

When Confession Becomes Idolatry:

Father Confessor and Penitent

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Confession, one of the seven mysteries of the Orthodox Church, is referred to more traditionally as the sacrament, or mystery, of repentance. In this rite the penitent confesses his sins in the presence of a priest, is prayed for by the priest who beseeches God to reconcile the individual to the communion of the faithful, is exhorted to make changes in his life that more fully reflect one's faith in Christ, and is given words of counsel or advice by the priest who is also present to bear witness to the contrition of the penitent.

Confession is perhaps one of the more difficult sacraments to acknowledge and accept by those coming to the Orthodox Church. The reasons for this are varied as are the responses that can be given to any objections. Many of our readers are undoubtedly familiar with both; numerous articles and recorded lectures address this topic. At this time we will only emphasize that people entering Orthodoxy eventually find great comfort in the mystery of repentance. Ironically, one of the initial sources of hesitancy – the open confession of sins in front of another person, i.e. the priest – becomes a liberating factor in the sacrament itself. It is experienced as a relief, a lifting of a burden to verbalize one's sins to another human being. Again, there are reasons for this that will not be described here. Suffice it to say that the human dynamic in confession, the communication and relationship between the penitent and the father confessor is significant.

As important as it may be, however, abuses can and do occur which may lead to a misunderstanding of confession itself, as well as of the role of the priest in the sacrament and the life of the parish.

Practically speaking, an abuse often committed by the clergy is lengthy counseling during confession. There is advice fitting in the context of confession, and then another that is more appropriate when given during a meeting in the priest's office. A distinction should be made for at least two reasons. First, extensive counseling during the sacrament easily leads to a shift in emphasis from the contrition of the penitent and his actual confession, to the guidance given by the priest: *the* most important words uttered are those made by the one confessing his sins. It is not necessary in the sacrament for a clergyman to be *overly scrupulous* in his examination of an individual's deeds and thoughts. Second, lengthy confessions place an undue hardship on others waiting in line to make their confession, especially parents with small children and the elderly. Except in rare circumstances people should not have to remain in Church for hours before speaking with the priest. Discernment and discretion should be used; sensitivity to those waiting in line is in order.

More serious, however, is the tendency for some to be overly *dependent* upon the need for frequent confession. Extraordinary cases may exist where a person must come to confession every week, or every other week when receiving communion regularly. Generally speaking, however, such cases are exceptions and likely indicators that other remedies are required, in addition, to treat the penitent. The description of one being *dependent* on frequent confession is used intentionally. Confession can become as a narcotic, an idol to the penitent, the reason for coming to Church above all other reasons, an end in itself. This description may seem exaggerated, but such cases assuredly exist in

our parishes. It is possible, for instance, to visit certain communities belonging to the OCA and the Diocese of the South, having more than one priest, and observe people attending festal celebrations primarily to confess their sins to one of the priests during the service. Such a practice and similar ones reflect a misunderstanding not only of confession but of the significance of feasts in the Orthodox Church.

The above approach to confession can be associated with the dangerous tendency to *exaggerate* the dynamic, the relationship between the father confessor and the penitent. As specified above the main responsibilities of the parish priest in the sacrament are to hear the actual confession, bear witness to the contrition of the individual, and to give appropriate and concise advice related to one or more sins confessed, if necessary. Anything more should be accomplished outside of the sacrament proper, and fall in the realm of the priest's competency and counseling abilities. The penitent should be learning as well to take responsibility for his own life and not to look to the priest for answers to every one of life's questions. The Church has the task to educate and empower the faithful to discern on their own as Christians what is proper to say, do and think on a daily basis through the operation of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Where such an approach is not being taken by both clergy and laity a type of quasi-Orthodox *cult* can develop.

In this context we should stress that in the OCA one's father confessor is typically the local priest. He has the task imparted unto him by his bishop to oversee and administer the entire life of the parish. This includes being responsible for the lives, the spiritual health, of his parishioners, and dispensing the sacraments, insuring that those who approach the chalice are prepared, having confessed their sins. Such a task is worked out best by the local priest who has regular interaction with Church members. Should an individual seek spiritual counsel from another father confessor he should first receive a blessing from his priest, exercising a certain degree of caution. Pseudo-elders exist – some being associated with American and foreign monasteries – eager for disciples ready to give themselves over to their guidance.

None of this is written to diminish the importance of confession or the priest's role in the parish, or to demean our beloved monasteries. Rather, with the newly illumined particularly in mind, we hope to prevent abuses and misunderstandings that can easily arise out of enthusiasm for one's new found faith and out of a desire to counsel and help those in need. I hope that our clergy and faithful will take these words to heart, maintaining a fervent wish to "be saved and come to the knowledge of the Truth."