

Rules for a Saving Confession

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Chapter V in *The Forgotten Medicine* (pp 41-57)

ALL CHRISTIANS without exception must go to Confession if they wish to be saved. But how should the truly faithful Confession occur? Many do not know this, and that is why it is necessary to discuss this question more thoroughly. Here we will look at the following three parts of Confession:

- a) What we should do before we go to the confessor.
- b) What we should do when we are with the confessor.
- c) What we should do when we come out of Confession.

What should we do before we go to the confessor?

The first and the last of the Apostles of Christ sinned gravely. Peter denied Christ; Judas betrayed Him. But Peter was forgiven and Judas perished. Peter regained his apostolic dignity, but the condemnation of the ages is still weighing on Judas. What saved Peter, and what destroyed Judas? What should have this wretch done? Should he have confessed the sin after he committed it? But, technically speaking, he confessed when he went to the scribes and the elders and told them, *I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood* (Matt. 27:4), and with the confession gave back the thirty silver pieces to them. Is this not enough? Alas, no! A confession by itself does not save. Besides a broken heart, a live faith in God's grace is needed. Judas despaired of his salvation; that is why he hung himself after his confession. His body hung on a tree, and his soul went to hell for eternal torment.

Peter did not do so. In the yard of Calaphas he denied Christ, his Benefactor and Teacher, three times: *I do not know the Man* (Matt. 26:74). But at the third denial, when he heard the rooster crow, he remembered what Christ had prophesied, realized his sin, and humbled his heart. He went out of that yard, got out of the bad company of the servants of the high priest, and, most importantly, began to shed bitter tears—tears of sincere, heartfelt, deep repentance. According to one tradition, throughout his whole life, whenever he heard a rooster crow Peter remembered his heavy sin, and his eyes turned into two springs of most repentant tears. Peter did not despair; he believed in God's mercy and thus saved himself.

St. Peter has left us a living lesson: to turn again to God after our fall into sin. It is **faith in God's mercy** which drives away every despair. God is love. However grave our sin may be, He will forgive it, provided we repent from the heart. Even if our sins are as high as the mountains, they will sink in the ocean of God's mercy. However, if a man despairs, he is lost. Despair is the triumph of the devil. In short, let us protect ourselves from despair, because if we despair no one can save us.

We should imitate the holy Apostle Peter in another respect, as well. As he realized his sin, he immediately went out of the accursed yard of the high priest where he had denied Christ. And you, brother or sister, when you want to confess and come back to God, come out of that accursed yard of sin where you have been until now and where you have denied Christ not three times, but thirty-three times. Come out with your body, with your heart, and with your mind! Peter went away from the servants of the high priest. You, too, abandon the friendship with those who teach you to sin or who unwittingly serve as a temptation to you.

The most important moral from the behavior of the repentant Apostle is the following. When St. Peter was left alone, he reflected in himself, relived the horror of his sin, and cried bitterly because of deep suffering. As you prepare to go to your confessor, do not approach him without preparing beforehand. First go away from the noise of daily life, leave every other care, gather your thoughts, and make a short but heartfelt prayer. Remember all your sins and even write them down on a piece of paper, so that you will not forget them in your embarrassment, and thus remain uncleansed of them, when you go to Confession. Remember the Ten Commandments, see which ones you have transgressed, recall whether you have committed a deadly sin, test your conscience, judge yourself, cry for your fall, and in such a mood go to the priest! Then you can be confident that you will receive true forgiveness, because *a heart that is broken and humbled, God will not despise* (Ps. 50:17).

Grieving over the sins committed by LLS is absolutely necessary, if we want to receive God's forgiveness. Indeed, this is what repentance consists of-to shed tears, to feel deep sorrow because of one's fall. As St. Isaac of Syria testifies, God accepts our repentant grief as an offering of repentance.¹

This is what we need to do before we go to the confessor.

What should we do when we are with the confessor?

We have to do the following: 1) Remember that we have come to Christ's infirmary. Here, the visible doctor is the priest, and the invisible-Christ Himself, 2) Confess our sins without false shame; 3) Not seek excuses for our sins; 4) Consciously conceal absolutely nothing; 5) Do not confess with general phrases which have no meaning; 6) Confess briefly, but precisely, the character of each of our sins; 7) Not reveal other people's sins, and conceal, whenever possible, the names of the persons who have tempted us or who have sinned with us through our fault; 8) Not to boast before the priest of any virtues of ours; 9) Not to transfer the blame on others, but only on ourselves; and 10) Have a sincere desire not to sin again.

1) When we go to Confession, **we enter Christ's infirmary**. Here God Himself is the Doctor, because only He can give and take away life, judge and acquit, punish and for-

¹ Protopriest G. Diatchenko, *Lessons and Examples of the Christian Faith*, (St. Petersburg), p. 547

give. The priest is only a witness and a representative of God. That is why, standing visibly before the priest, and invisibly before Christ Himself, we must approach the great mystery of spiritual cleansing with great trembling! The priest hears our confession, but God accepts it. The priest examines our soul, but God will heal it. The priest will prescribe the remedies, but God will do the miracle of spiritual renewal.

Be heedful, Christian, to what infirmary you have come, so that you will not go away uncured because of carelessness or neglect, or ignorance or misplaced fear. If you truly have fear of God, be fearless when you come to confess your sins. The judge before Whom you are standing is infinitely merciful! He is dreadful only for those who do not fear Him and in their thoughtlessness refuse to repent.

2) Your confession must be done **without false fear**. In this world, almost all of us live with a Pharisaic hypocrisy. We are one thing, but we want to pass for something else; we do not show ourselves outwardly as we are inwardly. We wish that people would have a good opinion of us, and that is why we hide the bad qualities and show the good ones. If we do not have any good ones, we boast of imagined virtues. That is why you will often meet people in this life who seem to be good on the outside, but are not so in their hearts. Do we not lie to each other like that in this world? But should we lie when we are standing for Confession?

It is true that it is not easy to show yourself sinful before your confessor when you pretend to be good before everyone else. You feel ashamed to reveal your weaknesses. Yet how are you going to be cured if you hide your illness? You conquer your shame when you go to a doctor for examination—that is how you cure your body. Then why are you ashamed when you go to the priest to cure your soul? Do you not see that shame is an obstacle to your salvation? So shrug off the shame and get a grip on determination! You must be ashamed when you sin, not when you confess your sin! God has connected shame with sin, and determination with Confession. Do not listen to the devil who corrupts God's order and inspires shame at the confession of sin, but determination at its commission. He has turned everything upside down in order to destroy you.

When the famous Socrates was walking along a street in Athens, he saw one of his students who was coming out of the house of a certain harlot. The young man became ashamed in front of his teacher and quickly drew back inside again to hide. "Oh, young man," Socrates said to him, "it is not that shameful to come out of such a house, but it is shameful to remain in such a house." Oh, Christian, I will say, it is not that shameful to disclose your sin in Confession, but it is shameful to remain closed in it, that is, to conceal it from your priest. St. Basil the Great said: "The hidden sin is an incurable sickness of the soul." How can you be cured from your illness if you hide it from the doctor?

Some are ashamed to confess because they have high posts and are high-ranking people, but look at the example of Bishop Potamius. He was of a respectable age, famous for his virtues, a model of celibacy. Yet it so happened that he fell in sin, but he got up immediately and thought of repenting at the council of all the bishops who

were to meet soon in his town. When the council began, Bishop Potamius, being respected by all, was elected as chairman. He began to feel in his heart a horrendous struggle between shame and heartfelt repentance. "Potamius," shame was saying on one side, "are you really going to confess in public?"

"Potamius," repentance was calling on the other side, "why are you delaying and not doing that which you decided to do?"

"Are you not ashamed before the people?" reasoned shame.

"You be ashamed before God!" advised repentance.

"But you are a prelate! You will become a temptation!" reasoned shame.

"Precisely because of your being a prelate, YOU must give the world a good example!" cried repentance.

In the end repentance won, and shame retreated. Potamius got up from his chair and confessed his sin before all. Even the angels in heaven wondered at such a confession!

If a prelate was not ashamed to confess his sin before a whole council, why should we be ashamed to tell of our sins secretly before one servant of God? The moment we tell of them, they stop being sins. When David confessed his sins before Nathan, he immediately heard the comforting word, *The Lord has put away thy sin* (II Kings 12:13). But the unconfessed sin leaves an incurable, deadly wound on the soul. So let us confess boldly!

3) When we are standing before the court of voluntary confession, **we must not seek excuses for our sins**. Let us suffer in voluntary self-exposure. This suffering is expiatory. Let us blush with embarrassment. Our sins are burning in the flames of self-exposure. But if we begin to excuse ourselves, to justify ourselves, that is the end of the saving power of our confession. What is Confession? —repentance. And the truly repentant person knows only one thing—to cry and ask for mercy. If he begins to justify himself, to use cunning, all of his repentant mood will vanish into thin air. In the Sacrament of Confession the repentant mood is very important.

We must remember all of this, because there are many Christians who, as they confess, always want to excuse themselves in some way. Even though they confess their sin, they always try to make it less important and heavy, always looking for some extenuating circumstances, so that they will look more innocent. They must know that the heavenly court is not like the earthly one. Before the earthly court the defendant tries to make himself appear more innocent so that he will be acquitted. Before God's court it is the opposite: whoever accuses himself more is acquitted more.

Is it not for this that Jesus Christ is calling us to Himself, to forgive us all voluntary and involuntary sins? No other religion teaches of a God as full of love for men as ours does.

It is told about Blessed Jerome that, as he lived in Palestine and worked in the cave of Bethlehem where our Saviour was born, he had a wondrous vision on Christmas. Jesus Christ appeared to him as a child and asked him: "Jerome, when everyone presents something to me, what are you going to give me?"

"My virtues and prayers," answered St. Jerome.

"This is good, but what else?"

"My heart, my soul, and all of myself"

"I accept that, too, but I want something else from you as well."

"But what else should I give You, Lord?" wondered the ascetic.

"Give me your sins!"

The Blessed Jerome began to cry brokenheartedly. He asked through tears: "Why do You need my sins, Lord?"

"I want to take them on myself"

Do you hear? "Give me your sins!" Jesus Christ wants from us our sins. Let us give them to Him in the holy Sacrament of Confession, and He will forgive us for them.

4) **We must consciously hide absolutely nothing** before the priest. If we unwittingly forget a sin, we must confess it the next time. To conceal something for which our conscience is clearly bothering us would mean that we have doubled our sin: doubled, because one, we have committed it, and two, we have concealed it.

Do not hide your sin in your soul. It is a deadly disease. It is an ulcer which, if it is not operated on, can send you to the grave. By concealing our sins we are doing the greatest favor to the devil, who makes us commit lawlessness and afterwards keep it in our souls as his treasure, which will serve him as accusatory material against us. Confess everything which stains your conscience. The more waste you carry out of your soul of your own accord, the more your soul will be swept by God's grace. Whoever sins enters into an alliance with the devil, but whoever confesses breaks up his friendship with the demons. Confession is treason against the devil. It is the only virtuous treachery.

St. Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov teaches us wonderfully: "Through the confession of sins the friendship with the demons is broken up. The hatred of sin is a proof of true repentance and of the determination of a man to lead a virtuous life. If you have adopted the habit of sinning, confess your sins more often, and soon you will free yourself from the captivity of sin. Lightly and joyously you will follow the Lord Jesus Christ. The friends of a man who constantly betrays them become his enemies and go away from him as from a traitor who continually seeks their certain peril; and the sins, too, draw back from the man who confesses them, because the sins are based and stand on the pride of the fallen nature and cannot stand exposure."²

5) In Confession **we must not use general terms** which do not mean anything. Many, especially among those confessing for the first time, learn what to say before the

² Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, Works, Vol. 3, (St. Petersburg, 1905), p. 102.

priest when they go to him. Either out of timidity or out of lack of experience, they often say inappropriate things and leave Confession without benefit.

A Christian woman decided to go to Confession, but she did not know what to do. She asked another woman for advice, and that woman taught her: "Say: 'I am guilty of everything!' and that is it." "Oh, it is very easy then," said the first Christian to herself and stood encouraged before the servant of God.

When the priest asked her about her sins, she calmly said: "Father, I am guilty of everything!" and thought that she had finished her confession. "And have you stolen any horses?" he unexpectedly asked. "Have I stolen horses?" she wondered. "It never occurred to me to commit such a sin!" "Ah, so you are not guilty of everything!" wisely said the priest. "There are people who do steal horses. But you, as it turns out, have not committed this sin. Let us see, one by one, in what you have sinned," so he led her to a true confession.

6) When we confess, we must tell **briefly and accurately** the nature of each of our sins. We see that general terms do not benefit the confessing person. He must recount individually each of his transgressions before God. Of course that does not mean that he must begin to tell long and detailed stories. The priest is usually a very busy man. During the feasts, and especially before Communion, many are waiting their turn to confess to him. That is why conciseness, accuracy, and briefness are needed. In order to achieve that, it is recommended that the sins be recorded beforehand on a piece of paper and that they be read during Confession. Do not wait for the priest to ask you questions. The benefit is much greater when you tell about your sins of your own accord. If the confessor stops you and, in order to clarify your spiritual condition for himself, asks you a question, you are obliged to answer accurately and straight to the point.

Some are cunning at Confession and, thinking that they can outwit even God, instead of briefly describing the nature of their sin—i.e., "I hate my neighbor"—out of an improper desire not to compromise themselves, begin to tell long and unnecessary stories of how their neighbor hated them, how he harmed them, etc. Again, instead of saying: "I stole such-and-such a thing," they begin explaining how someone else's property has been left with them. This is not a confession, but a foolish slyness before God.

7) During Confession, **we must not tell of other people's sins**, but only of ours, withholding whenever possible the names of the persons who have caused us to sin or whom we have tempted to sin with us.

Many do not abide by this natural rule and fall into the following unreasonableness: when they come to confess their sins, they speak only about those of other people: "She, my daughter-in-law, did this and that! My husband is an impossible boor!" or "My wife is not obeying me; she has a very bad character, and she is constantly quarreling with me and my family. A friend of mine, his name is so-and-so,—you know him, Father—has insulted me greatly. And so-and-so, Father did this!"

This is not Confession-to accuse others instead of yourself. Rather, It is a judgment of others. Those who do this come to the priest sinful and leave even more so!

8) Others, when they come to Confession, instead of exposing, themselves, which is natural, necessary, and good during Confession, most unexpectedly begin to **boast**: "I, Father, have neither murdered nor stolen. Neither am I a drunkard. I live most respectably. I am held in respect by my neighbors and friends. Well, as a human, I might have sinned somehow at some time, but now I do not remember anything. My conscience is clear."

This terrible smugness is an even greater sin than those horrible sins which such a man boasts of never having committed, because he has sunk in the abyss of sin-dumb, complacent pride.

Many people arrive at the dulling of their moral sense and the belief that they are not sinful because of staying away too long from God's grace, which is given through the Sacraments of Christ's Church. The zealous servant of Christ from the village of Chepelare, the late Archpriest Eustathius Iankov, told me about one such man:

"My parishioner Bocho was a drunkard. He broke off with the Church and always hung around the bar. For a long time he did not come either to confess nor to take Communion. One evening his sister, who was a very devout Christian, called me.

'Come, father, to confess and give Communion to Bocho. He is not sick, but since I know that he would not come to you, you go to him!'

I went. I explained to him how good it would be for him to confess. But he stood silent. I asked him what was on his conscience. Was something bothering him?

'There is nothing. My conscience is clear,' he said.

'But how is it that there is nothing? Are you not a sinful man.' 'I have done nothing wrong.'

'And do you want to take Communion?'

'Why not? I will take Communion,' he answered indifferently.

'Good! Tomorrow I will come to your house with the Holy Gifts.'

I went back home, but something was so heavy on my soul.

Bocho's sister prepared him for Holy Communion—helped him to wash himself, gave him clean clothes to change into.

On the next day I was carrying the Holy Gifts to Bocho's place. But I met some acquaintances of mine, and they told me: 'Bocho died unexpectedly last night!'

I was numbed with horror. Obviously, God did not allow him to take Holy Communion, because he did not want to confess and be humbled before God by admitting to be sinful."

9) When we confess, **we must put the blame not on others, but on ourselves.**

In Paradise our ancestors Adam and Eve sinned: they ate from the tree with the forbidden fruit. God called them to confess, ready to forgive them: "Adam, where are you? Eve, what have you done?" Oh, if they **had confessed their sin bravely!** If they had admitted their guilt! If they had not transferred the blame each on the other! If Adam

had said for himself, "God, forgive me! I am guilty!" and if Eve had hurried to admit: "No, Lord. Adam is not guilty, because I gave him to eat from the forbidden fruit!" If they had done so, they would not have been driven out of Paradise.

Instead, what did they do? When God spoke to them, they began to justify themselves and to transfer the blame one to the other. "Adam, what have you done?" "Not I, Lord, but the woman; she is to blame!" "Eve, what did you do?" "Not I, Lord; the snake, it tempted me." Both of them concealed their guilt. That is why they were driven out of Paradise.

But do not many among us do as Adam and Eve did? When we go to Confession, the priest asks: "Adam, in what condition are You? Eve, what have you done?" We justify ourselves, hide our sins, and blame others. This is not Confession! True Confession is a voluntary self-exposure before the confessor, fearless self-accusation, diligent self-compromise, virtuous self-shaming, deep brokenness, non-hypocritical sorrow for sins, and true desire for correction with God's help.

10) The crown of true repentance is the **firm intention not to sin any more in the future.**

There are people who confess only to be able to take Communion. They are led by the thought that the taking of Communion without Confession is a heavy sin for the soul, but they do not make the decision in their hearts to begin a new life. They think: "I will sin until the next Confession, and I will repent again; if there is Confession, the sin is not so frightful." And some even hurry to commit the sins which they desire but have not yet committed before they confess, so that they can report them in the coming Confession. All this is loathsome and base before God! Confession is not beneficial to the one who consciously follows the sinful whimsies of his perverted will and transgresses God's commands on purpose. Such a man who creates sinful habits in himself later wonders in vain why, when he confesses, he cannot correct himself! He cannot correct himself because he himself does not want to.

St. Basil the Great says: "It is not he who says: 'I have sinned', but after that continues to sin that is confessing his sin, but it is he who, according to the words of the Psalm, has seen his sin and has hated it. Of what use is the care of the doctor to the sick man when the one suffering from the diseases is holding steadfastly to that which is detrimental to life? In the same way, there is no use in forgiving the injustices of the man who continues to commit them. The one who continues to live in debauchery does not benefit from the loosing of the sin of debauchery. The wisest Home-builder of our life wants the one who has lived in sins and afterwards has given a vow to begin a new life, to put an end to his past and, after the committed sins, lay a beginning as a person ready for a new life through repentance."³

In order for us to have true benefit from Confession, we must firmly resolve not to sin any more in the future. True repentance, according to the Holy Fathers, is in exactly

³ Protopriest Diatchenko, op. cit., p. 556.

this, not to repeat your sin any more! "Whoever allows himself to sin arbitrarily, with the hope that he will repent," says St. Isaac the Syrian, "deals treacherously with God. Death strikes him unexpectedly, and he does not live to the time which he presumed to devote to virtue."⁴

In order for us to have true benefit from Confession, we must resolve not to sin in the future. True repentance, according to the Holy Fathers, consists precisely in not repeating the sin any more. In order for this to happen, in Confession we must wish with all our heart to begin a new life in the future. If we have this saving desire, let us be confident that God will help us by all means.

What Should We Do When We Leave the Confessor?

After we have confessed well, we must carry out the penance which has been given to us: bows, intensified prayer, fasting, diligent reading of God's Word, almsgiving, visiting the sick, caring for orphans, etc. We must pay special attention to the following three points:

1) If you have an enmity against someone, **forgive with all your heart**, so that God will also forgive you (cf. Matt. 6:14-15). Otherwise, your confession will be in vain.

Themistocles and Aristides, distinguished Athenian governors, were in constant enmity between themselves. But their country assigned them to do an important state job together. However, how could they abandon the enmity? Then Aristides said: "Themistocles, do you want to leave the enmity here, on the border? We will go, do the job, and, if you want, when we come back, we will renew our enmity!"—and so they did. After successfully completing the state job, they came back and again continued to be hostile to each other.

Does it not happen so with Christians who are on hostile terms? They confess, take Communion from the same cup, and leave the hostility on the threshold of the temple; but when they leave the church, they renew the enmity again.... Is this Confession? They are committing a greater sin by confessing and taking Communion without wanting to give up hatred towards their personal enemies. Let us put an end to enmities!

2) Others who have admitted in Confession that they have violated their celibacy or family honor must **give up the bad road forever**. They cannot love both the sin and God.

A philosopher once went boating in the sea. There was a strong storm which almost overturned his boat. It was a miracle that he survived. He came back home and,

⁴ Ibid, p. 556.

since one of his windows was overlooking the sea, immediately walled up that window, so that he would not look towards the sea and fall into the temptation of wanting to go boating again!

Oh, Christian, how many times you, too, have almost lost both your life and your soul in the sea of lewd love! You have been delivered by a miracle. Now avoid the causes for it! Do not go by that road anymore. Do not enter that house anymore. Do not look toward that window anymore. Close your eyes so that the temptation will not enter your heart. Otherwise, you will perish!

3) Finally, if you have misappropriated another's possession, if you have robbed someone, **return that which does not belong to you.** Otherwise, there is no forgiveness for you.

If you blaspheme God's name, if you deny Orthodoxy, if you are angry, if you are proud, if you envy, or commit other heavy sins—when you repent, everything will be forgiven you. Why? Because with all of these sins you offend God, and God has made the priest His representative for all these sins with which men offend Him. As God's representative, the priest can forgive you the sins against God if you repent.

However, if you keep another's property and confess it but do not return it, the priest does not have the right to forgive you. If you are holding in your hands the property of some poor man, how can the priest forgive you for this sin? The poor man has not made the priest his substitute and has not given him the power to forgive his stolen property on his behalf

But you will say: "I give alms to the monasteries and the poor!" Be quiet! No law, either of God or of man, allows anyone to give away as a gift to someone another man's property. Therefore, in order to receive forgiveness from God, return that which does not belong to you!

We see then what the rules are for a saving Confession: first, before we go to the confessor, we must examine well our conscience; second, when we are with the priest, we must confess sincerely, with a broken heart, and without shame and excuses; third, when we leave the priest, we must carry out our penance, put an end to the hostility, give up our impure life, and return that which *Is not ours '

He who does not correct his behavior through Confession does not confess but talks idly, according to the words of St. Basil the Great.⁵

⁵ Ibid, p. 540.