

# Confession

Confession is an essential element of the Christian life. In fact, without an acknowledgment and confession of our sins, there is no Christianity.

We confess our sins in order to:

- **Reveal our lives to the judgment of God and those around us;**
- Beg for mercy and forgiveness;
- Free ourselves from our sinful secrets;
- Open ourselves to the Light of God and those around us;
- Liberate ourselves from everything negative which binds and corrupts us; and
- Be reconciled with God while being united to the Church - the People of God.

The book of Proverbs declares, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper but whosoever confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (*Prov. 28:13*). In the Old Testament confession was never exclusively a private affair between God and man. Rather we have evidence that confession was made in the presence of others. Lamak by confessing his sins to his wives limited his punishment (*Gen. 4: 23-24* - see the LXX).

The children of Israel confessed their sin before Moses and asked for his intercession for them (*Num. 21:7*). Barlaam confessed his sin before the Angel of the Lord (*Num. 22:34*). Achan confessed his sin before Joshua (*Jos. 7:20*). Israel confessed its sins before Samuel (*1 Sam. 7:6*). Saul confessed his sin before Samuel and asked Samuel for the pardon from his sins (*1 Sam. 15:24*). David confessed his sin before Nathan, and the prophet announced God's forgiveness to David (*2 Sam. 12:13*). Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar are instructed

by God to have Job offer up burnt offerings and pray for them for the forgiveness of their sins (*Job 42: 7-10*). There is a long and rich tradition and practice of the confession of sins throughout the entirety of our Salvation History.

## OPEN AND PUBLIC

There is no confession of sins which is not open and public. A confession "in secret" or "to God alone," as some say, is no confession at all.

God knows what we have done before we do it. To admit our sins to Him privately is partial and incomplete, for every sin against God is a sin against humanity and nature. A sincere confession is always an open confession. This alone manifests plainly our genuine acknowledgment of sin, our authentic sorrow, and our sincere desire to change our lives.

In the New Testament we are told in James 5:16 to "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that you may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." In the early Church, the faithful would confess serious sins publicly and receive forgiveness from Christ through the apostles and their successors who were given the power to bind (retain sins) and loose (remit sins - see *Matt. 16:19, 18:18, Jn. 20:23*). St. John writes about people who refused to confess their sins publicly, by making the excuse, "I have no sin." "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (*1 Jn. 1:8-9*).

## IN THE PRESENCE OF THE PRIEST ALONE

Why, then, do we confess to God in the presence of the Priest alone? Why, if confession is open and public, does it appear to be "private"?

The pastor of the parish community proclaims God's forgiveness on behalf of the entire community - in the name of God and His People. He bears witness before all of the sincerity of our confession. If possible, he counsels and advises us in ways which will bring about spiritual growth. He proclaims the comforting words of divine forgiveness to us when we truly repent. He does as Christ commissioned His disciples to do: "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them."

In the early Church, confession was open and public, taking place before the whole Christian community and society. The present practice, by which the Priest represents the community, is merely a condescension to human frailty. It is not at all built upon a doctrine of Priestly "power" and "authority" alone. As the Church grew and became the preferred faith of the State, visitors, strangers and the less committed began to come to Church more frequently. In this situation, it became more beneficial to confess one's sins privately to God in the ear of a father confessor. Those who might not be strong in their faith could be easily tempted by hearing the public announcement of others' sins — or, after the Church began to worship in the open following the end of persecution, anyone might be present to hear the confessions of others and use what was heard in an evil way.

We need to humble ourselves before God and man and receive guidance and prayer from others. We need this guidance, first of all because most of us are very poor judges of ourselves. We also need this prayer and guidance so that we do not fall into the dangerous spiritual condition of being self-willed. That occurs when one lives independent from the community of faith, isolates oneself thinking that this can be handled by myself, tries to be their own spiritual doctor, or goes in their own direction. The person, however, who humbles oneself by giving a full and honest confession, demonstrates godly sorrow and a sincere desire to live a life free from sin (*2 Cor. 7:10*).

## WHY THE CHURCH?

Why is the Church the means of confession?  
Cannot God forgive sins "directly?"

Of course God is everywhere and is always ready to receive repentant sinners. However, this very same God revealed Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ, Who founded His Church and has filled it with the power of His Holy Spirit.

Thus, in the same way that we have recourse to the Church for Baptism and Chrismation, for marriage and burial, to hear the proclamation of the Word of God and to receive Holy Communion, so we also go to confess our sins and to receive the grace to be reunited, through Jesus Christ, with God the Father in the Holy Spirit. Since the Church is made up of people - God's People, we likewise turn to the Church to find reconciliation with those around us as well.

If we turn to the Church to receive all that we know and all that we have from God — including even the Holy Bible and the Divine Revelation which was given by God to His People through Jesus Christ, how strange it would be if we did not come to the same Church to confess our sins and to receive Divine forgiveness and mercy!

The priest stands as a witness to hear the confession and to pronounce the forgiveness from Christ. The Orthodox formula for absolution says, "Whatever you have said to my humble person, and whatever you have failed to say, whether through ignorance or forgetfulness, whatever it may be, may God forgive you in this world, and in the next" and "May our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ through His mercy and bounty and love for mankind forgive you all your transgressions. And I His unworthy priest, through the power given unto me by Him do forgive and absolve you from all your sins. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

## Confess Ye Your Sins

