Catechesis 10 The Mystery of Confession



**Confession in the Old Testament:**

"First confess thy transgressions, that thou mayest be justified" (*Isaiah 43:26) [LXX]. The Wisdom of Sirach 4:26; 20:3.*

“But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die.  All his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him: in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live.  Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die, saith the Lord God, and not that he should return from his ways, and live?” (*Ezekiel 18:21-23*)

“And while I *was* speaking, and praying, and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God for the holy mountain of my God” (*Daniel 9:20*).

“Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore” (*Ezra 10:1*).

“And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers” (*Nehemiah 9:2*).

“I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.” (*Psalm 32:5*).

Psalm 50

“He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh *them* shall have mercy” (*Proverbs 28:13*).

**Confession in the New Testament:**

And they were baptized by him in Jordan, confessing their sins (*Matthew 3:6*).

 Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.  And when he had said this, he breathed on them*,* and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost:  Whosesoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosesoever sins ye retain, they are retained (*John 20:22-23).*

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (*I John 1:19*).

And many that believed came, and confessed, and showed their deeds (*Acts 19:18*).

    Both Christ and St John the Baptist preached the same message, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (*Matt. 3:2, 4:17, Mark 1:15*). St Peter advised people, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (*Acts 2:38*). In the early Church, some people delayed Baptism until the end of their lives because they knew that Baptism washed away all the sins they had committed up to that point, but some thought that sins committed after Baptism could not be forgiven (They may have been thinking of *Matt.12:31-32, Heb. 6:4-6,* and *I John 5:16)*. The reason why these sins could not be forgiven is to be found in the sinners themselves, and in their lack of repentance, and not in the will of God.

**The Apostolic Fathers**:

 “Assemble on the Lord’s Day, and break bread and offer the Eucharist; but first make confession of your faults, so that your confession may be a pure one.” **[[1]](#footnote-2)**

 “Confess your sins. Do not go to prayer with an evil conscience.” **[[2]](#footnote-3)**

**Later Writers:**

"Confession is nothing other than the necessary avowal or recognition of one's own failings and foolishness, that is, a realization of one's own poverty" (St Symeon the New Theologian, Letter on Confession).

     Unfortunately, people do sin after their Baptism, and so the Lord provided the Mystery of Repentance for us (John 20: 22-23) for the forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism. St John, the abbot of Mount Sinai says, “Repentance is the renewal of baptism.” **[[3]](#footnote-4)** St John later says that mourning and compunction console those who are contrite, and uproot from the heart bad habits and the addictions of sin.**[[4]](#footnote-5)**

 Later in the same book he says, “Greater than baptism itself is the fountain of tears after baptism…. For baptism is the washing away of evils that were in us before, but the sins committed after baptism are washed away by tears… And if God in His love for mankind had not given us tears, those being saved would be few indeed and hard to find.” [[5]](#footnote-6)

     We know that Baptism washes away all the sins we have committed up to that point, but what about sins committed after Baptism? God, Who became man for our salvation, "aware of the exceeding frailty and misery of our nature," does not permit our sickness to remain without a remedy. He has provided the Mystery of Repentance for the sins we commit after Baptism. "For after we have received the knowledge of the truth, and have been sanctified by water and the Spirit, and cleansed without effort from all sin and all defilement, if we should chance to fall into any transgression, there is... no second regeneration made within us by the Spirit through Baptism in the water of the font, and wholly recreating us (because that gift is given once for all): but by means of painful repentance, hot tears, toils and sweats, there is a purifying and pardoning of our offenses through the tender mercy of our God. For the fount of tears is also called a baptism, according to the grace of the Master; but it needs labor and time; and many has it saved after many a fall; because there is no sin too great for the clemency of God, if we are quick to repent and purge the shame of our offenses, and death does not overtake us and we do not depart from this life still defiled; for in the grave there is no confession nor repentance. But as long as we are among the living, while the foundation of our Orthodox Faith continues

unshattered," even if some of our inner building is damaged, it is possible to renew the damaged portion through repentance.**[[6]](#footnote-7)**

**THE WAY OF A PILGRIM**

 This book has become a spiritual classic, and has been translated into several languages, including English. There is a wonderful examination of conscience in the section entitled “A Confession which leads the inward man to humility.”

**Lenten Troparia:**

These beautiful and compunctionate troparia first appear on the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, and are sung during the Great Fast:

*Open to me the gates of repentance, O Giver of Life, for my spirit rises early to pray toward thy holy temple, bearing the temple of my body all defiled; but in Thy compassion, purify me by the loving kindness of Thy mercy.*

*Lead me on the paths of salvation, O Mother of God, for I have profaned my soul with shameful sins, and have wasted my life in laziness; but by thine intercessions, deliver me from all impurity.*

*When I think of the many evil things I have done, wretch that I am, I tremble at the fearful Day of Judgment; but trusting in Thy living kindness, like David I cry to Thee: Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy.*

These hymns may be heard at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CSbIBkjq4g>

     Strictly speaking, the power to forgive sins belongs to God (Mark 2:7), but Christ promised to give this power to the Apostles and their successors (Matt. 16:19), fulfilling this promise after the Resurrection (John 20:19-23). In the Greek form of Confession, the priest prays for God to forgive the penitent. In the Russian form, under Western influences, the priest says that he himself forgives and absolves the penitent.

    We are really confessing to Christ Himself, Who "is invisibly present." It is God alone Who forgives sins (Consider the sinful woman Luke 7:36-50, the paralytic (Matt. 9:2-8, Luke 5:15-26). Before Confession, the priest reminds the penitent that he is merely acting as a witness, "bearing testimony before Him of all things which you say to me." On the fearful Day of Judgment, the priest will bear witness before God that someone has, or has not, truly repented. After Confession, the priest prays that God will forgive his spiritual child "through me, a sinner," for all the things he/she has confessed.

 Our confession should not be something superficial, as we read in the Life of St Ambrose of Milan (*Dec. 7*): “Confession is not sufficient unless correction of the deed follows.” **[[7]](#footnote-8)**

 St Gregory of Nyssa tells us that true repentance is not only the disappearance of the works and acts of sin, but also the disappearance of the dispositions and inclinations of the heart. “This is repentance: the release from and disappearance of past things, either those things which were practiced, or those things which were thought about.” **[[8]](#footnote-9)**

    St John of Damascus likens Confession to a "second Baptism," because through Confession, a person's spiritual afflictions are treated, the impurities of the soul are removed, and a Christian becomes innocent and sanctified, just as he emerged from the waters of Baptism. Relieved of the burden of sins, one once more comes to life spiritually, and is able to strengthen himself to follow the path of virtue. There are two basic actions in Confession: 1) Confession before one's Spiritual Father, 2) The prayer read by the priest, forgiving and remitting our sins.

 St Photios the Great (*Feb. 6*) also tells us that sins committed after Baptism can be healed through Confession and sincere repentance (Homily I “*The Beginning of Lent*”): **[[9]](#footnote-10)**

For it is written, "I said, I will confess mine iniquity to the Lord against myself; and thou forgavest the ungodliness of my heart." (*Psalm 31/32:5*). "Therefore confess your sins one to another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed," bids the disciple and Brother of the Lord (*James 5:16*). "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous, that he may forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness,” the Beloved Disciple also pledges (*I John I: 9*).

 How shall I confess? By imitating the Prodigal in falling down and crying out to the Lord with contrite heart and humbleness of spirit, "I have sinned against heaven and before thee (*Luke 15: 21*); "receive me, Father, in my repentance."

 How shall I confess? By departing from error and by abhorring sin. "For if thou shalt turn, and humble thyself before the Lord, and remove unrighteousness far from thy habitation, the Almighty shall be thy helper" (*Job 22, 23, 25*). "Turn to me, and I shall turn to thee," saith the Lord Almighty (*Zachariah 1:3*).

 How shall I confess? By turning with all my heart, and by humbling myself with fasting and lamentation and rending of the heart. "Now, therefore," saith the Lord our God, "turn to me with all your heart, and with fasting and with weeping and with lamentation; and rend your heart, not your garments, and turn to the Lord  your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, long-suffering and plenteous in mercy" (*Joel 2: 12-13*).

 How shallI confess? By pitying the poor and the beggar, and by forgiving my neighbor's faults. For it is said "the merciful shall obtain mercy" (*Matt. 5: 7*), and "forgive, and it shall be forgiven you"(*Matt. 6: 14*), and "a man's mercy is to him as a signet" (*Sirach 17:22*), and "it is a good gift” (*Proverbs 4: 2*) to those who do it before the Most High. Thus a sin is wiped out, thus are we cleansed of faults.

 "It is He again Who crieth out through the Prophet Isaiah: I, even I, am he who blots out thy transgressions for my own sake (*Is. 43: 25*) and I shall not remember them. But do thou remember, and let us plead together; do thou first confess thy transgressions, that thou mayest be justified;" and "Behold, I have blotted out thy transgressions as a cloud, and thy sins as darkness" (*Is. 44: 22*). **[[10]](#footnote-11)**

      The task of repentance and purifying the soul is difficult at first, but St Symeon the New Theologian tells us that "according to the degree of his repentance, every man will find a corresponding boldness and familiarity with God" such as Adam and Eve had in Paradise before the Fall (*Ethical Discourse 13*). This should help us to overcome any feelings of shame or fear in confessing our sins.

    The late Elder Gabriel (1886-1983) of Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos says, "Confession cleanses us and gives us purity, so that we might worthily receive Divine Communion."  It is the revelation, to a Spiritual Father, of our soul's recognition of responsibility for the sins we have committed, and of our sense of deep sorrow and contrition, and of our hope for divine mercy and forgiveness. God's mercy is greater than any sin we may commit, and there is no sin which cannot be forgiven if we are truly repentant.

 Although it is possible to forgive sins committed after Baptism, we must not become negligent or take this for granted. It is much easier to be vigilant and to preserve the grace of Baptism than to recover it later. St John Chrysostom tells catechumens to keep their baptismal garment clean and spotless. “Be careful and take thought for your luster now, so that you will live in purity at all times and get no stain on your robe. This is much better than that you grow careless and later weep and beat your breast so that you may wipe clean the filth that has besmirched you.” [[11]](#footnote-12)

     Just as the priest is bound not to reveal anything he hears in Confession, the penitent also should not repeat to others what he/she says to the priest, or what the priest says to him/her. Any counsel or advice is given for the particular circumstances of each individual, and may not apply to others. Instead of receiving benefit, a person who follows the advice given to someone else may actually find that advice detrimental, since everyone's circumstances are different. Also, a person who accidentally overhears part of someone's Confession is bound not to reveal it to anyone else.

    Our sin is not only that we fail to grow in perfection toward a "mature manhood" in Christ (Eph. 4:13), but that we seem unaware of our high calling, and constantly offend against it in our thoughts, words, and actions, which often lead us in the opposite direction. Our sins may consist of certain negative actions which we commit, or even those positive actions which we should do, but fail to do. "To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin" (James 4:14).

    In order to correct ourselves, we must repent. The Greek word metanoia (μετάνοια) literally means "a change of mind." The Christian life is not a perfect state which is attained at one particular moment of a person's life, but it is rather a movement, a continual progress, a task which is never fully accomplished in this life. Our repentance, therefore, must be a continual change of our mind, thought, and disposition toward God.

 Father Alban Butler has a wonderful explanation of repentance in his Life of Saint Nikon Metanoeite (*Nov. 26*):

*The necessity and obligation that all men lie under of doing penance, he inculcated according to the maxims of the Gospel; and he excellently explained the conditions of sincere repentance. For thousands and thousands befool themselves, and mock God in this point, when, by venting a few sighs and groans they persuade themselves that they have repented, though their hearts all the while deceive them. A true penitent must apply himself to the difficult work of self-examination by a strict scrutiny into, and survey of, the whole state of his soul in order to discover every latent inordinate affection or passion. He must pursue sin home to his inclinations, and dislodge it thence; otherwise all he does will be to little purpose; so long as the root of sin remains lurking in the affections, it will shoot out again, and God who sees it there, pays no regard to lying vows and protestations. By earnest prayer, mortification, alms, and holy meditation the penitential sorrow must be improved, till it has forced its way into the very innermost corners and recesses of the soul, shaken all the powers of sin, and formed that new creature which is little understood among Christians, though the very essence of a Christian life. By teaching penitents thus to lay the axe to the very root of sin, St. Nicon had the comfort to see many wonderful conversions wrought amongst Christians, by which the face of religion seemed changed amongst them through the whole island. The saint, fearing lest the infant-principles of conversion might be stifled and overlaid by the cares of the world, was infinitely solicitous to engage penitents to cut off and renounce all occasions of sin, to strengthen their souls in the fervent practice of all virtues and good works, and to cultivate the seeds of piety which the divine grace had sown in them.***[[12]](#footnote-13)**

 We should take these words to heart so that our own repentance is not just a superficial enumeration of our sins, but is rooted in a genuine desire to correct ourselves, to turn away from everything that separates us from God, and to acquire virtues and holiness, which bring us closer to Him.

    The holy Elder Gabriel says that the person coming to Confession "must resolve to deny the 'old man,' must hate sin, must feel regret for the sins he has committed." One must repent before God and one's Spiritual Father, "promising to change his life in word and in deed, and to return to the straight path of virtue. Furthermore, he must accept and comply with the penance prescribed for him."

     The purpose and power of Christ always remains in His Church. "If we confess our sins, He will forgive us" (I John 1:9). Just as we come to the Church to be baptized, chrismated, and to receive Holy Communion, so we also go to the Church to confess our sins and to receive God's forgiveness.

    In the early Church, Confession was something public, and was done before the whole congregation. Confessing privately to God was not sufficient in Biblical or Church History. When a person confessed in front of the community, however, it was clear to all that he/she had repented, and then the bishop or priest would read the prayer of absolution.

    With the influx of new Christians (many of them less committed than those who had risked their lives for their faith) after the period of persecution ended, this practice became increasingly difficult to continue. There was necessarily a loss of intimacy and sense of community when more people became Christians. Church members seemed to lose their mutual concern for one another, and some could not refrain from gossiping about what they heard people confess in church. Thus, Confession became more private, and people revealed their sins to the bishop, priest, or even to monastics (the bishop or priest still read the prayer of absolution if the monk was not also a priest).

    Today, in most cases, only the priest or bishop hears someone's Confession, but it is still "public." It takes place at the front of the church, not in a separate room or enclosed area. Although people no longer confess to the whole community, the priest is there to represent all the members of the parish. In his person, we still confess to all, because our actions have repercussions for all. Our relationship with God is not just an isolated one, something between the individual and the Lord. We are also members of one another. Our salvation must be worked out with others, both in the community of the Church, and in the context of the Christian family. Salvation depends also on our relationship with our neighbor.

 St Nikolai Velimirovic (*March 18*) writes in his *PROLOG FROM OCHRID*, “How terrible a thing it is to perform a sinful act, to speak a sinful word, and to think a sinful thought…. It is of the greatest importance to know and weigh how every act, word, and thought of yours makes an inescapable impression on four sides: on God and the spiritual world, on nature, on other people, and on your own soul. If you train yourself in this knowledge, you will reach a high level of spiritual vigilance.” **[[13]](#footnote-14)**

     Who is my neighbor? Christ answers this question in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). On the Day of Judgment, God will ask us for an account of our lives, how we loved both Him and our neighbor. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. As you did it not to the least of these, you did it not to me" (Matt. 25:40, 45).

    The priest hears Confessions because he is the one responsible for the spiritual integrity of the community, and must ensure that no one approaches the Eucharist in a faithless or sinful manner. He cares for the whole life of the local parish, as the one who manifests the presence of Christ to the Body. We also confess to our pastor because he manifests all the members of the Church to each individual member.

 Serious sins (murder, adultery, fornication, blasphemy, public denial of Christ, etc.), by their very nature, exclude us from the Eucharist if we do not repent. The power to bind and to loose, given by Christ to the Apostles and their successors (*John 20:19-23*), is understood as the authority to forgive sins. Binding can also mean forbidding unrepentant sinners to come to Holy Communion. Similarly, loosing also means reconciling an individual with God and with the Church, and restoring that person to Communion. We must not imagine, however, that we can simply conceal these sins from our Spiritual Father and still partake of the Holy Mysteries. “There are many pangs for the unyielding heart, and the patient who resists his physician amplifies his torment.” **[[14]](#footnote-15)** “If a man is ill and he recognizes his ailment, his healing will be easy. If he confesses his pain, he draws nigh his cure…. There is no unpardonable sin, save the unrepented one.” **[[15]](#footnote-16)**

 “At the time of your defeat, when you are bound both with languor and slothfulness, and subdued by the enemy in the most painful misery and wearisome labor of sin, ponder in your heart on the former time of your diligence, and how you used to concern yourself even over the most minute matters, and the valiant struggles you displayed… reflect upon the groans which you used to utter because of the small faults that you committed due to your negligence…. For thus, with such and so many recollections, your soul is wakened as if from the deep and is clad with the flame of zeal. Then through fervent struggling against the devil and sin she rises up out of her sunken state as if from the dead, she is raised on high, and returns to her ancient state.” **[[16]](#footnote-17)**

 If we were to partake of the Holy Mysteries in a state of sin, it would not be for our sanctification and healing, because Christ is “a fire consuming the unworthy.” **[[17]](#footnote-18)** Our conscience should prevent us from approaching the chalice, even if the priest has not specifically forbidden us to do so because we have failed to disclose all of our sins to him.

 First, we must acknowledge our sin by coming to Confession, and also display some signs of repentance. For example, we must return anything we may have stolen (or its value). We should resolve not to repeat the sin, and to struggle against it in future. We should also labor to acquire the opposite virtues of the sins we confess.

    Can God forgive someone who confesses secretly in his heart to Him? Of course He can! But God did not ask us merely to acknowledge our sins to ourselves. Sincere repentance involves opening one's life to all, asking forgiveness from all. Even our most personal and secret sins are not just against God, but also against others. Each individual life has universal social and cosmic proportions. Our sins cannot hurt God, but they can wound and infect our neighbor and the world. Confessing to our Spiritual Father overcomes our pride, which is the chief source of sin, and it also overcomes any sense of despondency or hopelessness we might feel in regard to our correction and salvation.

    We can't really see the true ugliness and hideousness of our sins until we confess them and stand revealed before an equal, one who is like us, our brother in Christ, before whom we are guilty, because we are members of one another. Therefore, there can be no repentance before God which is not also repentance before our Spiritual Father.

    Repentance is not just an awareness of our sins or an acknowledgment of our unworthiness, or mere contrition and regret (although all these things are part of repentance). Repentance also involves our firm resolve to correct ourselves, and to do battle against our evil inclinations. In addition, we should pray that God will help us in our struggle against temptation. The effect of this Mystery is not only the removal of our sins, but also the entry of a grace-giving healing into the soul which helps us to avoid falling back into sin.

Preparing for Confession:

    We should approach Confession with prayer, fasting, by examining our conscience to uncover and acknowledgment of our sinfulness, and by asking forgiveness of those we may have offended. When we accuse ourselves of the sins we commit, we are brought close to the point of casting them away from us. God's mercy goes out to one who repents like the Prodigal Son (*Luke 15:11-32*) or the Publican (*Luke 18:9-14*). This is made clear in the words of the prayer read by the priest after we confess.

   We must prepare ourselves for Confession by examining our lives, and all that we think, say, and do. We are encouraged to do this each day during our Evening Prayers, so that we may realize how we have failed to live up to our high calling as Christians. Often, we do not have the proper measure by which to judge ourselves. We judge ourselves by our own idea of what a "normal" person is. We tell ourselves, "I am normal, average, no worse than anyone else." Or we judge ourselves by the standards of secular society. "I am law-abiding, hard-working, thrifty, etc."

    Perhaps we might use Old Testament standards, which are good, but are not on the high level of the life to which we are called. "I do not murder, I do not commit adultery, etc." Our real standard should be Christ's life and teachings. We must study the New Testament as a whole, looking more at Christ than at ourselves.

Some suggested passages for judging ourselves, our actions and attitudes: Matt. Ch. 5, 6, 7, Luke 6, Rom. Ch. 12-14, I Cor. 13, I John.

PENANCES: Often our Spiritual Father will assign us a penance after Confession. This is for our instruction and benefit. Penances are not reparations for our sin, but are therapeutic and promote our spiritual rehabilitation. They may consist of prayer, fasting, alms-giving, returning of something stolen (or its equivalent value), etc.

    The early Church knew various categories of Penance, and people spent certain periods of time in each category. The whole process could take years (depending on the seriousness of the sin): 1) Mourners had to stand outside the door of the church, begging people to pray for them. 2) Hearers stood in the porch or narthex, and were dismissed after the Scripture readings and sermon. 3) Kneelers remained on their knees in the nave until the dismissal. 4) Bystanders were permitted to stand inside the church, but could not receive the Eucharist.

    Penitents in the early Church had to spend certain prescribed periods of time in each category, and so the process of reconciliation might take several years. Today, however, such lengthy penances are rarely (if ever) imposed).

CONFESSION BEFORE ONE’S SPIRITUAL FATHER:

    First of all, one must have faith that God will forgive us, and faith that our Spiritual Father will develop a real connection with us, that he will be kindly disposed toward us, and we toward him. We must not be "ashamed or afraid" to disclose everything to our Spiritual Father so that he may have an accurate idea of what our sin is, and how to treat it. It is very important to remain with one Confessor who will come to know us, and therefore be in a better position to prescribe the right spiritual "medicine" for healing our spiritual wounds. In a case of great necessity (For example, if we are traveling and it will not be possible to see our Spiritual Father for some time), we might (*with his blessing, of course*) be able to confess to another priest. This should be done only in special circumstances, however.  It would not be beneficial to confess some of our sins to one priest, then go to another and confess those things we might be too embarrassed to reveal to our Spiritual Father. The reason we should not confess to another priest is because then neither priest would have a complete and accurate picture of our true spiritual state.

 The priest, who is a sinner like everyone else, is not there to judge or condemn us, but to help us in our spiritual growth and to reconcile us to Christ and to the Church. Elder Gabriel of Dionysiou Monastery says that the penitent should not conceal anything in Confession out of shame or for any other motives. "Nor must one entertain the unfounded thought that the Confessor might tell one's sins to others,**[[18]](#footnote-19)** or that he may lose respect for him, or may prescribe a severe penance."

    We should accept full responsibility for our sins, attributing them to one's own negligence or carelessness and without seeking to blame someone else for them. If others have participated in our sin(s), we should not specifically identify them by name, but in general terms (a friend, a coworker, a family member, etc.). We should confess our own sins, and allow other people confess their own.

    The Spiritual Father does not need to hear our sins because he is inordinately curious, but in order to provide us with proper counsel on how to uproot our sins. In the prayer before Confession the priest says: "Behold, my child, Christ stands here invisibly and receives your Confession. Therefore, be not ashamed, nor afraid, but conceal nothing from me. Tell me without hesitation all things which you have done, and so shall you have pardon from our Lord Jesus Christ. Behold, His image is here before us, and I am but a witness bearing testimony before Him of all things which you say to me; but if you conceal anything, you will have the greater sin. Therefore take heed, lest having come to a physician, you depart unhealed."

    One should not be deliberately vague or misleading. The penitent should be as honest and open as possible, even though it may be uncomfortable or embarrassing. We must not simply say, "I have sinned against the ninth commandment." Be specific and tell how you have done so.  It should be remembered that we are confessing to God as well as to our Spiritual Father. We cannot hide anything from God, Who knows all the innermost secrets of our hearts. If we are not open and honest with our Spiritual Father, he cannot provide us with the proper help we need.

    "He who exposes every snake (sin) shows that he has real faith; but he who hides them still wanders in trackless wastes" (St John Klimakos, LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT 4:46).

 Like a doctor who treats a patient with an open and festering wound, the Spiritual Father is not repelled by its ugliness, but his only concern is how to treat it and heal it. He is not there to judge or condemn the penitent, but to reconcile him or her to God and to the Church. Let us take encouragement from the words of St John Chrysostom: "Enter into the Church and wash away your sins, for here is a hospital and not a court of law."

1. *DIDACHE* 4:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *EPISTLE OF BARNABAS*, Chapter 19:12, in *THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS*, Catholic University of America Press, 1969, pp. 220-221. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT*, “*On Painstaking and true Repentance*,” Step 5:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *LADDER*, Step 7:49, “*On joy-making mourning*” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. *LADDER*, Step 7:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. St John of Damascus, *THE PRECIOUS PEARL: THE LIVES OF SAINTS BARLAAM AND IOASAPH*, Belmont, MA, 1997. Pp. 138-139. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Paulinus, *THE LIFE OF ST AMBROSE*, Chapter 9: 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. *AN EXHORTATION TO PENITENCE*, PG 40, 368D. The quotation is from Saint Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain, *EXOMOLOGETARION*, Uncut Mountain Press, 2006, p. 430. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Cyril Mango, translator, *THE HOMILIES OF PHOTIUS THE PATRIARCH OF CONSTANTINOPLE*, Harvard University Press (1958), pp. 45-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. The texts from Isaiah have been taken from the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. St John Chrysostom, *BAPTISMAL INSTRUCTIONS*: *The Fifth Instruction*. *ANCIENT CHRISTIAN WRITERS Volume 31*, Newman Press, NY, 1963, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. A. Butler, *LIVES OF THE FATHERS, MARTYRS, AND OTHER PRINCIPAL SAINTS VOL. XI* (November), James Duffy, Dublin, 1866. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. *PROLOG FROM OCHRID, Vol. I*, Lazarica Press, 1985, p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. St Isaac the Syrian, *ASCETICAL HOMILIES*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, Mass., 1984, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. *Ibid* p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Ibid pp. 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Third Prayer after Holy Communion, by St Simeon Metaphrastes. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. A priest who discloses the sins he has heard in Confession would be subject to severe penalties. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)