

Homily on the “Sacrament of Confession” -- Seven Questions, Seven Answers

His Grace, Michael – Bishop of New York & the Diocese of New York and New Jersey

Question #1: Exactly what is the Sacrament of Confession?

Answer: In the water of baptism, we die to sin. We are freed from sin, and we rise alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6). But yet, we find ourselves sinning after our baptism. Confession or Repentance is the mystery where the sins we commit after our baptism, and confess with our spiritual father, and for which we truly repent, are forgiven by our Lord, and we are reconciled to God. We learn from Saint John the Theologian: “If we confess our sins, He (Christ) is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9). Abba Isaiah expresses it this way: “If there were no repentance, no one would be saved. Just as Baptism cleanses us from original sin and from all sins committed prior to Baptism, so repentance, involving the confession of our sins, cleanses us from all lawlessness committed after Baptism.”

Question #2: What is the basis of the Sacrament of Confession?

Answer: Christ Himself established this mystery during His earthly ministry. He proved that He, as God the Son, had the power both to forgive sins and to heal physical sickness, when He said to the paralytic, “My son, your sins are forgiven you,” and then raised him from his bed of paralysis (Mark 2). He told the sinful woman in Luke's Gospel, “Your sins are forgiven” (Luke 7:47). And He told His followers in the Gospel of John: “Sin no more” (John 5:14). Before He ascended into Heaven, He gave His apostles the authority to forgive sins: “Receive the Holy Spirit; if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:22-23). The apostles, in turn, gave that authority to the bishops of Christ's Church; and they, to the priests – unto this very day.

Question #3: How should I understand this sacrament?

Answer: Just like we understand the ministry of Jesus: as a ministry of healing. Sin is a spiritual poison that will infect our soul and destroy us, if it is not expelled; just like poison in our stomach would kill us, if we did not vomit it out. By confessing, by calling out, to the Lord, to the Church, to ourselves, and even to the devil, that we have sinned and we are truly sorry, we expel the poison that is inside us. Saint John of the Ladder writes, “Nothing gives demons more power against us than unconfessed sins in our heart upon which they feed.” Great Saints like King David and the Apostle Peter, and scriptural “heroes” like the publican and the prodigal, prove the necessity of confession and the grace of God's forgiveness that follows. Saint John Chrysostom explains it simply: “Repentance is a medicine which destroys sin. It is a heavenly gift. It accepts and transforms all. It does not send away the adulterer or the drunkard, the idolater or the slanderer. The wound and the medicine – these are sin and confession.”

Question #4: But why must I go to a priest for confession; can't I just confess directly to God?

Answer: The first Christians confessed their sins publicly, out loud before everyone in the Church, because we sin against both God and one another; and they received the forgiveness -- the absolution -- from the bishop (or the priest) as directed by our Lord. Saint James confirms this, saying: "Confess your sins to one another" (James 5:10). Because people unfortunately began to discuss one another's sins, the Church prescribed that the priest (or bishop) would not only individually offer the forgiveness, but would also individually hear the penitent's confession with the promise of confidentiality. Just like we cannot be healed by our doctor unless we tell him where the pain is, we cannot be healed of our sins unless we tell them in the presence of our spiritual father. It is humbling to be sure; but that cures the mother of all sin: pride. Saint John Chrysostom tells us, "It is difficult to confess to our spiritual father; but I would rather confess my sins to one man and be forgiven, than be disgraced before the whole universe at the Last Judgment for my unforgiven sins."

Question #5: What is required for a good confession?

Answer: First we must examine our conscience, and recognize that we have sins, and what they are. Sometimes that in itself is hard; when we are living in the darkness of sin, it is hard to recognize. It is only in the light of Christ that we truly see, like Saint Paul says, that "all have fallen short of the glory of God." Saint John warns us, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (I John 1:8). Seeing our sins, we must feel sorrow for them -- like the Prodigal Son, we are sad to be separated from our Father. Then, we turn ourselves around, and come home to Him -- this is *metanoia*, repentance. And then, like the Prodigal, we confess our sins: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15). When we do this, the Lord will receive us and restore our relationship as a son or daughter ... and give us the robe and the ring and the banquet of Holy Communion ... and our inheritance: His kingdom of Heaven.

Question #6: How often should I go to confession?

Answer: The more often, the better. According to Saint John of the Ladder, just as wounds shown to a doctor do not get worse, so when sins are confessed, they do not increase. Certainly going to confession once a year, before Pascha, is the minimum. But more frequent contact in confession with one's spiritual father also helps us to more precisely examine our conscience -- and to deter us from repeating our sins. If we confess more frequently, we are more assured that when the Lord does call us out of this life, He will find us in the grace of God. As Saint Basil says, the prince of the world will have nothing in us to claim as his. The best guideline for receiving Holy Communion every week would be confession once a month.

Question #7: What about "general confession"?

Answer: General confession was designed as a service offering prayers for repentance and a group examination of conscience -- so that those who commune frequently can better prepare to make their regular, sacramental, private confession. Both Father Alexander Schmemmann, in his teaching on general confession, and the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America, in its 1972 Encyclical on Confession and Communion, insisted that "general confession" is not a substitute or replacement for private, sacramental confession. The Sacrament of Confession, instituted by our Lord, is necessary for forgiveness and the worthy reception of Holy Communion. Saint Paul warns us: "Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord" (I Cor. 11:27). General Confession is intended to help us make better individual sacramental confession.

As we continue our Lenten journey to Pascha, let us all be sure to lighten our souls of the burden of sins, and refresh our souls with the saving grace of God, by coming to the Sacrament of Holy Confession. Let us never turn our backs on our loving Lord – but instead, turn our backs on sin and the evil one, and like the prodigal son return to the One who alone loves us more than we love ourselves. To Him be all glory unto ages of ages.