

The Sacrament of Confession

Remedy for a sick soul

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Reasons for inner discord

THE GREATEST PARADOX OF OUR LIFE is that while we all instinctively strive for happiness, most of the time we are unhappy and dissatisfied even when no danger threatens us. Philosophy is helpless in satisfactorily clarifying the reason for this paradox. The Christian faith, however, explains that the reason for our dissatisfaction and dark feelings lies within ourselves. It results from our sinfulness - not only from our personal sins but also from our very nature that is marred by the primordial sin. Sinful corruption is the main source of our grief and suffering.

Sin is a spiritual sickness that grows and expands with time like cancerous cells. Left unchecked, sin gains in strength and enslaves its victim, and in doing so, it taints his mind, weakens his will towards good, permeates him with uneasiness and bitterness, arouses in him passionate feelings and evil thoughts and compels him to sin again and again.

We all are, to a greater or lesser degree, damaged by sin, although we often fail to recognize the full extent of our inner sickness. The main reason that the Lord Jesus Christ came to our world was to eradicate in us the roots of sin and return to us spiritual health and with it eternal bliss. However, because sin is so intimately interwoven with our mind and will, with our subconscious, it cannot be removed instantly or by external means. It is essential that we become actively involved with its extermination, but even our own efforts are not enough to accomplish total eradication of sin. Only the grace of Christ can give us complete spiritual recovery.

Indeed, this is the essence of the great advantage of the Christian faith. In contrast to other religions and philosophical teachings that are powerless in spiritual warfare, only the Christian faith has all the necessary resources and can strengthen us to overcome sin and achieve moral perfection.

The first turning point of spiritual healing is in the Sacrament of Baptism. Here the believer is cleansed from all sins and is spiritually reborn for righteous living. However, the predisposition towards sin, which is interwoven with his free will, is not completely eliminated. As time passes, an individual falls into sin due to carefree ways, inexperience, and different temptations. Supposedly eliminated, sin, similar to cancerous cells left after surgery, begins to propagate once again, gaining strength and striving to totally control the individual's will. The individual once again becomes spiritually sick and consequently unhappy and bitter.

In this difficult and dogged battle with sin, the Sacraments of Confession and Communion are powerful tools available to us. In the Sacrament of Confession the penitent Christian, in the presence of the spiritual confessor, opens to God his darkened and sick heart and allows the

heavenly light to enter, cleanse and heal it. In Confession, as in Baptism, the great rebirthing power of the crucified Son of God is concealed. This is the reason that after this Sacrament, the truly penitent person feels cleansed and renewed, as a newly baptized infant. He obtains new strength to battle the evil within himself and to restart a righteous life.

To help our reader gain the most benefit from Confession, we will explain here the meaning and strength of this Sacrament and provide some aids in preparation for confession and prayers read during this Sacrament.

Looking into oneself

IN OBSERVING THE COURSE OF OUR FEELINGS and thoughts, we become quickly convinced that within us constantly battle two entities: one good and one evil. Real Christian life begins only after we consciously elect the good and reject the evil. When we disregard our spiritual growth, passively succumbing to our desires and tendencies, whatever they may be, not making any evaluation of them, we are not yet living a Christian life. Only when we become painfully aware of our shortcomings, when we judge ourselves in the light of the Gospel and decide to improve our moral condition, only then can we begin to ascend on the path to salvation. The Gospel has many vivid examples of the sudden change in people who decided to turn to God. One of them is illustrated by the parable about the Pharisee and the Publican (Lk. 18:4-14). The Pharisee is an example of self deception. He frequents the temple and observes the established religious rituals. Yet it cannot be said of him that he is a pious person, because he is quite content with himself, full of pride, and despises others whom he considers not so religious. He boasts of his righteousness because he fails to see his own moral deficiencies - lack of compassion and love, selfishness and formalism - to mention a few. The Publican, on the other hand, illustrates a sinful person who realizes his poor moral condition and repents. He judges only himself and wants to become a better person. He asks God only for mercy and guidance, and God accepts his prayer while He rejects the boasting of the Pharisee. Jesus Christ makes the repentant Publican an example for us so that we thoroughly examine our hearts and make every effort to correct our moral condition!

Another genuine repentance is seen in St. Mary of Egypt. Having been a reckless and passionate sinner from her youth, after visiting the Resurrection church in Jerusalem she repented deeply, went to the desert and after living there the rest of her life she became one of the greatest saints. (She died at the beginning of the 6th century.) The Church observes her memory in the 5th week of Lent as an example of true repentance.

Often a person, even when considering himself a Christian, pays no attention to his shortcomings and for many years lives unconcerned with any moral improvement. Then suddenly, sometimes after a personal tragedy and sometimes without any apparent reason, his spiritual eyes open, and he decides to turn to God. He becomes a completely different person. In many cases, though, this turning to God happens slowly after much hesitation and repeated falls.

Let us now verify whether the above conditions apply to us. Observe carefully your actions during the last several days, your feelings and intentions, words you said. Just yesterday, for example, you cruelly hurt someone with harsh words, or with an insulting suspicion, or by a

caustic sneer. It has been three days now that you have been disturbed by some dirty, base desire, and you not only did not drive away this sinful desire, but even dwelt on and enjoyed it. Or you were given an opportunity to do something good for somebody, but you felt that this would disrupt your peace and comfort, so you failed to do it. If you were observant and conscientious, you would realize that passions comprise a great deal of your existence, that your whole life is like a large braid made of small and great sins: unkind thoughts, feelings, words and deeds. If we pay no attention to the moral content of our life or think that it is quite normal, we still are pagans in our mentality. We will have no reason to try to change. Our true spiritual life will begin only after we say decisively, "No, I do not want to slide down any more! I want to become a true Christian!"

But as soon as you choose the path to righteousness, you will discover that the battle against bad habits and temptations is extremely difficult, painful and exhausting. You will see how frequently impure thoughts, feelings and desires, often against your own will, take hold of you and push you toward sinful actions. In many cases, only some time after you have uttered a cruel or offensive word or have perpetrated an unkind deed, you begin to realize that you should not have spoken so or have done that. But before you have actually sinned, you did not understand where your thoughts and feelings were pushing you. So over and over again we fall into actions that we later regret. This is the way we start to learn the great truth of the words of the Apostle Paul: *"For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do"* (Romans 7:15). Where do we find help, and how can we be delivered from our inner conflicts? Some people share their difficulties with someone in the family or a close friend; some visit a psychiatrist. But these are only partial and often ineffective solutions. Only after you experience the total difficulty of spiritual warfare and the ineffectiveness of human means do you begin to realize how effective is the regenerating power of Divine Grace.

A prolific pre-revolutionary spiritual writer, Saint Theophane the Recluse, relates the following story: "There was a youth who was greatly saddened because of his numerous sins. Once in grief he fell asleep. And there, in his dream, as if out of the sky, he saw coming down an Angel. The heavenly visitor slit open his chest with a knife, took out his heart, cut it into pieces, and removed from it all the spoiled and corrupt parts. Then he carefully replaced the heart in its original spot, and finally healed the wound as well. The youth awakened and felt cleansed of all his sins. He was so happy that God had accepted his repentance in such a sudden and unexpected way and relieved him from this unbearable burden. In truth, wouldn't it be good," asks Bishop Theophane, "if we could experience a similar healing from a light-bearing Angel!" And such an Angel is available to us. It resides in the healing Grace of our Redeemer which operates through repentance in the Sacrament of Confession!

We know that Jesus Christ brought to earth the holy life. Through the Holy Sacraments of the Church this life is transmitted to all of us. Confession or Repentance is one such sacrament. It is not just a ritual or a venerable old tradition but is an extremely powerful tool for moral healing and correction. It responds to one of the most essential demands of our damaged nature. To decline Confession is the same as suffering from some physical ailment and knowing the right medication but, due to laziness, not using it and thereby letting the illness run rampant.

Power of the Sacrament of Confession

FOLLOWING THE TEACHING OF OUR SAVIOR and His Apostles, we believe that the Sacrament of Repentance cleanses the soul of the repentant Christian and heals his spiritual ills so that after the absolution of his sins, he once more becomes innocent and sanctified, as he was after Baptism. Confession reinstates the living ties between the Christian and the Body of Christ, i.e. the Church. The power of this Sacrament comes from the blood of the Lamb of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who because of his infinite love and compassion toward us took upon Himself all our sins, nailed them to the cross and suffered what we had to suffer as transgressors of God's commandments. Freed from the burden of sins, the Christian once again rises to spiritual life and gains strength to strive for moral perfection.

To receive the most from the Sacrament of Repentance, a person must prepare for it with prayer, reading of Scripture and introspection. Fasting is an old and a helpful tool for repentance and spiritual renewal.

From the external aspect, the Sacrament of Repentance consists of two parts: a) the verbal confession of all sins done by the repentant, and b) the prayer of absolution administered by the pastor-confessor. The loud articulation of one's sins, i.e. confession, is an indispensable factor of true repentance because it forces the penitent to overcome pride, which is the source of most of our spiritual ills. Besides, the acknowledgment of one's faults and bad habits draws a person closer to overcoming them. This is a well known psychological fact. Many non-religious people go to psychiatrists and receive help just by openly discussing their inner difficulties. The Sacrament of Confession, beyond the psychological, has a sacramental aspect, because through it operates the healing power of the Grace of Jesus Christ.

Repentance, to be effective, should not be limited just to awareness of one's sinfulness or to a cold admission of unworthiness. It should be accompanied with a deep feeling of regret and a sincere desire to become a different person. It requires the decision to battle with one's evil inclinations and the will to correct one's way of life. The penitent opens his soul to God, the true and loving Physician, and asks for mercy and help in the battle with bad tendencies. Such heartfelt contrition is necessary so that the effectiveness of the Sacrament will extend not only to the removal of committed sins but also to bring the Divine remedy into the receptive soul and strengthen it against future temptations.

Upon finishing his confession the penitent kneels before the cross and the gospel, and the priest-confessor places the stole upon his head and prays for the absolution of sins. The priest requests the heavenly Father not to turn away from the repentant as He did not turn away from the prodigal son but to again make him a new creature and a worthy member of His Divine Kingdom. At this time the invisible Grace of God descends upon the Christian and renews within him the spirit of righteousness.

Jesus Christ spoke twice of the Sacrament of Repentance. The first time He said to the Apostle Peter that He "will give him the keys of the kingdom of heaven so that whatever he will bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever he will loose on earth will be loosed in heaven"

(Matthew 16:19). Some time later He gave the authority to forgive and to retain sins to all the apostles. This was done in conjunction with their task to resolve problems among the members of the Church: *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the Church. But if he refuses even to hear the Church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven"* (Matthew 18:15-18). The Lord solemnly established the Sacrament of Confession soon after His Resurrection. He appeared to His disciples and said to them, *"Peace unto you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you."* And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said: *"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"* (John 20:21-23). The apostles transmitted this power to absolve and to retain sins to their disciples - bishops and priests - who were to continue their task of saving human souls.

St. John Chrysostom, commenting on the authority given to the pastors of the Church *"to bind and loose,"* wrote, *"What the priests determine on earth, God affirms on high in Heaven. Here the Master conciliates with the opinion of His servants."* However, the priest-confessor does not absolve sins by his own power, and there is nothing mechanical in the prayers of absolution. The priest-confessor is only a witness of one's repentance and a mediator of Divine Grace. God appointed him to be an instrument of His mercy. Ultimately it is up to the repentant to make his soul receptive to the healing Grace.

By its wide magnitude and power, the invisible work of Grace in the Sacrament of Repentance covers all of man's lawlessness. There is no sin which is beyond forgiveness. What is crucial here is to have sincere regret for committed sins and to decide to become a better Christian. Our Lord Jesus Christ said, *"I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance"* (Matthew 9:13). New Testament Scriptures are full of examples of God's mercy to sinners. Great was the Apostle Peter's sin of denial, but when he repented, Jesus forgave him and reinstated him as an Apostle. After the Pentecost, when the Apostle Peter started to preach the Gospel, he called to repentance even those Jews who crucified the Messiah (Acts 2:38), and later he called to repentance Simon, who was a sorcerer and at the end became a heretic (Acts 8:22). Saint Paul, before becoming an apostle, hated the Christian faith, persecuted the Church and took part in the death of the first martyr, the deacon Stephen. Later he was forgiven by God and received from Him abundant grace. Remembering God's infinite mercy, St. Paul once absolved a person guilty of incest, subjecting him first to temporary excommunication (2 Corinthians 2:7).

With all this one should remember that absolution of sins in the Sacrament of Confession is an act of mercy, not of thoughtless pity. It is given for the spiritual benefit of man *"for edification and not for your destruction"* (2 Corinthians 10:8). This fact places a great responsibility on the priests when they perform this Sacrament.

The Holy Scripture mentions instances or conditions in which sins are not forgiven. Specifically, it mentions that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven either in this world nor the next (Matthew 12:31-32). In addition it speaks of especially devastating *"mortal sins."* *"All wrongdoing is sin,"* explains the Apostle John, *"but there is a sin leading to death. I do not say*

that he should pray about that [person who commits such mortal sin]" (John 5:16). The Apostle Paul teaches that "it is impossible for those who were once enlightened and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again through repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame" (Hebrews 6:4-6). All these warnings refer to people with a cynical attitude toward God; they either reject His mercy or they don't want to abandon their sinful habits.

In all cases the reason for unforgiveness comes not from any limitations of the Sacrament of Confession but from the unrepentance of the sinner. Indeed, in the case of speaking offensive words against the Holy Spirit, how can any sins be forgiven when His mercy is ridiculed and rejected? On the other hand we must believe that even the sin of blasphemy can be forgiven when it is followed by a true repentance. St. John Chrysostom says the following about this: "For even this guilt [blasphemy against the Holy Spirit] was forgiven to many repentant Jews. Many of them who blasphemed against the Holy Spirit [during Jesus Christ's preaching] later believed, became Christians and everything was forgiven to them" (Sermon on the Gospel of Matthew). The Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 A.D. in the city of Nicea, near Constantinople) said the following about mortal sins: "A mortal sin is the one which remains unrepented ... These [sinners] will have no share with the Lord, unless they humble themselves and turn away from their transgressions."

The Gospel teaches that **all** must be allowed to repent, *"I say to you that there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance"* (Luke 15:7). These words include Christians who have fallen into sin.

Some contemporary Christians mistakenly believe that their faith alone makes them holy and free of sin and that for this reason there is no necessity to repent of anything. Referring to these self-satisfied "righteous" ones, the Apostle James writes, *"For we all stumble in many things"* (James 3:2). The Apostle John teaches that even Christians, not only pagans, need to cleanse their conscience: *"If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. If we confess our sins, He [Jesus Christ] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9-10).

The Holy Fathers of the Church explain that the absence of a penitent attitude occurs in people not because they are actually sinless but because of their spiritual hardening. Indeed, the brighter the light, the clearer one detects the dust and other defects on objects. Similarly, the closer man approaches God, the clearer he sees his shortcomings and the humbler he becomes. In the lives of saints we see that the more they succeeded in Christian virtues, the more unworthy they felt about themselves. Even saints who performed great miracles repented with grieving and tears of their insignificant faults and considered themselves unworthy.

Aid to Repentance

A SPIRITUAL LEAFLET FROM MOUNT Athos gives the following directive: "Intending to confess, before going to the priest, seclude yourself, beloved brother, even if for an hour. Put aside all secular matters, collect your thoughts and thoroughly examine your conscience: How

did you sin in thought, word or deed? In what did you offend God and your neighbor? Try to remember all the sinful events and their details. After this pray, grieve and wash your conscience with tears of repentance. Feeling relief in your heart, make a firm resolve to fight your bad habits and to become a better Christian. After preparing yourself in this way, go to the priest-confessor believing that God will forgive you --- for He has never rejected a contrite and humble heart. When you come to the priest, confess without shame, do not hide anything, do not try to 'save face.' For many of us have become accustomed to putting up a front for others, and try to appear better than we really are. Being used to hypocrisy, we are often ashamed to honestly admit our faults, omitting some and leaving others incomplete. Remember, my brother, that the Holy Spirit says in the Scripture: 'Who hides his sin receives no benefit.' So speak openly without self-justification and without blaming others. If someone offended you, make peace with him and forgive him with all your heart, according to the words of the Lord: 'If you forgive others then God the Father in heaven will forgive you. But if you do not forgive those who sin against you, then the Father will not forgive you your sins.' Amen."

The following prayers of repentance with enumeration of sins can help an individual to repent at home and to come to church prepared for Confession:

I bring to You, my merciful Lord, the heavy burden of my innumerable transgressions, which I have committed from my very youth and up till today.

Mental and sensual sins: I have sinned, my Lord, by being insensitive towards Your mercies, by neglecting Your commandments and by being ungrateful. I have sinned by being indifferent towards Your Truth, by having doubts about faith, by being superstitious and curious about unorthodox teachings. I have sinned by thirst for pleasure, love for money and luxury items, by passionate interest in another person and sinful thoughts. I have sinned by spiritual weakness, vanity, suspicion, jealousy, envy, irritability and anger. I have sinned by excessive sadness, depression and despair. I have sinned by contempt for people, gloating over misfortunes others, self-reliance, pride and blasphemous thoughts. Forgive me, O Lord, and help me to become a better Christian.

Sins of the tongue: I have sinned, my Lord, by idle talk, unnecessary laughter, speaking in the church and by using Your Holy Name in vain. I have sinned by criticizing of others, by using rude words, yelling, and by making sarcastic comments. I have sinned by cursing people and wishing them evil, by mockery and insults. I have sinned by telling indecent jokes, bragging and breaking my promises. I have sinned by complaining, irreverent conversations and damning. I have sinned by spreading unkind rumors, gossiping, lying, slandering and denunciation. Forgive me, O Lord, and help me to become a better Christian.

Sins through deeds: I have sinned, my Lord, by not loving You, my Creator and Benefactor, with all my heart and all the time as I should. I have sinned, by being selfish, lazy and by wasting time. I have sinned by careless and disoriented prayer, by missing church services and coming late to church. I have sinned by being disrespectful with my parents, by refusing to help them and to do what they said, by disobedience and stubbornness. I have sinned by negligence towards family needs and by failing to instruct my children in the Christian faith. I have sinned by self centeredness, over-preoccupation with my career and success in life, greediness, stinginess and

by failing to help the needy. I have sinned by over-eating, over-indulgence, breaking fasts, smoking, abusing alcohol, using stimulants, squandering resources and by gambling. Forgive me, O Lord, and help me to become a better Christian.

I have sinned, my Lord, by looking at someone with lust, looking at indecent films or magazines, listening to music which evokes crude or lustful desires, listening to indecent jokes and stories. I have sinned by wasting too much time in front of a TV, by watching scenes of violence and sin. I have sinned by being obsessed with my appearance, by behaving in a tempting matter, masturbation, lasciviousness, sexual perversions, adultery, and other corporal sins which are too shameful to say aloud. I have sinned by losing my temper, displaying anger, by crudeness, rude treatment of close ones, by non-reconciliation and revenge. I have sinned by hypocrisy, insolence, impertinence and careless handling of sacred objects. I have sinned by being cruel, deceitful, stealing, and taking bribery. I have sinned by consenting to abortion, having interest in occult subjects, astrological forecasts and by visiting fortune tellers.

Dear brother or sister in Christ, never despair! Remember that there is no sin which is beyond God's mercy. For the Lord Himself promised through His prophet, *"Though your sins may be like scarlet, I shall whiten them as snow; Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool"* (Isaiah 1:18).

Prayers for the Sacrament of Confession

THE BEST TIME FOR CONFESSION is on the eve of Communion, usually on Saturday before or during Vespers [*afterwards at St. Vladimir's*]. If one cannot come to the Vespers service, he can confess on the day of Communion. In that case, it is necessary to come before the Liturgy starts, because the priest should not be distracted from the altar during the service. Those who come late must understand that Confession during Liturgy delays the church service, causes other worshippers to wait and forces the priest to rush. This kind of haphazard Confession can hardly accomplish what this great Sacrament was intended for. It lowers Confession to the level of a meaningless ritual.

During the Sacrament of Confession, after the commencement prayers and the 50th Psalm, the priest-confessor reads the following Troparia:

Have mercy on us Lord, have mercy on us; for being devoid of all defense, we sinners offer to Thee, as Master, this supplication: Have mercy on us.

Glory to the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. Lord have mercy on us, for in Thee have we trusted. Be not very angry with us, neither remember our iniquities, but as One tender of heart, look down upon us even now and deliver us from our enemies. For Thou art our God, and we are Thy people, all being the work of Thy hands, and we call upon Thy name.

Now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen. Open unto us the door of Thy loving-kindness, O Blessed Birth-giver of God, so that hoping in Thee we may not perish, but through Thee may be delivered from adversities, for Thou art the salvation of Christian people.

Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy.

Then the **priest** reads the following prayer:

O God our Savior, Who by Thy prophet Nathan granted unto repented David pardon of his transgressions, and have accepted the Manasses' prayer of penitence! Do Thou, in Thy love towards mankind, accept also Thy servant *[name]* who repents of his sins which he has committed, overlooking all that he has done, pardoning his offenses and passing by his iniquities. For Thou hast said, O Lord: I have desired not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from the wickedness which he has committed, and live. And that even unto seventy times seven sins ought to be forgiven. For Thy majesty is incomparable, and Thy mercy is limitless, and if Thou shouldst regard iniquity, who should stand? For Thou art the God of the penitent, and unto Thee we ascribe glory, to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

The priest further reminds the repentant: "Behold, my child, Christ stands here invisibly receiving your confession. Do not be ashamed and do not fear, and do not withhold anything from me; but without doubt tell all you have done and receive forgiveness from the Lord Jesus Christ. Lo, His holy image is before us, and I am only a witness, bearing testimony before Him of all things which you say to me. But if you conceal anything from me, you shall have the greater sin. Take heed, therefore, lest having come to the physician, you depart unhealed."

The repentant stands before the lectern, crosses himself, kisses the cross and the holy gospel, and in a repentant attitude confesses sins before the priest. After he finishes, the priest gives needed advice and sometimes instructs him to do certain things in order to help the penitent to overcome some bad habits -- to read Scriptures, pray, fast, do some kneeling, to make certain acts of mercy, etc.

At the end the penitent kneels *[or bows down]* before the cross, and the **priest**, covering the head of the penitent with his stole, reads the following prayer of absolution:

O Lord God of the salvation of Your servants, merciful, compassionate and long-suffering; Who repents concerning our evil deeds, not desiring the death of a sinner, but that he should turn from his way and live. Show mercy now on Your servant *[name]* and grant to him (or her) an image of repentance, forgiveness of sins and deliverance, pardoning all his (or her) sins, whether voluntary or involuntary. Reconcile and unite him (or her) to Your Holy Church, through Jesus Christ our Lord, to Whom, with You, are due dominion and majesty, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

May our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, by the grace and compassion of His love for mankind, forgive you, my child, *[name]*, all your transgressions. And I His unworthy Priest, through the power given me, forgive and absolve you from all your sins, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Following this prayer, the penitent rises, kisses the Cross and the Gospels and, receiving a blessing from the priest, steps away thanking God.

Notes and conclusion

THUS, IN THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION God gave us a powerful tool to battle sin. In preparing for our confession of sins, we learn to watch over our inner life more carefully, to realize our weak points and the cunning methods of our temptor, the devil. Sincere confession before a priest helps us combat our pride and thus to become free from the bonds of passion with which the devil wants to ensnare us.

After a deep repentance and the Divine cleansing that follows it, a Christian feels as if a heavy stone was removed from his heart. He finds himself renewed and enlightened, willing to love God and other people. This feeling should be the most obvious proof of the great spiritual power of the Sacrament of Confession. For this reason let us cherish this Divine tool of spiritual healing and ask God to give us wisdom and willingness to lead the remaining days of our life in righteousness, so that all our thoughts, words and deeds will be directed toward His glory and our salvation. Amen.

Some Notes:

"Epitimia" or penance is to be understood as an interdiction which, according to Church canons, the priest as a spiritual physician has to apply in certain cases in order to treat the moral diseases of his spiritual children. For example he might impose a fasting beyond that which others do, some additional prayers of repentance, performing of a certain amount of prostrations, works of mercy, reading of the Holy Scripture and other righteous exercises.

Special penance or *epitimia* imposed sometimes by the priest-confessor is not a punishment but represents an action for correction or pedagogical healing. The purpose is to deepen contrition for sinning and to support the will for correction. The Apostle Paul said, *"For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death"* (2 Corinthians 7:10). One of the canons of the Sixth Ecumenical Council declares: "Receiving from God the power to bind and loose, the priest must evaluate the nature of sin and preparedness of the repentant, and thus utilize appropriate means of healing. But if not applying appropriate means to this or the other, salvation will not be available to the sinner. For all sins are not similar, but different and specific, and represent many aspects of harm from which evil develops and disperses further, unless it is stopped by the healing power."

In the ancient Church Confession was accomplished somewhat differently from the contemporary Russian practice. At that time Christians had Communion every Sunday, or in any case often, so that Confession was not necessary each time. Christians came to Confession as needed, when they had committed a serious sin if their behavior was a temptation to other Christians. Usually the Confession of sins was done aloud before the priest and the congregation as well. At present time in the Greek Orthodox Church, Confession is not done before each communion and is separate from the Liturgy. Confession is heard at a time assigned by the priest and in a place specifically designated for this purpose, *a confessional*. Closer to our times the Russian St. John of Kronstadt, having no opportunity to hear individual confessions, often performed communal Confession, in which thousands of people participated. During this Sacrament many confessed their sins aloud and repented in front of the whole congregation. These communal confessions had a very beneficial effect on those who took part in them.

In whatever outward form the Confession is performed, it is necessary to remember that it is a great Sacrament and requires our most serious and reverent attitude. Its purpose is to achieve beneficial healing of the soul. That is the reason that a quick Confession just before the presentation of the Chalice is not the proper attitude towards this Sacrament. It is imperative to appear for Confession in advance, and one must repent with heartfelt sorrow and faith in the power of the healing grace of God.

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