose hope, for the church is a hospital and not a court, for He does not condemn us for our sins.”

With this meaningful saying of St. John Chrysostom we are ready to start our discussion of confession. We will first start by answering the repeated question “Why Confess?” and we will move from there to the very important question “How to confess?” Before we start we must reiterate that repentance and confession go together, you can’t receive the blessing of confession, if you do not live a life of repentance, and a life of repentance is fulfilled through confession. We cannot over emphasize this. As we start talking about confession, remember that repentance goes along the way with confession.

WHY CONFESS?

+ God Wants Us to Confess.

“Where are you” (Gen. 3:9)? “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat”(Gen. 3:11)? God spoke to Adam with these words after Adam sinned. Did God not know where Adam was? Was he asking to find out for sure whether or not Adam ate from the tree? Of course not! God knows all things, but He wanted to hear it from Adam. He wanted Adam to confess, but Adam did as we all would have done; he looked for an excuse. Years later God spoke to Cain, Adam’s eldest son. He asked him “Where is Abel your brother?”(Gen 4:9). God knew that Cain murdered Abel, but God asked Cain to confess his sin. Cain refused to confess saying, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9).

God loves us so much that He always gives us the chance to confess and repent. He is always patient, waiting for us to come back and fall on our knees confessing our sins. But if we insist on refusing to confess, the cry of our sins will be loud in the ears of the Lord as the voice of Abel’s blood cried out to the Lord from the ground (Gen. 4:10).

Out of the love of Christ to the Samaritan women, He waited for her confession. He told her “Go, call your husband, and come here.” When she confessed that she had no husband Jesus replied, “You have well said ‘I have no husband,’ for you have had five husbands, and the one

whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly”(John 4: 16-18). So, this woman who was once a sinner, was praised from the Lord for her confession and she then went and proclaimed what happened to her causing many of the Samaritans to believe in Christ (John 4:39).

It was God’s commandment in the Old Testament that whomever sins shall confess his sin “And it shall be, when he is guilty in any of these matters, that he shall confess that he has sinned in that thing” (Leviticus 5:5). The same command is repeated in the book of Numbers. “When a man or woman commits any sin that men commit in unfaithfulness against the LORD, and that person is guilty, then he shall confess the sin which he has committed” (Num.5: 6,7). God so dealt with his people declaring in His law that He will never abandon those who come to Him repenting and confessing their sins. “But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, with their unfaithfulness in which they were unfaithful to Me, and that they also have walked contrary to Me...then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham; I will remember the land” (Leviticus 26:40,42). And again in the New Testament, St. John the Beloved remind us of the same promise, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us” (1 John 1:9-10).

Therefore, repentance and confession are answering to God’s call. They are the way by which we give room to the Holy Spirit to work in our lives. Let us enjoy this love that God is offering to us, and express our love to God by kneeling in front of Him confessing our sins.

+ Confession is Love

Repentance is more than just a feeling of sorrow or regret for a sin we committed, but it is a sorrow blossoming from our love to Christ. As Father Tadros Yacoub Malaty says, “Confession is a strong eagerness and a sure desire for fellowship with God, thus it is hatred and aversion to the old man as a natural result of our love to God.”

Many people have felt sorrow for things they did as Herod felt sorrow for killing St. John the Baptist (Mark 6:26), Judas regretted what he did (Matt. 27:3,4), Joseph's brothers realized their sin against their brother (Gen. 42:21), and Saul confessed his sin to Samuel (1 Sam. 15:24,25). All those and many others lacked one important thing, a love for God and a desire to have fellowship with Him. Their motive was not the love for God and their goal was not returning to Him. As for us, we return to God with hearts longing for Him and with souls finding their satisfaction in Him as it is written, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind”(Matt. 22:37).

The Lord has revealed to us this concept through the prophet Joel saying, “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. So rend your heart, and not your garments”(Joel 2:12,13). For God desires our hearts first that He may come and dwell in us. He desires to redeem us and forgive us for He said, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice”(Hos. 6:6).

Through repentance and confession God works in our hearts that we may love Him even more. He cleans us and gives us soft hearts, according to His divine promise:

“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you

shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God. I will deliver you from all your uncleanness”(Ezek. 36:25-29).

St. Paul commands us to walk in love (Eph. 5:2) for it was the way Christ walked ahead of us all. The apostle continues to explain, “as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma”(Eph. 5:2), we also through the sacrament of repentance and confession offer ourselves as a “living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God”(Rom. 12:1). Each time we go to confession we offer to God our love and devotion.

+ Confession is a Holy Mystery, a Second Baptism

Confession is one of the seven Sacraments of the church. It is an action of the Holy Spirit in us. It is not just a practice we do to make us feel better. It is much more than that, for when we confess our sins the Holy Spirit is present and working to cleanse us from our sins. “Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered”(Romans 8:26). When we go to confession, we have to truly believe that God is listening to us and forgiving us our sins.

The Church has put a great emphasis on Confession and its role in our spiritual lives. The fathers of the Church called confession the second Baptism. As we walk in the world we lose the purity we received in Baptism. Thus it is necessary that we get washed, but not wholly for we have been cleansed in Baptism. We only need to wash our feet, which got dirty from walking in the world. After the last supper Christ started washing His disciples feet, but when He came to Peter,

Peter said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?"

Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this."

Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!"

Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!"

Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, "You are not all clean"(John 13:6-11).

Likewise, Christ wants to wash our feet that got dirty, so let us not prevent ourselves from having a part with Him. Let us approach Him saying, “Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow”(Ps. 51:7).

Just as we were once renewed in Baptism and we put on the new self, we are being renewed day by day through the sacrament of repentance and confession. As St. Paul commands the Colossians: “Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (Col. 3:9,10). Thus, in Baptism we put off the old man with all his works and we put on the new man. This new man needs to be constantly renewed in his mind and transformed in the image of God as St. Paul says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:2).

In Baptism, we died to the world that we may live for Christ, and in Confession we remind ourselves of the apostle's words, "How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:2-4).

+ Confession is Liberation From Sin

St. John Cassian once said, "The one who admits his thoughts cannot be deceived." He also said, "Sin will stay as long as it is hidden in the heart." St. John spoke truly, as long as the sin stays in the heart it entangles us with the yoke of bondage. Nothing is as dangerous to our spiritual life as the deception of sin. Don't be haughty then, but seek the liberation from sin. It is said about sin, "She has cast down many wounded, and all who were slain by her were strong men"(Prov. 7:26). St. Paul warned us from the deception of sin saying, "For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me"(Rom. 7:11). He cries out, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"(Rom. 7:24). The answer comes quickly, he immediately continues saying, "I thank God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:25).

Thanks to God who has granted us liberation from our sins. Through confession we expose all the sins of our hearts before Him, that He may carry them away. Sin itself cannot stand being exposed, "For just as a snake which is brought from its dark hole into the light makes every effort to escape and hide itself, so malicious thoughts [sin] that a person brings out into the open by sincere confession seek to depart from him"(St. John Cassian). The Spiritual Elder once said, "Repentance is a sever suffering to the devil."

Jesus taught us that whoever commits sin is a slave to sin, but that He grants liberty to us who believe in Him. "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed"(John 8:34-36). Let us continue in this freedom as St. Paul commands, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free"(Gal. 5:1). Let us continue in confession that we wouldn't leave room for the evil one to build his webs in our heart.

To end this section, a story from the desert fathers. One day St. Macarius the Great met a devil. He asked the devil how well he was doing with the monks in the desert. The devil answered, "Very bad. Every evil thought I tell them, they admit to their priests, except one monk, who is my friend because he never confess his thoughts to the priest." St. Macarius went strait and advised the monk to confess all his thoughts to the priest. The monk obeyed. Later, St. Macarius met the devil and asked him, "How well are you doing?" The devil answered, "Very bad, even that friend of mine is no longer my friend. He is now my enemy."

+ Confession is Medication to the Soul

"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"(Matt. 11:28). In confession we lay our burdens on Christ, and find rest in Him. It is truly a medication to our souls and not just our souls, but our bodies too. Modern science has proven the benefit of expressing ones thoughts and confessing ones problems to the health of the individual. Yet Christian confession is even greater than that, since through confession we open our hearts for the work of the Holy Spirit that grants us comfort for we call the Holy Spirit "The Comforter", "The

helper” and the “Counselor”. St. Paul described God as “the God of all comfort” when he said “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ” (2 Cor. 1:3-5).

Like any disease, if left without care, it may grow to overtake the whole body. Only when it is exposed to the doctor, it can be treated. Let us then unveil our sins in front of our doctor and the healer of our soul that He may cure us from all spiritual sicknesses. Confession is the key to spiritual success. The wise Solomon declares, “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy”(Prov. 28: 13). Only in confession we find spiritual prosperity. It is the practice of the wise. It is also the channel through which God’s mercy flows on us curing us and healing our souls. Notice, confession comes in two fold, “confess and forsake.”

My friend, do you some times feel broken? Do you feel that you are carrying a very heavy load on your shoulders? Do you feel that your problems are multiplying, and you lack the wisdom to solve them? Do not worry, for He Himself said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you"(Deut. 31:6). Step forward then and confess your sins, relieve your soul from its pains and win yourself a heavenly comfort and an inner peace.

+ Confession is a Source of Humility

I imagine that if the devil were to choose between his weapons for the strongest one, he would choose the weapon of pride. Pride is the origin of all evil. Satan himself fell from his angelic status because of pride. We too are confronted by this war repeatedly. Like the Pharisee we are tempted to pray to God saying, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men-- extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess”(Luke 18: 11-12). Many times we feel self righteous, imagining ourselves as saints or if not saints then at least better than the majority of people. Thus, confession is of no great need to us. Confession is for those “bad” and evil sinners. We can’t recall any major sins to confess, we don’t kill, steal or commit adultery. I tell you the truth, it is at these times that we need confession the most. It is critical for our spiritual life. In such times we are being tempted by the devil of pride. The only remedy is searching our hearts and crying with David, “For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight-- That You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge”(Psalm 51:3-4).

It is said about humility, “Indeed there is nothing stronger than humility, for nothing can conquer it.” When St. Anthony saw all the nets of the devil spread out, he sighed and asked God, “Who can escape them?” God answered him, “Humility escapes them.” Confession is one of the main sources for humility. For in confession we examine our hearts, we reveal our thoughts and desires. In confession we shed the divine light on our souls, that we may see our sins and realize that we are in a great need for God’s mercy. How will we then condemn our brothers? How will we take pride in our righteousness? A broken heart that confesses its sins will always conquer pride. It will always ascribe all glory and power to the God who delivers all our souls from their sins.

+ Confession is a Source of Hope

The devil uses two classical wars against all believers. The first is pride, which we just talked about. The second is hopelessness, which we will now address. Many times the devil tells us there is no hope, the way of God is hard and long, and you are a miserable sinner. He says to us, "Where will you fit among all those saints? You haven't made a good start yet and you have a long way to go after that." He tells us, "How will you ever return to your previous state? You have messed up everything and there is no way back to God." Thank God that He does not leave us to be tempted by such temptation, but He shows us His mercy and love.

Every time we repent, confess our sins, and hear the absolution from the priest we are assured that our sins are forgiven. God has promised many times that He will forgive our sins and He will remember them no more, if we return to Him with repentance. God promise us saying, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow"(Is. 1:18). He also promised, "And the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out"(Jn. 6:37). The Lord declared in the book of Ezekiel chapter 18:

"But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live. Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?" says the Lord GOD, "and not that he should turn from his ways and live?"

The Lord also says to His people, "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins"(Is. 43:25). He repeats His promises in the New Testament saying that He is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"(2 Pet. 3:9). How can we loose hope when we have such a merciful God?

In Confession we return to God asking for forgiveness. We leave confession rejoicing and singing with king David saying, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us"(Ps. 103:12). Truly, confession is a source of hope. In confession we experience the mercy of God flooding us and working in our hearts to convert us, and cloth us with righteousness. Therefore, "Hope in the LORD; for with the LORD there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption. And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities"(Ps. 130:7-8).

+ A Cloud of Witnesses

Now let us study examples of those who experienced confession that we may be encouraged to step forth and confess our sins. In many occasions in the Old Testament confession was mentioned in association with repentance. We read in the book of Ezra that after the Israelites came back from Babylonian captivity to find their temple destroyed, "Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, 'You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel. Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers, and do His will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan wives'"(Ezra 10:10,11). We read in the book of Nehemiah that the people did as Ezra commanded. "They stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for one forth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshipped the LORD their God"(Neh. 9:3).

Daniel the prophet also offered confession on his behalf and on behalf of the people. Daniel said:

“And I prayed to the LORD my God, and made confession, and said, ‘O Lord, great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and mercy with those who love Him, and with those who keep His commandments, we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments. Neither have we heeded Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings and our princes, to our fathers and all the people of the land. O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face, as it is this day--to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, those near and those far off in all the countries to which You have driven them, because of the unfaithfulness which they have committed against You”(Dan. 9:4-7).

David the king is a great example of confession. In Psalm 32 David says, “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and You forgave the iniquity of my sin”(Ps. 32:5).

In the New Testament we read about the prodigal son who repented from his sinful ways and went back to his father confessing that he sinned and that he is unworthy of being a son. Acknowledging his sin before his father was very important to him. It was the only thing he was determined to tell his father after a long period of living astray. In the life of the saints we read about many saints whose lives were transformed by repentance. They all needed to realize their sins and confess them so as to repent. One clear example is St. Moses the black who was transformed from being a ruthless thief to be a great saint. It is said about St. Moses that after he first became a monk he was tortured by his past and by the sins he committed in the past and for years was tempted to return to the sinful ways. One day, as he was confessing his sins to St. Macarius, an angel appeared with a tablet full of his sins. As he confessed, the angel began wiping the tablet clean. The more he confessed, the more the angel wiped, until by the end it was completely clean. The saint lived after that a holy life that witnesses to us the power of repentance and confession. Likewise, all the desert fathers realized the importance of confession. Confession for them was an integral part of their monastic life. Let us look at those examples and learn from them about the importance of confession to our spiritual lives. Let us always keep them in front of our eyes that they may encourage us to experience the sacrament of repentance and confession.

WHY CONFESS TO A PRIEST?

Why do I have to confess to a priest? Why not confess to God directly? Why not confess to a friend? In this section we will discuss the reasons for confessing in front of a priest. Note that when we go for confession in front of the priest we are not confessing to him but to God. Bishop Kallistos Ware writes, “The priest is simply God’s usher, introducing him (the penitent) in to the divine presence; to pursue the medical analogy, he is only the receptionist in the waiting room. It is to Christ, not to the priest, that the confession is made . . . and it is from Christ, not from the priest, that the forgiveness comes.” Priests have been given the authority to teach,

admonish, and rebuke. They have also been given a greater authority to bind and loose sins. We will talk about this in more detail.

+ God Gave Authority to His Priests

A man full of leprosy came to Jesus imploring, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.” With all compassion Jesus touched him saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.” Yet Jesus said to him, “But go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as a testimony to them, just as Moses commanded”(Lk. 5:13). Through the ages God allowed man to be His “fellow workers”(1 Cor. 3:9). It is not that God needs man to fulfill His work, but He honors man by giving him a share in laboring for the Kingdom. God is the one who heals and redeems us, but He has given His Church the authority of loosing us from our bondage. When Christ raised Lazarus from the dead he said to those around Him, “Loose him, and let him Go”(Jn. 11:44). Likewise the priests loose those who have been raised by Christ from the death of sin. When Christ talked to Saul of Tarsus (later St. Paul) while he was in his way to Damascus, He told him, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do”(Acts 9:6). Couldn’t Christ tell Soul what to do? Definitely He could, but He chose to send Saul to Ananias the apostle who baptized Saul. The same thing happened with Cornelius; the angel told Him to ask Peter to come, he did so and was baptized by Peter. Again, it was God’s desire that Cornelius be admitted into the Church at the hand of Peter.

In the Old Testament the command of God was very clear, whomever sins must go to the priest confessing his sin. It was essential that every sinner confess his sins to the priest (Refer to Lev. 5, Num. 5, Deut. 26). David the king was forgiven when he confessed his sin to the Lord before the prophet Nathan. Nathan delivered to David the forgiveness of God saying, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die.”(2 Samuel 12:13) Hezekiah also after praying to the Lord to be healed received the answer through Isaiah the prophet. (2 Kings 20:1-11) The Scripture tells us that many people came to John the Baptist to be baptized for repentance “confessing their sins”(Matt. 3:4).

In the New Testament God was even more explicit in declaring the authority He gave to priests. Jesus said to His apostles in the great commission, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”(Jn. 20:22). St. Mathew records the words of Christ to Peter saying, “And 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”(Matt. 16:19). The same words were repeated to all the apostles in Matt. 18:18. Nothing much can be said after these explicit sayings of Christ. How then will the priests loose you from your sins, if you don’t confess it? You can’t ask the doctor for a medication without revealing to him your disease. Confession is thus a natural consequence for the responsibility and authority of the priest.

Confession was an integral part of the life of the early Church. We read in the book of Acts that, “many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds”(Acts 19:18). The authority given to the Church was manifest in the story Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to the Holy Spirit and died at the feet of St. Peter the apostle. This authority is clear in the word of St. Peter to Sapphira, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out”(Acts 5:9). St. Paul speaks of this authority to the Corinthians after he warned those who sinned saying, “Therefore I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness, according

to the authority which the Lord has given me for edification and not for destruction”(2 Cor. 13:10). In the teachings of the apostles that were compiled in the second century it is said, “Every bishop or priest that doesn’t accept whoever return from his sin but cast him out shall be excluded, for he sadden Christ who said: there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents”(Law 52). Thus, it is evident that confession was practiced in the early Church, and that the authority that God gave to His priests was clearly understood then.

It is also evident from the saying of the early church fathers that confession was widely practiced through out the history of church. St. Kepryanos who lived in the third century said, "The authority of binding and loosing sins was given to the apostles and the churches that they established as they were sent from God; and to the bishops who succeed them." St. Athanasius the 20th pope of Alexandria and the defender of the faith who lived in the fourth century said, "As the one baptized by the priest is enlighten by the grace of the Holy Spirit, likewise, the one who confesses his sins through the priest attains forgiveness by the grace of Christ." In the fourth century St. Basil stressed the importance of confession to a priest saying, "Confession of sins to those entrusted by administering the mysteries of God, is necessary." St. Gregory of Nyssa exhorts his people to confess saying, "Take the servant of the church a faithful partner for you in your sorrows and a spiritual father. Expose to him your secrets with brevity. Expose to him the secrets of your souls as the patient exposes his hidden wounds to the physician so that you may be healed." St. John Chrysostom said:

“For the inhabitants of the earth were allowed to reveal what is in heaven, and they received an authority that God didn't give neither to the angles nor to archangels, for he didn't say to those 'whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Also for the authoritative of the earth have authority to bind, but only bind bodies, but this bind (given to priests) touches the soul itself and go beyond the heavens. For what the priest do down here, the Lord advocate up, and the master uphold the opinion of the servant.”

+ Confession is Discipleship

The first thing Jesus did when He started His ministry was to appoint twelve disciples, whom He had with Him at all times. Later He appointed seventy apostles and sent them to spread the good news. Before His ascension Christ commissioned His disciples saying, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations”(Matt. 28:19). Christ didn’t write a book for us to read or just said great sermons to carry all His teaching, but on the other hand He appointed disciples among whom He lived. Those disciples were the ones who later wrote the Bible and spread the Gospel everywhere making disciples of the nations. This was how Christianity began and how it shall be, for Christians were first called “Disciples” till they were called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Saul (St. Paul) and Cornelius were taught by those who preceded them. Likewise Samuel the great prophet who heard the voice of God was trained by Eli the priest, Elisha was a disciple of Elijah, and Joshua was a disciple of Moses. In the New Testament we read about Apollo who the bible testifies that he was mighty in the Scriptures, he also needed to be instructed by Aquila and Priscilla and to be accepted by the disciples (Acts 18:26). St. Paul himself sought the knowledge of the rest of the disciples. He said, “And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain”(Gal. 2:2). The revelation that told St. Paul to go to Jerusalem, could have told him everything that the disciples will tell

him, yet again God chooses discipleship over direct instruction. In the monastic life a lot of emphasis is put on discipleship, when a novice asked Abba Paisios what he should do to fear God, he was told, "Go, and join a man who fears God, and live near him; he will teach you, too, to fear God." Unfortunately, we are now at a time when everyone desires to be a teacher and no one accepts being a disciple. In Confession we are being disciples to our father of confession, learning from him and listening to what the Lord is telling us through him.

Moses said in his prayer, "Ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you"(Deut. 32:7). It is also said, "Where there is no counsel, the people fall" (Prov. 11:14). St Dorotheos comments on this verse saying, "Did you see what the holy books are teaching us? It is calling us not to depend on our own minds and think that we know everything imagining that we are able to guide ourselves, but we are in need for help and for someone to guide us in God." The wise Solomon in the book of Proverbs stressed the necessity of listening to the instructions of the elders and keeping them. Our fathers of confession lead us in the spiritual path as good shepherds leading the flock of Christ. We ought to listen to them and obey their advices for surely God speaks to us through them as he did in all the previous examples.

+ Spiritual Accountability

Accountability to a spiritual father is one of the forgotten yet important benefits of confession. Many denominations that once rejected confession are beginning to appreciate the importance of spiritual accountability. They promise their members to offer them opportunity for spiritual accountability. Thank God, we Orthodox have a clearer understanding of spiritual accountability, and we have been practicing it for numerous centuries. Spiritual accountability for us Orthodox Christians means that each one should have a spiritual father to whom he/she has to offer an account of his spiritual life. The confessor presents to the priest all his weaknesses and all his spiritual struggles, then awaits the advice of the priest in obedience. The priest can give the confessor spiritual exercises to practice such as more bible readings, more prayer times, fasting, prostrations, etc. The priest will follow up with him on his spiritual progress.

I believe that spiritual accountability is even more important now than it was. We live in a time where we are taught to be independent in everything. We are taught that obedience is wrong and submission is evil. Everyone creates his own beliefs and follows it. No one accepts correction from anyone. We have grown accustomed to disobey our parents, our priests and our church. Christianity can't exist in such an environment; Christianity and disobedience cannot live together.

+ Confession is a Practice of Obedience

First thing we ought to realize is that priests are not worldly authorities, the rules that apply to the worldly authorities do not and should not apply to the church. Rather they are spiritual guides and leaders that God has put in this place. "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up"(Eph. 4:11). Above all, priesthood is a sacrament. Therefore, deal with them as spiritual fathers who ought to be respected and obeyed. I repeat, they ought to be OBEYED, that is the Lord's commandment. In the First Epistle of Saint Peter chapter 2 verse 13 he says, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men." If he said this about every authority, how much more should we be obedient to church authorities! Also Saint Paul in his First Epistle to the

Thessalonians says, "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another"(1Thes 5:12-13). In his Epistle to the Hebrews chapter 12 verse 17 he says, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."

What do we know about the teachers of the Law and Pharisees? What did Jesus say about them? They were not good people; they opposed Jesus. In spite of all this, listen to what Jesus says, "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do every thing they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they don't practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they are not willing to lift a finger to move them"(Matt. 23:2-4). So Jesus asks the people and his disciples to obey the Pharisees who were "not good". Now that we have a greater priesthood on the order of Melchizedek with Jesus Christ himself as the high priest, don't you think then that we should obey them?

My point here is not just to give reasons for why we should obey our spiritual fathers. Rather, I hope to clarify that obedience is a virtue that the Bible always emphasized. In fact Saint Paul says about obedience, "For just as through the disobedience of one man the many were made sinner, so also through the obedience of man the many will be made righteous"(Rom. 5:19). The time of confession is a time where we get to practice the virtue of obedience by submitting to the priest and by following his spiritual advices. We ought to trust that God will speak to us through his priests exactly as He did before over and over again. Let me end with this quote from St. Anthony the great, "My beloved, those with strait hearts, if you wanted to move forward, grow, have no panic in your heart, and that demons don't mock you in anything; then listen to your fathers and obey them and you will never fall."

HOW TO CONFESS?

Now that we discussed the reasons and benefits of confession, we will move on to an equally important question, "How to confess?" The first thing we have to realize is that confession is more than just going to the priest once every while to iterate to him a list of sins. Confession is a process that needs preparation, determination on repentance and a desire for continual transformation. Most writers who wrote about confession broke it down to three steps. We will discuss those steps here.

+ Sit with yourself

"But when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger"(Lk. 15:17). After a long time in the miserable life of sin the prodigal son realized this important fact: servants at his father's house are in much better condition than he is. It could have taken the prodigal son many more years or perhaps his entire life to realize this simple fact, if he didn't take the time to come to himself and reconsider his situation. The key to the son's repentance was taking the time to sit with himself and realize his sins and his miserable state. We need to do the same, take sometime to sit with

ourselves and search our hearts. Saint John Chrysostom says, "We ought to give account of ourselves every day that we may not become lazy or forgetful and thus won't be able to examine ourselves." The first step to confession is thus sitting with ones self, searching for the hidden sins and seeking to unveil ones inner thoughts. David the prophet instructs us saying, "Meditate within your heart on your bed"(Ps. 4:4).

A good confession starts before we leave to church. It is essential to make our quite time a daily practice. Even though we may go to the priest once every few weeks, we ought to sit with ourselves daily. Only in these quite times we will be able to realize our continuous need for the life of repentance. Following are some suggestions about how to make the most of your quite time.

A quite setting

First begin by placing yourself in a quite place, away from any interruptions. Remind yourself that for the next half an hour or so you are to focus on God alone. Start by a prayer asking God to bless this time and help you get the most of it. Tell God "Here I am." If you ever tried to have a quite time before, the first thing you will realize that as soon as you start your mind starts to wonder as well. All sorts of thoughts start attacking you, even those thoughts that you have not encountered for a long time. Do not let that ever daunt you. Victory is yours, if you persist. The Gospel tells us, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you"(Jam. 4:7). Try to bring your attention back to God through prayer, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. Saint Anthony the great says, "If the soul yields itself to God with all its strength, the good God will reveal to it these pains and defects one by one that it may turn away from them."

Prayer

L. Joseph Letener in his book about confession says, "Prayer is the single most important thing to do in preparing for confession. Unless the Holy Spirit reveals our sins and sinfulness to us, we will not see them. In prayer we ask God to show us what He finds displeasing in us, what He wants us to repent of. If we are concerned only with how we are disappointed in ourselves, repentance can become an exercise in self-improvement but not a return to the Father."

Pray to God telling him "Restore me, and I will return"(Jer. 31:18). Ask Him to enlighten your heart and open your eyes to see every sin inside you. Tell him, "Without You I can do nothing, so come now and help me to return to you." Be persistent in your prayer and fight every thought that attacks you with a short prayer. Be sure that no matter how simple your prayer is God will listen to you and will help you in your prayer for we know that "the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered"(Rom. 8:26). It is often helpful to say a hymn or a spiritual song at the beginning of your quite time so as to focus your thoughts. Some people find it helpful to repeat the Jesus prayer "My Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner" or say a Psalm like Psalm fifty-one.

Bible Reading

The word of God is very powerful. It gives us the wisdom to discern our errors. "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart"(Heb. 4:12). Always keep your Bible open next to you in your quite time. Read only

few verses and meditate on them. Relate these verses to your own life, meditating on the righteousness of God as opposed to our sinfulness, on His love and care as opposed to our negligence, etc. This time is not the time to logically analyze the Bible, to look for answers to your Bible quiz, or to gather immunization against the Jehovah's witnesses. This is the time to focus on your personal life only. It is often helpful to keep a journal to record your thoughts and decisions.

Remember Your Sins

Start examining yourself, look into every corner of your life, look for every weakness and sin. One important thing that you ought to understand is the meaning of sin. We often consider sin to be those terrible acts like killing, stealing, cheating, etc. Truly those are clear sins, yet the concept of sin is more profound than this. The Greek word used in the New Testament for sin is "hamartia". This word means "missing the mark". Therefore, sin is missing the goal, deviating from the way, or departing from the truth. The goal, way and truth is Christ himself. Therefore, the first thing you ought to do when you sit with yourself is set your goal and set the measuring stick for your spiritual life. Too often we compare ourselves to the world, we judge ourselves based on how better or worse we are when we are compared to others or on how well or poorly we are keeping the rules. This should not be the measuring stick. The measuring stick is Christ Himself. St. Paul writes that we shall attain "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). So just because we think we are better than our colleagues at work or school, or because we can stick to some rules well, doesn't make us perfect. As Christians our goal is holiness; that is the calling we received from Christ Himself. That is why we always need to sit with ourselves. This means that we should be very meticulous when we sit with ourselves, we should look deep inside our hearts to reveal the hidden sins. For it is often the small hidden sins that are the real danger for they can so easily go by unnoticed if we don't search ourselves. The fathers always warn us from them saying beware of "the little foxes that spoil the vines"(Songs 2:15).

When you start preparing for confession you should set before yourself your goal from confession. Let me clarify what I mean by goal. Jesus once passed by a man who had an infirmity for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him, He approached the man saying, "Do you want to be made well?"(Jn. 5:6). Jesus certainly desires that we all become well and be healed from our spiritual infirmities for we say in the prayers of the hours, "He does not desire the death of a sinner but rather to return and live." Yet, Christ asks each one of us, "Do you want to be made well?" That is why we should set before ourselves this goal, to be cleansed from our sins. We should approach confession with the attitude of the leper saying with him, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." Sometimes, confession turns into a routine. When this happens, we should remind ourselves of this goal, that we desire to be healed from every spiritual weakness.

The devil can't tolerate seeing us examining ourselves. One weapon that he uses extensively is the weapon of excuses. He gives us hundreds of excuses for each sin we do, convincing us that our sins aren't "that bad", they aren't really worth confession. Excuses and repentance do not go together. Do not let be the case with you. Be strict with yourself, expose all your sins and ask God to take them away. Remember that the goal from confession is to be completely cleansed from all sins. With this goal there is simply no place for excuses, there is only a place for "a broken and a contrite heart." Attached to this book will be a guide to help you with

self-examination. It contains a classification of the different types of sins. Make use of it for it can help you examine yourself.

+ Sit With God

The next step is to sit with God confessing to Him that we have sinned against Him, have done evil in His sight, and are now returning back to Him. Approach God with a contrite heart. "Pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord"(Lam. 2:19). David the prophet teaches us how to approach God in this time. He says, "I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' and You forgave the iniquity of my sin"(Ps. 32:5). Tell God that you realize your sins, you know that you are not worthy of His Love, yet you are coming to Him full of hope as the prodigal son did. Speak to him as David spoke, saying, "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight," and ask Him for forgiveness saying, "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow"(Ps. 51:4,7). Pray with St. Ephram the Syrian saying, "What shall I give You Lord, and with what shall I repay You for Your goodness toward me? I sin against You every hour and You give me another chance... Chastise me Lord as a merciful father chastises his beloved son and forgive my weakness here that I may receive Your goodness there for You are the God of all life."

Contemplate With Hope on the Crucified

Our enemy works hard to prevent us from talking to God. He first attacks us by trying to make us careless and insensitive to our sins. If this attack does not work, he tries to portray God as a revengeful God. He tries to convince us that it is too late, we have already sinned and stirred up God's anger. The greatest weapon against both of these attacks is the cross. Fr. Malaty says, "Thus I say to you: When you sit secluded from the world, put the image of the Savior the Loving One and the Crucified One in front of your mind. If the enemy attacks you by carelessness, remember what sin has done to your Beloved One. If he attacks you by hopelessness, remember the power of the cross and the work of God in you." Ask God to give you power in your war against the enemy. Ask Him for victory over sins. For as He concurred death by His death on the cross, we too were given power through His cross to trample on serpents, and scorpions and all the power of the enemy.

"As Sorrowful, Yet Always Rejoicing"

We said earlier that repentance is more than just some emotions of regret and sorrow; it is a strong desire to return to God and hatred toward sin. That said, we also have to realize that confession should be accompanied by a contrite heart sorrowful for every sin it committed. We should strive for a heart like that of David the prophet. St. Paul teaches us that sorrow can be either of two kinds, godly or worldly. He instructs the Corinthians saying, "Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Cor. 7:9,10). Let us then seek that holy sorrow that leads to repentance, a sorrow full of hope, a sorrow leading to joy. It is not a paradox, but a mystery. Our Lord Jesus spoke to His disciples saying, "Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she

no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you"(Jn. 16:20-22). Repentance is crucifixion and sorrow, yet it is resurrection and joy. In repentance we are sorry for our disobedience, sorry for the sins that we have committed because we know how much they cost and realize the price that was paid on the cross. Yet we are full of hope that our God is a forgiving and loving God, knowing that he who resurrected from the dead can raise us from the death of sin. St. Keprianos said, "My beloved brethren: Be regretful with a contrite soul, search for your sins and know the load of the burdens on you with a good conscious, open the eyes of your hearts to remember your weaknesses."

+ Sit With God in the Presence of the Priest

After preparing for confession, it is time to go to the priest. Approach him as a patient approaches his doctor, as a disciple approaches his teacher, and as a son approaches his father. Realize that the priest is God's servant; you must completely trust him and be open to him. Those who have not tried confession might think that this step is the most difficult one, but truly it is not hard if you believe that Christ is present and that the priest is not a judge but a witness to the sincerity of your repentance. Many people are hindered by their shame; they say, "How can I tell the priest all these shameful sins? What will he think of me?" A person who understands confession knows that confessing sin is not embarrassing, but the sin itself is embarrassing. This means that confession is the only liberation from shamefulness. A patient who refuses to go to the doctor or hides his illness from the doctor because of shame will never be healed. He will live with his disease all his life. The only possible result will be that he will live in shame all his life while his case is deteriorating till it becomes impossible to hide and will be exposed to all instead of the doctor only. But if this patient exposed his illness to the doctor, he would have gotten rid of the shameful disease forever. Saint Tetrelian warns us from delaying our confession because of shame saying, "Many have worried more about embarrassment than about salvation and avoid confession to hide their shame or put it off from one day to the next, like one who has an embarrassing disease and refuses to tell his doctor. The result is that he speeds up his own death." If your embarrassment makes you hide your sin remember the words of the Gospel and repeat them saying, "For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have spoken in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have spoken in the ear in inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops"(Lk 12:2,3). Remember also that the priest is a human, who faces temptation and falls like anyone of us does, that is why he can relate to what we say. Don't think he will be disappointed at you because of what you did no matter what it is. On the contrary, he will be glad that you are coming back to repentance. As a father and a teacher he will exhort you and may give you a penance, but it is all for one goal, your victory over sin. "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance"(Lk 15:7), thus the priest who is a servant of the kingdom rejoices with one sinner desiring forgiveness, rather than ninety-nine coming to tell him "I'm good."

I can't tell you what to say to your priest, which is something you have to decide for yourself during your preparation. What I can help you with is some important points to consider when you confess and some other things to avoid.

Important Guidelines

❖ **Forget your relationship to the priest**

Talk to the priest as a representative of God. Confess to him with brokenness and awe. Don't confess as if you are telling a story to a friend, no matter what your relation to the priest is.

❖ **Confess all kinds of sin**

Confess the sins that you have committed by thought, deeds, feelings, etc. Your confession must also include your struggle with positive aspects such as your prayer life, bible reading, spiritual growth, etc. The guide to self-examination can help you with this.

❖ **Confess the details of sin**

Often the details are as important as the sin. They indicate your feelings and your reasons for committing the sin. Sometimes we feel inclined to omit important details to reduce the intensity of the sin. That should not be the case. At the same time you have to use wisdom in choosing what to say. You might feel inclined to include many useless details to obscure the actual sin. That should not be the case either. The most important thing is to be frank and honest in your confession. Don't try to shed a different light on your sin. Don't tamper with details to deviate the focus from the main sin. It is important that the priest understands you well, that is part of the medication, keep in mind the analogy of the patient and the doctor.

❖ **Emphasize the duration of the sin**

There is a big difference between sin that is becoming a habit and sin that happened once. Yes, they are both sins and they both need repentance, but sin that is becoming a habit might need to be dealt with in a special way.

❖ **Confess how you felt while sinning**

This can give a different meaning to the sin. For example, there is difference between getting angry with a person because of misunderstanding or because you actually hate the person or are jealous of him/her.

❖ **Be obedient**

One may say, "I know how to overcome my sin, do I still need to confess them? Do I still need to obey the advise of the priest?" I hope by now the answer is already clear. We don't only confess to receive guidance. Guidance is an important aspect of confession, but we also need to be loosed from our sins by the priest who has been given this authority. We ought to be obedient to our father of confession, even if we think we know the solution. We must trust in God who has given the priest the authority to teach and admonish. We must not to trust in our own understanding more than we trust in God. There is nothing wrong with presenting our solutions and thought to the priest and discussing them with him, but at the end let us always be clothed with the virtue of obedience. Here is a small story to illustrate this. A commander called Naaman the Syrian came to Elisha to be healed from his leprosy.

Elisha sent a messenger to him saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you, and you shall be clean." But Naaman became furious, and went away and said, "Indeed, I said to myself, 'He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and heal the leprosy. Are not the Abanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?' So he turned and went away in a rage. And his servants came near and spoke to him, and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do something great, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean?' So he went down and dipped seven times in the

Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. (2 Kin. 5:10-14)

Naaman almost lost his healing because he didn't wanted to follow Elisha's advice, but when he became obedient he was healed. Therefore, you also should not argue with your priest saying, "Why not ...". If he tells you to do something, put your trust in God and follow the priest's advice.

What to Avoid

❖ "I am not a sinner"

"God, I thank You that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess"(Lk. 18:11-12). This was the prayer of the pharisee, who gained nothing but a condemnation for himself. He failed to see his sin because he looked at his brother's sin. Always remember the words of St. John the apostle, "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 Jn. 1:8,9)

❖ "I am a sinner"

I don't mean to confuse you here. We definitely ought always to pray saying, "My Lord Jesus Christ forgive me a sinner." What you should avoid is carelessness or just confessing to fulfill a religious obligation. Be careful that your confession doesn't turn into a mere ritual without spirit. It will not benefit you to go the priest saying, "I'm a sinner, and I'll be a sinner. I'm satisfied the way I am, I have no desire to change myself." If you get nothing else from this book, remember that confession with no desire for repentance means nothing. God wants to cleanse you, but you must desire to be cleansed. He is waiting for you to invite Him in your life, but if you choose to be careless don't expect to receive what you yourself reject.

❖ Excuses

The first human said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate...The serpent deceived me, and I ate." The human of the twentieth century says, "I did drink, but everybody else did too. I had to do like them...I don't usually cheat, but if you know how much I needed to pass this exam, you would excuse me...I didn't really mean to do it..." The early man did not succeed when he searched for excuses, nor will his successors succeed. If you are truly seeking forgiveness, confess your sins without excuses. Excuses during confession simply defeat the purpose of confession. C.S. Lewis writes in his book "On forgiveness" in the weight of Glory saying,

Forgiveness says, "Yes, you have done this thing but I accept your apology; I will never hold it against you and everything between us will be exactly as it was before." But excusing says, "I can see you couldn't help it or didn't mean it, you weren't really to blame." If one was not really to blame then there is nothing to forgive... God knows all the real excuses very much better than we do. If there are real "extenuating circumstances" there is no fear that He will overlook them... All the real excusing he will do. What we have got to do is take to Him the inexcusable bit, the sin.

❖ Confessing you neighbor's sin

You are not going to the priest to confess what everybody else did. Avoid things like "Yes I got angry at him, but that is because he did... it was all his fault," or, "They all were gossiping, I was sitting with them," etc. Don't win yourself a condemnation instead of forgiveness. Even if what you will say will help your neighbor, confession time, is not the time to do this. Confession time is a time to confess your sins, and only your sins, no more, no less.

+ After Confession

LORD, You have been favorable to Your land;
You have brought back the captivity of Jacob.
You have forgiven the iniquity of Your people;
You have covered all their sin.
You have taken away all Your wrath;
You have turned from the fierceness of Your anger.
Restore us, O God of our salvation,
And cause Your anger toward us to cease.
Will You be angry with us forever?
Will You prolong Your anger to all generations?
Will You not revive us again,
That Your people may rejoice in You?
Show us Your mercy, LORD,
And grant us Your salvation. (Ps. 85:1-7)

Let that be your attitude when you come out of confession session. Praise God for His goodness towards you. Be fully assured that your sins have been forgiven. Be sure that no sin has any power over you. You have conquered sin by bringing it to the feet of the crucified one. Rejoice for the Lord has released you from the captivity of sin, for it is written, "When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.' The LORD has done great things for us, and we are glad" (Ps 126: 1-3).

After the priest reads you the absolution, it is your responsibility to maintain this great blessing you have received. In confession you decided to keep yourself away from all sin, ask God to help you to maintain your decision. Tell God, "Without you I can do nothing so give me the power to forsake my sins and hate to return back to them." One might ask, "What if after all this I fell again?" The answer is simply repent and confess again. The Bible teaches us that, "A righteous man may fall seven times and rise again, but the wicked shall fall by calamity" (Prov. 24:16). The words of St. John Climacus reflect the meaning of this verse, he said, "It is the property of angels not to fall, and even, as some say, it is quite impossible for them to fall. It is the property of men to fall, and to rise again as often as this may happen. But it is the property of devils, and devils alone, not to rise once they have fallen." The doors of confession are always open. No matter how many times you fall, you can rise. Always remember the words of the apostle, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us" (1 Jn. 1:9-10). At the same time, be sure "Not to receive the grace of God in vain" (2 Cor.

6:1). In other words, God's mercy should be motivation for repentance and not an excuse for sin. It is written, "How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?"(Rom. 6:2)

It is very important that communion comes after confession. When the Lord instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist, He said, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins"(Matt. 26:27,28). Continue therefore receiving the holy mysteries, repenting, praying, having quiet time, and in every good and edifying thing and the Lord of peace, will bless you with every Spiritual blessing, and will grant you the strength to tread on serpents and scorpions and all the power of the enemy.

WHEN TO START?

The excuse that we always use to delay our repentance is usually this, "How will I reach to these beautiful blessings of confession? It seems to be a long way? I tried several times, but there is still a lot more to do. It is too hard for me. I just can't get it." Let me answer this with a short story from the desert fathers.

A certain brother fell into temptation, and through tribulation relinquished the garb of monkhood; and he wished to begin to renew his ascetic life, but he saw the great difficulty of the matter, and he drew back, and said, "When shall I ever find myself in the same condition as I was formerly?" And through fear he did not begin his work, and he went and made the matter known to an old man, and the old man said, "The matter is thus: There was a certain man who possessed an estate, and he held it to be of no account and did not cultivate it, and it became full of tangled undergrowth and thorns. Now one day he remembered it, and he sent his son, and said unto him, 'Go, clean the estate.' And when he had gone and seen the abundance of the undergrowth he was afraid, and said to himself, 'When shall I be able to clean away all this undergrowth?' And he threw himself upon a bed, and lay down, and went to sleep, and thus he did every day. The father went forth and found that he was asleep, and that he had done nothing; and he said unto him, 'How is it, my son, that no work whatsoever hath been done by thee?' And he said to his father, 'When I came to work and saw the abundance of the undergrowth, I was afraid and said, "When shall I be able to clean all this away?"' And his father said unto him, 'My son, work according to the measure of thy sleep each day, and it shall be sufficient for thee'; and when he heard this the young man plucked up courage, and did thus, and in a short time he cleansed the estate. Thus also thou shall not be afraid but begin the work of thy rules, and God, by His Grace, will establish thee among those in the first rank." Now when the brother had done thus he was helped.

The Lord is calling you to confess your sins and forsake them, just as he previously called the Samaritan woman, Adam, Saul of Tarsus and many others. When you hear His call, do not delay answering His call, for it is written, "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion"(Heb. 3:7-8). It is also written, "'in an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you.' Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation"(2 Cor. 6:2). When St. Paul was received in the church at the hand of Annanias, Ananias told him, "And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord"(Acts 22:16). When St. Paul later preached the entire world, he passed along the same message, "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light"(Eph. 5:14). Now, this message is given to each one of us. Why are

you waiting then? Don't delay your confession anymore, rise up now and go back to your Father. Examine yourself daily while it is called "today," lest you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. Let me end with these words of St. Efraam the Syrian,

Let us repent my brethren as long as we have the time. You have heard what Christ said, "There is great joy in heaven over one sinner who repents." O sinner, why are you late? Do not lose hope. If there is great joy in heaven if you repent, why are you afraid? The angels want you to repent and you escape! The Holy Trinity to Whom is the worship, is calling you and you are still late!

Frequently Asked Questions about Confession

1. What is the relationship between confession in the Old Testament and New Testament?

When we talked about the necessity of confession to the priest we used some examples from the Old Testament on how God instructed his people to confess their sins in front of the priests. The commandment in the Old Testament was so clear. Yet some object to this, saying that in the Old Testament confession followed or was dependant on the sacrifice, which was offered by the priest, but in the New Testament the sacrifices became obsolete. Thus, we cannot use the confession of the Old Testament as proof to the necessity of confession to the priest in the New Testament.

Fr. Yohana Salama answers this objection in his book "The Precious Jewels in the Explanations of the Rituals and Beliefs of the Church". He explains that confession was not dependant on the sacrifice, and the sacrifice was not the reason for confession. Confession was an independent task that needed to be undertaken by each soul that had sinned in any of the things God prohibited. After the confession, the trespasser comes to the priest with a sacrifice for his sin that he had committed, and the priest will forgive him. (Refer to Lev. 5:6 and Num. 5:7.) He says:

Thus confession didn't follow or was not reasoned by the sacrifice but in the truth of the matter it was a reason for the sacrifice. As for the saying that they had to (confess to the priest) for the given reasons, is an invalid saying and the truth is that they completed the confession to the priests following the commandment of the Lord. So every sinner followed the law that the priest had to know his sin, and had to offer the sacrifice as atonement for the sinner's sin and to attain him the forgiveness from God - Numbers 5. And we say that not to take it as a premise to support the necessity of confession to the priest in the New Testament but to prove that confession of sins in the Old Testament was due to the priests by the command of God Himself and more so in the New Testament. For as there was priesthood in the Old Testament, there is also priesthood in the New Testament. And as there were sacrifices, there also is a Sacrifice. But as the priesthood of the New Testament is on the order of Melchizedek, for Christ came as a high priest on his order, so also His sacrifices had changed in their form and in their essence, it is no more in the ritual of Aaron but in the ritual of Melchizedek, and Christ commanded his apostles to offer offerings on this form, meaning bread and wine – Luke 22:19. So is the case in the matter of confession. For in the New Testament it is due to a priesthood that is far more noble and perfect than that (of the Old Testament).

To summarize, we can say that the sacrifices of the Old Testament were replaced by the one Sacrifice that was offered on our behalf on the cross. The sacrifices of the Old Testament were nullified by the Sacrifice of the New Testament that was of a different form and essence. The priesthood of the Old Testament was replaced by a greater priesthood in the order of Melchizedek which had a different form, and Christ Himself is the high priest on this order. So is the case with confession, it changed in form, for now it is due to the new Priesthood, and is associated with the a new Sacrifice. Nowhere in the New Testament it is mentioned that confession became obsolete, but on the other hand the New Testament makes it clear that confession is still essential, but now it is of a more noble and greater form, for in it we experience the work of the Holy Spirit that Christ has sent to His Church.

2. What does the verse that says “Confess your trespasses to one another” (Jam. 5:16) mean? Does it mean that we can confess to anybody and not necessarily the priest?

Definitely not! If we say, “Teach each other,” we mean that the one who knows will teach the one who does not know. It can’t be the other way around. If we say, “Cure one another,” we mean that the doctor should cure the patient. So is the case in the Church. “God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?”(1 Cor. 12:28-30) For though we are all members of one body, each member has a specific gift from God. Thus priests were given a specific gift, a special authority to bind and loose sins. The verse means that we ought to confess to those among us who have been granted the authority of binding and loosing sins, the priests. Also, if we look at the context of the verse, we will find it saying the following, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed”(Jam. 5:16-18). He mentions the priests of the church in the beginning of the verse, specifying them with the task of anointing the sick to be healed, and continues to say that their sins will be forgiven as well. As the priest is an intermediate for the healing that comes from God, he also is an intermediate for the forgiveness that also comes from God. This verse is proof for the necessity of confession before the priest. If we accept the idea of confessing to others members of the body, how much more reasonable it is to confess to those entrusted by God to administer the sacraments of God. The authority given to the priests is very clear in the bible, but for further reading on this topic, read “The Priesthood” by H. H. Pope Shenouda III. You can find a more in depth discussion of the sacrament of Priesthood.