

## Objections to Confession

By Archamandrite Seraphim Aleksiev

HOW GREAT must be our wickedness! We do not turn to Confession not only because we forget about it, but we do not practice it even when we know about it. What can be more imprudent than this?

Confession is so important to us sinners that we must boldly say: there is no salvation for us without Confession. Abba Isaiah expresses the same thought: "If there were no repentance, nobody would be saved. just as Baptism cleanses us from original sin and from all sins committed prior to Baptism, so repentance, involving a confession of our sins, cleanses us from all lawlessness committed after Baptism."

We do not confess because we have objections to Confession. What are our objections usually?

Here are the main ones:

### **1) One says: "I am so sinful! Can God forgive my sins?"**

I do not believe this! That is why there is no use for me to go to Confession."

But if a man repents sincerely, any sin can be forgiven him. "The power of repentance is based on the power of God. The Doctor is all-powerful, and the Medicine given by Him is all-powerful" (Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov).

St. John Chrysostom, pondering on the miraculous results of sincere repentance, says: "Repentance is a medicine which destroys sin. It is a heavenly gift, a marvelous force which through the grace of God conquers the might and strictness of the laws. It accepts all and transforms all. It does not reject the fornicator, does not send away the adulterer, is not disgusted With the drunkard, does not loathe the idolater, does not neglect the slanderer, does not persecute the reviler nor the haughty man: it regenerates everybody because it is a furnace for purification from sin. The wound and the medicine, these are sin and Repentance" [Confession-author's note].

Do not tell me: "I have sinned much, how can I save myself?" You cannot, but your God can, and He can do it so that all your sins will be destroyed. Listen carefully to my words: your God destroys your sins in such a manner that there is neither a spot nor trace left of them, and as He restores your health, He presents you with the righteousness which frees you from the death penalty. He gives you righteousness; and the one who has sinned He makes equal to the one who has not, because He destroys sin and makes it disappear as if it had never been.

"But is it possible," you will say, "for the one who repents to be saved?" It is perfectly possible! "But I have spent my entire life in sin: if I repent, will I be saved?" Of course! "How do we know that?" From the love of your God for man. Am I relying on

your repentance to destroy your heavy sins? If you were to rely only on your repentance, then, indeed, you should tremble; but the mercy of God unites with repentance. And the mercy of God has no limits; words cannot express His kindness. Your wickedness has an end, but the Medicine for it is boundless! Your wickedness is human wickedness, but God's mercy is ineffable, so, have hope that it will exceed your sins. Imagine a spark which falls in the sea: will it start a fire? Will it appear again? Sin is to God's love for man what the spark is to the sea, not even that, but something much smaller! The sea, however big it may be, has an end, but God's love for man is limitless.

## **2) Another says: "Why should I go to Confession? I have no special sins.**

Let those who have murdered, stolen, raped, or committed some other sin go to Confession."

This objection to Confession is the complete opposite of the first one. There the man, because of the oppressing realization of his wickedness, does not believe that he can be forgiven. Here, there is a lack of any realization of wickedness. "I have no special sins...." But is it really so? When a man stays in a closed room for a long time, he gets used to the bad air in it and does not feel how unpleasant it is. But if someone comes in from outside, he will not be able to stand the stench in the room and will run away.

Let those who say, "I have no special sins," answer whether they have Christ in their hearts. He likes to inhabit pure hearts. But are their hearts pure? Hardly! They imagine that they are pure, but imagination is not reality. *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us* (1 John 1:8). And where there is a lie, there Christ is not.

Then, what should we do?—let us confess. *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just. . . to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9).

The Holy Fathers teach us that It is very hard for a man to see his sins. They explain this with the blindness caused by the devil. Abba Isaiah says: "When a man separates from the one on his left side, i.e. from communion with the demons and from following their suggestions, then he will see his sins against God in full; then he will know Jesus. But a man cannot see his sins until he separates himself from them through a separation filled with labor and distress. Those who have reached this condition have found tears and prayers; as they remember about their sly friendship with the passions, they do not dare to look towards God, and live constantly with a broken spirit."

if it were easy to see our sins, St. Ephraim the Syrian would not have prayed: "Lord, enable me to see my transgressions." Neither would Father John of Kronstadt say: "This is truly a gift of God—to be able to see your sins in their multitude and in all their loathsomeness."

It turns out that those who think that they do not have any great sins are actually blind. They must pray to God to enable them to perceive their sins and to save themselves from the extremely fatal spiritual delusion that they do not have any particular sins. Even if their sins are as small as specks of dust, if they are not cleaned with constant Confession, they pile up and dirty the room of the heart so that the high heavenly Guest cannot enter there.

The small sins are often more dangerous than the greatest crimes, because the latter weigh heavily on the conscience and insist on being atoned for, confessed, settled, erased, while the small sins do not weigh too much on the soul, but they have that perilous property of making it insensitive to the grace of God and indifferent to salvation. Fewer people have perished from ferocious wild beasts than have from small microbes, invisible to the naked eye. By being considered insignificant, the small sins are usually passed by without any attention. They are easily forgotten, but they create in man the most terrible habit—the habit of sinning, of dulling his moral consciousness. Thus the wretched sinner comes to deceive himself that he is not sinful, that everything is all right with him, when he is both a miserable and abject slave of sin.

Small sins create a true stagnation in the spiritual life of man. just as the wall clock stops because of the accumulation of fine dust, so the spiritual pulse of man gradually dies out under the thick layer of accumulated small sins. In order for the clock to start running again, the dust must be blown out. In order for man to restore his spiritual life, he needs to confess even the smallest of his sins.

**3) A third man says: "All this is true. But why should I confess when I know that tomorrow I will sin again? Is there any point in such confession? I see that one should confess only if one would sin no more after that!"**

This objection to Confession contains both something which is very true and something which is not. The right thing here is the desire not to sin any more after Confession. But we are feeble humans, and we cannot attain right away such a firmness which makes falling into voluntary sins impossible. If we cannot reach such steadfastness in virtue right away, should we surrender to vice? Or should we stop confessing? Which is better—to roll in the mud of the spiritual swamp, or to pick yourself up after each fall and go on with the hope that someday you may reach the solid and beautiful shore of virtue? If you do not confess, you remain in the mud. If you confess, you pick yourself up from the mud and clean yourself. "But why should I get up if tomorrow I will fall again?" you say. When you fall again, then get up again! Every day begin all over again! This is undoubtedly better than falling out of the habit of getting up.

A young monk complained to the great ascetic abba Sisoës: "Abba, what should I do? I fell." The elder answered: "Get up!" The monk said: "I got up, and I fell again!" The elder replied: "Get up again!" But the young monk asked: "For how long should I get up when I fall?" "Until your death," answered Abba Sisoës.

This wise dialogue should be remembered by all of us who want to change but, deceived by the devil, constantly return to our previous sins. Every time we fall into a transgression, we must get up. The "getting up"—this is Confession.

"But why should we play at falling and getting up?" ask some. It is not a game, but a struggle in which there is much sense. If we, as feeble humans, fall but get up again, there is a great probability that death will find us when we are standing. Then we are saved. But if we do not intend to get up, death will surely find us lying in the mud. Then we are lost forever!

St. John Chrysostom says: "Repentance opens the heavens for man, takes him to Paradise, overcomes the devil. Have you sinned? Do not despair! If you sin every day, then offer repentance every day! When there are rotten parts in old houses, we replace the parts with new ones, and we do not stop caring for the houses. In the same way, you should reason for yourself: if today you have defiled yourself with sin, immediately clean yourself with repentance."<sup>1</sup>

For the washing away of bodily dirtiness God has given water. And for the washing of spiritual foulness, God has given the grace of the holy Sacrament of Confession. Every man, when he dirties his hands, washes them. No one says: "I will not wash my hands any more, because I will get them dirty again!" But why is it then that many people say, "I will not go to Confession, because I will sin again tomorrow!" It is clear that the enemy of our salvation is enticing us not to wash our souls, so that he can gain power over them.

But we must not give in to such satanic suggestions; we should confess frequently, because frequent washing produces a taste for cleanliness in us.

Leave your house unswept, uncleaned, and unventilated for one year! Will it not turn into a pigsty? Now think about what the soul of a man is like when he has not cleaned it through Confession, not only for a year, but for twenty, forty, sixty, or seventy years!...

**4) A fourth man says: "I am confessing before God. What need is there for me to go to the priest?"**

... God has ordained the priest to administer the Holy Sacraments so that we can receive through them heavenly all-saving grace. Confession is a sacrament, too. If you confess before God, you are doing well, because you are moving your conscience, remembering your sins, and maybe even shedding tears for them. Yet you do not receive God's grace of forgiveness through all that. As when you sit and think how, during the never-ending day of the Heavenly Kingdom, those who have pleased God partake of the unfathomable-for-us heavenly Communion, you do not partake in reality, no matter how moved you may be by your thought, until you accept visible Holy Communion; so

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<sup>1</sup> St. John Chrysostom, Works, Vol. 2, Book 3 (St. Petersburg, 1896), p. 377.

too, until you go to the priest to whom Jesus Christ Himself has given the power to bind and loose, no matter how much you confess before God, you do not receive forgiveness for your sins, because God Himself has condescended to say to the priest: *whose so-ever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them* (John 20:23).

Besides, Confession before a priest has an enormous instructive meaning. It humbles us. It cures our pride; it makes us blush savingly; It instills in us shame and fear and thus protects us from future sins. When we sin, we sin against the Omnipotent God, but we are not ashamed before Him because we do not see Him. In the same manner, when we confess before God, we do so easily, because we do not see Him, and it is as if we were talking to ourselves. But what shyness comes over us when we confess before the priests! The man who has submitted to the Church order to confess before a priest will hardly dare to repeat his sins, when he thinks of having to reveal them again during Confession.<sup>2</sup> Jesus Christ has ordered very wisely that our repentance should be done before a priest who is God's witness!

"But how can the priest absolve sins?" you ask. He can, since God has ordered it so. "But is the priest himself not a sinful man?" If he is sinful, what do you lose from that? He is sinful for himself and will answer before God for his sins. The Holy Sacraments administered by him do not cease to be active for you because of his sinfulness if you accept them with faith and humility. Does the sunray get dirty when it falls on mud? In the same way, God's grace does not lessen by being transmitted by a priest muddled with sins. He himself may be denied grace on Judgment Day because of his sinfulness, but you, accepting through him God's grace, will not deprive yourself of it if you show yourself to be worthy.

"But will the priest not give away the secret of my confessed sins?" No! No priest has the right to tell of that which he has heard during Confession. He has to take the secret of the Confession to his grave. So do not worry that the shame of your sinfulness may be announced to society.

But remember that if you avoid Confession because of zeal for your honor, you will shame yourself. If you are ashamed to admit your weaknesses before one man, everyone will begin talking about them! Such is the spiritual law. People sense our weaknesses, no matter how diligently we hide them. If you confess them before one man, God, because of your humility before this single witness, will cover you with His grace before the many.

However, if you are shielding your name before the confessor, your authority will collapse before all. Repent only before one man. Your confession will teach you to struggle with your passions; and if you are really fighting against them, the multitude of people will not find out about them. You, with God's help, will be healed before you have shamed yourself. But if you do not want to be healed through Confession, then you will

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<sup>2</sup> St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 7th edition (Sergiev Posad, 1908), p. 41.

both expose your name to abuse here and then be disgraced before the whole universe at the Last Judgment!

**5) A fifth man says: "I am going to the priest to have him read the prayer of absolution for me."**

This is the most sacrilegious abuse of Confession! What does "the prayer of absolution" mean? It means a prayer for the absolving of sins. The Christian goes to the priest and, without confessing his sins, asks him: "Father, say the prayer of absolution for me!" or "Forgiving prayer and the priest puts the stole on the head of the repenting man and forgives him the lawlessnesses which he has not confessed, but has hidden.

Stop, you, servant of God! What are you doing? Do you know what sins are hiding in this soul that you forgive them so carelessly? What a responsibility you carry before God, too! What if a deadly sin is being hidden from you, and you so thoughtlessly allow the Christian to partake of Holy Communion? Will you not speed up the death of his soul? Do you not know the words of the holy Apostle Paul: *Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord* (I Cor. 11:27). Why do you not test the believer? Why do you let him eat and drink his eternal condemnation? Why do you give the Sacrament to an unrepentant sinner? Judas, too, took Holy Communion together with the other holy Apostles at the Last Supper, but because he was an unrepentant sinner, instead of God's grace, Satan went into him. Do you want to make a second Judas out of the careless Christian who approaches Christ without Confession, only with an "absolving" prayer? It is better to refuse Holy Communion to the unprepared man until he repents and confesses than to give him fire and condemnation.

This reading of the prayer of absolution is the greatest misuse! It is both lying to God and lying to oneself. Ananias and Sapphira paid with their lives for their wicked attempt to deceive the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 5: 1 -10). Do not fool yourself, Christian! The priest cannot forgive your sins until he hears them during Confession. He cannot loose the knots of your conscience until he has touched them. No prayer of absolution, lulling to your conscience, can help you. You have either confessed your sins and have received forgiveness for them, or you have not confessed them and they have stayed in your soul. If you can wash yourself without touching the water, then you will also be able to clean yourself from your lawlessness without confessing it.

The reading of the prayer of absolution, as a lulling of the conscience's vigilance, is a sin both for the priest and the layman, because in its core there is delusion and lies. This practice does not lead to spiritual healing, but to ever greater sinfulness. Someone is critically ill. The illness is identified with certainty, and the medicine which can overcome it is also precisely known; but because it is bitter, the sick man asks for something more pleasant. Then the doctor gives either morphine to kill the pain or some sweet but useless syrup. Will the sick man recover? Never! And who will be responsible for his death? He himself, because he wanted sweet syrups to fool himself, and the doctor, who knew what he should give, but out of a desire to please the man did not give it.

Just recently a good and knowledgeable Christian woman confided in me the following: "I had prepared for Holy Communion. I went to church and looked for the parish priest so that I could confess. The priest was very busy, and his mood, as I noticed, was not good. He met me with a slight irritation: 'Well, why have you come? To confess all the same small sins? You do not have any big transgressions before God. Come here. I will read you the prayer of absolution!' 'But I want to confess; something is weighing me down!'—'There is no need! Come and kneel here!' I obeyed, and he read me the prayer of absolution. I got up and walked away, but there was no relief in my soul! The burden remained there and tormented me even more! I returned to the priest from the middle of the temple, but he was already busy with other worshipers. The time for Communion came. I did not dare to take Communion, because I did not feel that my conscience was cleared. On the next Sunday I went to another church. There I went to Confession and took Communion. I felt a great joy from the Confession; it was only then that I was relieved."

Editor's Note: The same warning may be said about the current practice of "general confession," that is, when the priest raises his epitrachelion to the whole congregation and recites the prayer of absolution for all, even though none have given a personal confession.

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