

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Now, during the Fast, there are many opportunities to experience the wonderful, grace-filled and grace-bestowing Mystery, or Sacrament, of Holy Penance. As we all learned, either while growing up or in our being catechized before entering the Church from other religious bodies (or from unbelief), the great Sacrament of Confession is the event whereby a Christian presents himself or herself before God, represented by a member of the Church ordained by God for just such purposes, namely, a Priest of the Church, and acknowledges publicly his or her weak belief, or even unbelief, and all the events, thoughts, and actions he or she has committed which opposed Christ's teachings, especially those of the Beatitude "Commandments," sins against God, against one's neighbor, against one's own self, i.e., our self as God would have it be, and then, after this confession and with a firm intention to no longer commit such sins, with God's help, receives from the Priest, who has the power to bind and loose received via the Apostles and their successors in the Church, Absolution. "Absolution" is actually expressed by the Priest praying that the Lord God "may forgive, through His Grace and love of mankind, all thy sins." This prayer is guaranteed its effectiveness by the aforementioned bestowal: "whatsoever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." The Priest also, as a simple human being and member of the Church, adds his own personal forgiveness (as every Christian is bound to do: "forgive one another your trespasses"), in the current recension of the prayer used in Churches in the Russian and Slavic tradition, with these words "And I, an unworthy priest, through the power given unto me by Him, do forgive and absolve..." We are thereby empowered to go forth forgiven, refreshed, cleansed, as in a second Baptism, into renewed life. Preferably, but not necessarily, we are able to partake of the Holy Mysteries (Sacrament) of the Body and Blood of Christ as a first event in this new life. These Mysteries were termed by the early Christians the Medicine of Immortality, and they are, on a grand and very vast spiritual scale, "just what the (Heavenly?) Doctor ordered" for us.

There was a time, not long past, when both these Great and Saving Mysteries had fallen into desuetude. Due to a legal minimum having been established in some places, such as the notorious injunction of the Russian Emperor Peter the Great's "Spiritual Regulation," that an imperial subject must confess and commune at least once a year, at Pascha, combined with the sinful tendency of all sinners, such as we are, to do the minimum only (if we can only find out what it is!), many Christians failed to avail themselves of such great gifts to the Church as Confession and Communion as often as was spiritually healthy, or even, we can say, appropriate to the Orthodox person. (Nevertheless, there was never a time when representatives of the hierarchy and other leading clergy, such as St. John of Kronstadt, did not exhort the Faithful to more frequent Confession and Communion, but the ancient enemy of mankind, Satan, was successful in keeping many, many Christians away from something actually essential to a Christian life: FREQUENT Confession and Communion.)

In our time, part of the problem was addressed: frequency of Holy Communion. However, the other part was not only neglected, it even got worse in some places. The eminent Archpriest, theologian, and teacher, Father Sergius Bulgakov, once described this disappearance of the Sacrament of Confession from the Serbian and Greek religious scene as "the loss of religious culture." Yet, many of his own students may have, unwittingly, contributed to the present sad state where in some places there is no

real Sacrament of Confession at all, but only the exercise called "General Confession," which is, of course, no Confession at all, no matter the mental and verbal gymnastics which its well-meaning defenders as such may now display. "General Confession," a beneficial exercise whose time is probably long past, was described by the late great teacher, Archpriest Alexander Schmemmann, and implemented by the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America, as a practice which IS NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION, yet it became just that in the lives of individual Christians and even whole parishes.

Some of the pious were even led to believe that there was some relation between this innovative exercise called "General Confession," and the mass Confessions conducted by St. John of Kronstadt. NOTHING OF THE SORT! In the practice of mass Confessions conducted by St. John of Kronstadt, all, according to witnesses and participants, said or, in many cases, shouted aloud all their individual sins. That is, the Christians who participated in this mass Confession did not speak their sins ONLY in the presence of an ordained Priest in the relative seclusion of the Office of Confession, but in the presence and hearing of their friends and neighbors and strangers standing beside them in Church!

The exercise of General Confession was instituted and is practiced in our own Parish until now. As has been stated on more than one occasion from the Amvon and in this monthly bulletin, it is to be used by those who are going to Confession frequently, as means of making more meaningful and complete the practice of the Sacrament of Confession which all should be accomplishing during the Great Fast. It should be merely the prelude to the opening of the individual heart before the Priest when the individual comes to receive Absolution at the end of the General Confession. (There are, of course, those who will have gone to Confession and Communion on the morning of the day on which General Confession is conducted, and for these, to be sure, it would be considered appropriate to merely receive the Prayer of Absolution and the ensuing blessing of the Priest to receive Holy Communion. All others are exhorted to take advantage of the great gift of peace and healing being offered to them and to confess at this time their individual sins.)

Dear brothers and sisters, we live in the last years of the twentieth century since the coming of our Lord, God, and Savior, Jesus Christ in the flesh. Our Lord preached of sin, repentance, perfection, holiness, forgiveness, love, humility, self-denial, obedience, and more. Our Church maintains all these teachings as they were received from Our Lord through the holy process called Holy Tradition, that is, from Him, through the Apostles and their successors until now. While many who are outside the Church through false teaching have gone from distortion of what our Lord preached to ignoring it, the Church still has the same teaching and the same Sacramental Life as was established by Him. You and I not only live in the richest society yet seen on our planet, and in the more prosperous part of that richest society, but we have been given the great possibility of real Life within that Holy Tradition that comes from the God-Man Himself, Jesus Christ. Let's own up to our failure and failures in being grateful children of our Heavenly Father. Let's not keep the Holy Mystery of Penance locked away, or rather locked outside the house in which we live. Let's not treat one of God's greatest Gifts to us, the Gift of the Father to the Prodigal Son as He runs to meet us halfway when we confess our sins, as a spoiled child with too many toys treats a toy hoarded in

a closet to be dragged out to be shown to visitors as one of our possessions, but one we no longer have a use for.

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