



The Orthodox Sacrament of Confession:

The Mystery of Repentance “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!” Repentance was the first commandment of Jesus’ ministry. For Eastern Orthodox Christianity, obedience to this commandment is so inextricably linked to Confession that the sacrament is also known as “The Mystery of Repentance.” Presenting oneself for regular confession is perhaps the most potent way for a Christian to immediately enrich and revitalize his spiritual life. The disciplines of prayer and fasting must be developed over many years, and almsgiving is much more of a challenge for the laity—who must devote their worldly resources to providing security for their families—than it is for monks, who live in voluntary poverty and can give all they have to the poor. But every Christian, regardless of his worldly circumstances, can begin at once to observe regular participation in the Sacrament of Confession. The grace God bestows through this Mystery is a powerful and invaluable aid to one’s repentance and the development of a humble heart, through which we gain the strength to resist sins afterwards as we grow in theosis and the likeness of Christ. We know that God will forgive all those sins for which we desire forgiveness. We are confident in this knowledge and in the expectation of His grace and mercy while we are out in the world, in the midst of our struggles to overcome sin and become more and more like Christ by the grace of God the Holy Spirit. But the Orthodox Christian also knows an overwhelming and humbling joy through the sacramental experience of this forgiveness in the context of the Church. The First Epistle of St. John (chapter 1, verse 9) testifies to this: it is when we confess our sins that God forgives and purifies us. For the Christian faith is concerned not merely with the private justification of each repentant individual, but rather also with his growth in Christ in the context of the Church, which is the Kingdom of God made manifest in this world. If we only intend confession of our sins but don’t actualize that intent, it so easily becomes trapped in the maze of our own thinking and self-deception; there is a world of difference between meaning to confess and actually doing it. It is when we actualize our desire for God’s forgiveness within the Church, through sacramental confession, that His love and forgiveness become something we experience—not just something we know about. In his general Epistle, St. James, the first bishop of the first church at Jerusalem, instructed Christians everywhere to “confess your sins to one another.” The practice amongst the very early Christians was to offer confession of their sins before all the faithful gathered to celebrate the Liturgy. Eventually this became impractical as the number of the faithful grew, and so confession has since been offered

before the bishop or priest, apart from the Liturgy. The Orthodox Church continues today to observe the rite of confession just as it has since those early years, thus keeping to a middle way between the distortions of the sacrament that developed later in the West. As noted above, Orthodoxy continues to provide faithful Christians the sacramental experience of God's love and forgiveness, not leaving them with only the expectation of it, as does Protestantism in its individualistic misconceptions of our relationship with God. But an Orthodox priest does not say, "I absolve you," during a confession, as does a Catholic priest. Instead, at that point in the Orthodox rite, the priest says, "My spiritual child, who has confessed unto me: I, a humble sinner, have not power to forgive sins, but God alone. Yet through that divinely spoken word which came to the apostles after the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, saying, 'whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted, and whosoever sins you retain they are retained,' we too are emboldened to say: whatsoever you have said to my humble self, and whatsoever you have failed to say, either through ignorance or through forgetfulness, whatever it may be, may God forgive you in this present world, and in the world which is to come. "Essential to sacramental confession is one's preparation for it, as part of a daily rule of prayer. The Orthodox Christian constantly examines his conscience, and strives to be entirely forthcoming and transparent before his spiritual father. Confession is effective as a sacrament not exclusively through the priest, but also because it constitutes the fruit of each Christian's personal prayers and spiritual struggles and his formal offering of repentance before God in His Church. Thus we see that confession (together with the weekly cycle of preparation and thanksgiving for receiving the Eucharist) constitutes an important and essential connection between the personal, inner spiritual life and the communal worship of the Church. The Orthodox prayer books contain chapters that instruct us as to how we should prepare for confession in our daily prayers, by examining our adherence to the Ten Commandments, to Christ's teachings, and to the spiritual principles that have been revealed and established by the Church's great spiritual masters, as they have progressed in theosis.

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