

The Sacrament of Confession

By Fr. Lawrence Farley in **Sacraments and Rituals**

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The odds are that the Sacrament of Confession is everyone's least favourite sacrament. Not "the least needed," just "the least favourite." No one likes to look inside himself to survey and itemize the mess he finds there. It is like opening the fridge door and finding a large jar of green, smelly, mouldy, unidentifiable food. One instinctively cringes, and would prefer to simply ignore it and close the door.

A commitment to our own spiritual health means not simply closing the door to our conscience, but making a regular spiritual house-cleaning. Indeed, going to the sacrament of Confession is a bit like spring cleaning—we clean up after ourselves all the time, but make a special effort once a year in the spring to keep our home really clean and to get the messes we may have missed. In the same way, we confess our sins every day to God, but make special efforts several times throughout the year to keep our hearts really clean and to get the messes that still require special attention.

How many times throughout the year should we go to Confession? Different churches have different guidelines, but ultimately it is up to the individual, who knows his needs better than anyone else. My own suggestion is that one should confess four times a year, during the four fasting seasons, at a minimum. Obviously, though, if you have a spiritual melt-down, you should not wait until the next fasting season, but go to Confession right away to deal with it.

Some people ask why they need to go to a priest to confess their sins. Why not just go to God? Can't God forgive sins without the aid of a priest? Of course God doesn't need a priest's help to forgive sins. But the sacrament of Confession is about more than simply being forgiven. It is also about being healed. And any 12-step programme (such as Alcoholics Anonymous) will tell you that to be truly healed, one needs to "make a fearless moral inventory" (i.e. an examination of conscience), and then share this with another person.

It is a difficult thing to do. No one enjoys letting another person know all the shameful things they have thought, said, and done. It is hard on the pride. But that is just the point—it is our pride that keeps our sins intact, that keeps the lid on the whole mess, and keeps God's grace on the outside. By confessing our sins to another person, we destroy our pride and let God in, and this is the only way to truly begin the process of dealing with our sins and overcoming them. And confessing to a priest has the added advantage that he is empowered to pray for you and effectively ask for God's forgiveness.

Where, you might ask, did the priest get this power? It is not his personal possession. The priest does not walk around with divine power to forgive in his back pocket like some kind of credit card. As he himself says in the very prayer of absolution, "I do not have power on earth to forgive sins, but God alone does." But the priest does represent God's Church, and Christ committed the stewardship of divine grace to that Church. That is, He gave His Church the authority to bind and loose, and after His Resurrection, He said to His disciples, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whosoever's sins you forgive, they have been forgiven them; whosoever's you retain, they have been retained" (John 20:22). In this act, Christ committed the keys of stewardship to His Church, and gave them authority to gain forgiveness from God for those who repent.

We Orthodox take for granted the assurance of forgiveness, but this was new in the ancient world. In that world, when one repented, one could only hope that God would forgive. There was no assurance or guarantee: maybe He would, and maybe He wouldn't. You wouldn't find out whether or not He forgave you until some disaster struck, telling you that He had in fact not forgiven you, or until you reached the final judgment and got the bad news then. Christ gives to His Church the firm assurance of forgiveness so that we can really know now for certain that God forgives us. Eternal life thus is not a distant wistful hope, but a joyful present possession. As a part of Christ's body we can know that we have been forgiven and now have eternal life.

We see this stewardship of grace in action in the ministry of the apostle Paul. One member of the Corinthian community sinned rather badly (he was living as husband and wife with his step-mother), and on Paul's insistence, the offender was expelled from the Eucharistic communion of the church (1 Cor. 5:1-5). Later, he was overwhelmed with regret and repented and amended his life. Paul, therefore, urged the Corinthian community to forgive him, and to welcome him back (2 Cor. 2:6-8). When the local church forgave him (doubtless through the prayers and welcome of its leaders), God forgave him as well. Thus the church's authority to forgive sins was revealed through the restoration of the penitent after excommunication.

In the early church, this responsibility to restore the penitent devolved on the pastoral leadership, and especially upon the congregation's main pastor, the bishop. An early ordination prayer for the bishop (in the third century document known as *The Apostolic Tradition*) mentions this responsibility, and asks God to give the new bishop the Holy Spirit so that he may "offer to You the gifts of Your holy Church [i.e. preside at the Eucharist], and by the Spirit of high-priesthood to have the power to forgive sins according to Your command...to loose every bond according to the power which You gave to the apostles" [i.e. restore the excommunicated to the fellowship of the church]. In this prayer we see the bishop's responsibility to decide who is in the church and who is out. If a person had been expelled from the church for grave sin, it was the bishop who allowed him back in upon repentance, and prayed for his forgiveness. Most Christians, of course, never had to be expelled for grave sin, and so never had to receive this prayer for forgiveness and re-admission. A good Christian in those early years never had to have recourse to what would later be called "the sacrament of Confession," for he would never have to be excommunicated.

Later, however, this rite of forgiveness for the excommunicated became fused with another private spiritual exercise, one which became especially popular among monks. In this practice, the young monk would confess his sins to an older monk who was his spiritual father as the young one struggled to gain the victory over his sins. The penitent had never been excommunicated; he was only confessing his sins and receiving counsel for his spiritual benefit. The older monk would listen and give counsel and pray for the younger one's forgiveness. It proved to be spiritually valuable, and not just for monks. Nowadays, everyone in the church uses the sacrament of Confession like this.

Thus this Sacrament has developed a great deal over the years, and is used in a number of ways by a number of people. The Church uses it to reconcile excommunicated persons when they repent (its original function). The Church uses it to reconcile Orthodox to the Church after they have lapsed and been away from the Church's communion for a long time. The Church uses it to offer forgiveness to Orthodox communicants after they commit some major sin. And the Church offers it to Orthodox communicants as part of their regular spiritual house-cleaning.

In all its many uses, the Sacrament of Confession brings the penitent back to Christ, and to His boundless mercy. The penitent may be telling his sins to the priest, but the priest is there simply as a witness. It is Christ who really receives the confession; it is Christ who brings the forgiveness and the healing. We see this in the original form of the absolution prayer: in the original version, the priest does not say to the penitent, "I forgive you," (the western formulation) but rather, "May God forgive you." And the penitent does not kneel before the priest who is seated (as in the classic western confessional booth). Rather, both priest and penitent stand together before the cross, with the priest's arm around the penitent in a gesture of solidarity and support. In that sacramental moment, both are sinners. Both are debtors to the boundless love of God.