

18. A Brief Guide to Confession

Holy Confession is one of the Mysteries of the Church. As we proclaim in the Nicene Creed, we “believe in one baptism” and we are accordingly only baptized once. However, Confession provides the needed renewal of our baptisms whenever we sin again and defile our baptismal garments. It is the merciful gift of God, granted to us through the Church, that we might be freed of the burden of our sins. All adult believers should confess on a regular basis. Normally children begin confessing from the time they can understand what it means to sin (typically by age 7 if not earlier).

Confession is, of course, an expression of repentance. Repentance is not something we do only once in our life, or only occasionally. Repentance is the Christian way of life. Our hearts are only gradually converted and healed; this is a life-long process. Every day we need to face those things within us that create barriers in our relationship with God; we ask Christ to remove those barriers and soften our hearts. This is repentance.

People sometimes ask, “why do I need to confess my sins to another person? Isn’t it enough to confess to God?” Certainly, we do confess to God directly and should do so the instant our conscience begins to bother us. However, the Mystery of Confession enables us to confess more sincerely and humbly, to receive the seal of God’s forgiveness, and to be healed more surely. As with all the Mysteries, it is a gift from God. Christ commands us through the Apostle James to confess our sins to one another (James 5:16), and He gives His Apostles and their successors (the bishops and priests) the authority to “loose” or “bind” sins depending on the sincerity of our repentance.

As a Mystery of the Church, Confession is a public event. However, for practical reasons, the priest serves as the only witness. In Confession we stand before the Judgment seat of Christ and judge ourselves ahead of time. The priest can bear witness on the Last Day that we have done so, and been forgiven. The priest is also given the task of administering spiritual medicines (counsel and penance) for our healing. Confession is totally confidential, and clergy may never reveal what someone has confessed, to anyone, for any reason.

At St. Nicholas, confession is generally available on Saturday evening after Vespers, or by appointment. We should prepare ourselves through prayer, fasting, and examination of conscience. It is best not to confess on a full stomach, but having fasted beforehand. We ought to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to convict us for the sins we’ve committed and to bring us to contrition, even to tears. And there are useful resources in most Orthodox prayerbooks and elsewhere to aid us in examining our consciences.

According to our Archdiocese guidelines, we should confess once a month if we wish to receive communion each time we attend Liturgy. Other than the life confession of a catechumen, regular confession should not take very long, and should be relatively simple. We name the sin we’ve committed in a straightforward way, with sorrow for what we’ve done, without trying to justify or explain, but simply convicting ourselves for what we’ve done. The more we convict ourselves sincerely before God, the more deeply the medicine sinks into our souls. We should listen carefully to any counsel the priest offers us. Finally, we should follow each confession with a sincere prayer of thanksgiving to our gracious God for having granted us His forgiveness.