

“Let no one be kept back either by his sins or by his years from coming to obtain salvation. To him who still remains in this world there is no repentance that is too late.”

- Saint Cyprian of Carthage

HOW TO COME TO CONFESSION

How should we come to confession? What should we do?

The first guideline for us to follow in approaching confession is to act according to the practices of our local parish. In addition to this, we must:

- confess openly and fully, avoiding useless details and vain enumeration;
- be sincerely sorry for our sins;
- truly desire forgiveness and reconciliation with God and those around us;
- hear the spirit of true repentance and the desire to change our lives; and
- make amends for our wrongs and resolve to improve our lives.

These are the main elements of confession. Should the priest advise or instruct us to do certain things - to read, to pray, to perform certain acts of mercy - we should follow his advice cheerfully and carefully, knowing that God Himself speaks to us with every act of sacramental penance if we are sincere and open to His presence.

NOTHING IS SECRET

Finally, we should come to confession as we would come to the Last Judgement. We must recognise the significance of this point.

Christ is coming to us in the Church. He is coming specifically and concretely in the sacrament of Holy Communion at the Divine Liturgy. He is coming either to accept us into loving communion with God or to judge and condemn us. We prepare ourselves to meet Him by opening our souls, confessing our sins, and seeking mercy and forgiveness.

In the Church we already live in the Light of God's Kingdom. Judgement is every present. Jesus Christ continually appears. We must meet Him with heartfelt confession of sins and genuine repentance so that our meeting with Him may be “not for judgement, nor for condemnation, but for the remission of sins and unto life everlasting.”

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 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.

- 1John 1:8-10

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CONFESSION



CONFESSION

Confession is an essential element of the Christian life. In fact, without an acknowledgment and confession of our sins, there is no Christianity.

We confess our sins in order to:

- reveal our lives to the judgement of God and those around us;
- beg for mercy and forgiveness;
- free ourselves from our sinful secrets;
- open ourselves to the Light of God and those around us;
- liberate ourselves from everything negative which binds and corrupts us; and
- be reconciled with God while being united to the Church - the People of God.

OPEN AND PUBLIC

There is no confession of sins which is not open and public. A confession “in secret” or “to God alone,” as some say, is no confession at all.

God knows what we have done before we do it. To admit our sins to Him privately is partial and incomplete, for every sin against God is a sin against humanity and nature. A sincere confession is always an open confession. This alone manifests plainly our genuine acknowledgement of sin, our authentic sorrow and our sincere desire to change our lives.

IN THE PRESENCE OF THE PRIEST ALONE

Why, then, do we confess to God in the presence of the priest alone? Why, if confession is open and public, does it appear to be “private”?

We confess to God in the presence of the priest as if we were confessing in the presence of God’s People. Or, to put it another way, we confess to all in the person of the priest.

The pastor of the parish community sees and hears and offers guidance and proclaims God’s forgiveness on behalf of the entire community - in the name of God and His People. He bears witness before all of the sincerity of our confession.

If possible, he counsels and advises us in ways which will bring about spiritual growth. He proclaims the comforting words of divine forgiveness to us when we truly repent.

In the early Church, confession was literally open and public. It took place before the whole Christian community and society. The present practice, by which the priest represents the community, is merely a condescension to human frailty. It is not at all, in the Orthodox Christian understanding a practice built upon a doctrine of priestly “power” and “authority” alone.

WHY THE CHURCH?

Why is the Church the means of confession? Cannot God forgive sins “directly”? Is He not present everywhere, always ready to show mercy to sinners?

Of course God is everywhere and is always ready to receive repentant sinners. However, this very same God revealed Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ, who founded His Church and has filled it with the power of His Holy Spirit.

Thus, in the same way that we have recourse to the Church for baptism and chrismation, for marriage and burial, to hear the proclamation of the Word of God and to receive Holy Communion, so we also go to confess our sins and to receive the grace to be reunited, through Jesus Christ, with God the Father in the Holy Spirit. Since the Church is made up of people - God’s People - we likewise turn to the Church to find reconciliation with those around us as well.

If we turn to the Church to receive all that we know and all that we have from God - including even the Holy Bible and the divine revelation which was given by God to His People through Jesus Christ, how strange it would be if we did not come to the same Church to confess our sins and to receive divine forgiveness and mercy.