Confession

A Series of Lectures on the Mystery of Repentance

by

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Chapter One

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONFESSION FOR CHRISTIANS

When I was teaching theology in two of the theological academies in Russia, my students always gathered with particular interest to hear the lectures on confession, of which I gave four or more each year. At that period, and also much later, after I had finished my academic career, people begged me to write these lectures down and then have them printed. But, since I had only the briefest summary of their contents with me and I have always been overburdened by work and people, I have not managed to start working until now. I have always had to write about many things, and the only free time I had was at night.

At present I am confined in a Uniate monastery and so I have ample time at my disposal. However, I am afraid that my work will suffer no little detriment from the fact that I have not even my very short (one might almost say, symbolic) summaries with me, and of course my memory cannot retain everything that I said in the academy auditoria nineteen years or more ago. But, putting aside all pretence at a complete exposition of the subject, I will share with the reader what the Lord helps me to remember.

In a certain sense, confession is a thing which should accompany all of a priest's relationships with the faithful. When Christians refer to priests as spiritual fathers, they are acknowledging the fact that these people chosen by God have the right and obligation constantly to call their conscience to account and demand that their soul be opened to them. Of course, as life becomes more complicated and we become more worldly, as do our flock and our relationships with people, it is not possible in all circumstances to make use of this right — or rather, fulfill this duty — of our calling. But nevertheless, even poor Christians admit that essentially the matter should be otherwise. They will never be reconciled to regarding a priest in any other light than as a mediator between themselves and God, both in prayer and in the constant struggle between good and evil which is the lot of each person. This is why even in this age of universal cooling towards faith and salvation, there do exist priests and monks who always direct their thoughts and words as if they were talking to penitents at confession, no matter to whom they are talking or what they are talking about. There are not many of them now, but not long ago, within our memory, in piously disposed patriarchal village parishes and even

sometimes among educated society, it was possible to meet pastors who were so disposed and so involved with people that their conversations with their flocks, at home or at gatherings or anywhere else, could hardly be distinguished at all from their conversation during confession: salvation of the soul, the will of God, the truth of God — this is what was always the subject of the intercourse between the pastor and his flock.

A higher example of such relationships is shown by monastery elders, to whom the brothers of the monastery and also Orthodox Christians from all parts of the world come to confess their thoughts and receive advice and guidance. The answers and counsel of the elder are accepted as the voice of God, and people consider going against them as a mortal sin, like the sin of Adam and Eve. Do not think that such a relationship, or something approaching it, with one's flock and even with those coming to confession is something completely unattainable for an ordinary spiritual father: the majority of our priests themselves do not realize what a great spiritual force is in the hands of a faithful clergy. They are mostly brought up apart from the life of the laity and have been among members of the clergy from their childhood; they know them not so much as God's ministers, but rather as their own fathers, relatives or superiors. Thus our priests and sons of the clerical class in general do not look upon confession with such secrecy, such trembling and such torture as do ordinary lay people, be they simple or educated. Here otherwise separated members of our flocks who have nothing in common come together as one, except of course those who have altogether ceased coming to confession and turned themselves away from the chalice of Christ.

Perhaps my brother pastors will say to me: "You are giving us Fr. Amvrossy of Optina[1] and Fr. John of Kronstadt as examples. What is there in common between the piously disposed crowd sitting at their feet and my impatient flock, crowding round the confessional to the number of about 500 people, just so that they can burst in one by one, mutter a few times "Sinful, sinful" and then rush to get out of church?"

Admittedly there is not much in common here, but worse things can happen. In some very populous dioceses in the Eastern Ukraine priests hear 15-20 peoples' confessions at once, and in Petrograd many fathers hear the confessions of everyone in the church at the same time. Then they offer those who also wish to speak to the priest separately the chance to do so, but very few people turn out to be such bold Christians and sometimes nobody does. Each one thinks — "There are 500 of us and if everyone goes to talk separately then we won't be finished till morning".

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[1] Fr. Amvrossy of Optina: A famous Russian elder, or "staretz" of the 19th century. See the book on him by John Dunlop, *Staretz Amvrossy: Model for Dostoyevsky's Staretz Zossima*, Nordland, 1972.

This is a grievous phenomenon: I will say more — it is horrifying. But I must mention one more which is even more horrifying, though for most people this will not be new information. At diocesan conferences after the first revolution of 1905, in several places the clergy resolved "to abolish private confession and replace it with general confession", i.e. simply abolish confession altogether. This amounts to abolishing the Orthodox Faith, since without confession the attitude towards religious life as a constant inner struggle is lost, and it is precisely this which distinguishes our faith from the Lutheran and Stundist[2] heresies. Of course, these blasphemous resolutions were not an expression of the voice and desires of the whole clergy: the majority, I hope, were horrified when they found out about this insanity on the part of their brothers. But of course this majority will not dispute the fact that we perform confession ineffectively and in a disorderly manner, not according to the manner laid down by the Church and not in a pastoral spirit. The laity is more painfully aware of this, but on whom does it depend to arrange the matter differently? Who is chiefly to blame that it has fallen from its proper height? Of course it is us, the pastors. We were and are fully able to prevent the situation from deteriorating to such a degree; even now we can put it right, if only we desire and also strive to set to work — before all else, on our own selves. Of what should this task consist?

We have already said that clergymen do not fully realize how receptive lay people are to edifying advice when they stand before them during confession. In order to realize this clearly, let us consider the fact that the conversation which occurs at confession is an absolutely exceptional event in the life of the person confessing and of humanity in general. You see, whenever people have conversations outside confession, especially at the present time, their aim is to hide their imperfections and display their often non-existent merits. The majority of people consider their enemies to be those who have accused them of something and even those who have found out something bad about them. On the conscience of almost every person are deeds, words and thoughts which he would not admit to an acquaintance, even if threatened at the point of a knife; but the day and the hour for confession comes and he willingly expounds it all to his spiritual father. Admittedly, he will tell even his spiritual father only after a severe inner struggle, and in the confidence that the spiritual father will not repeat his confession to anyone. Perhaps he has avoided confession for several years just because he could not conquer his shame, his pride; but once he has come, he will crucify himself spiritually and recount his sin. Think on this, priest of God, and take pity on man and love him. A man is never so fine, so dear to God, as when he kills his pride

[2] **Stundists: forerunners of the Russian Baptists.**

before Him and before you. When only this chief enemy of our salvation, this enemy of God, pride, has been destroyed, the soul of the person confessing becomes open to receive the holiest thoughts, wishes, intentions and decisions. Blessed are you, spiritual father, if God tells you things that can help your spiritual child in the complete or gradual renunciation of his former sins. But "God helps the laborers and not the layabouts," says St. Tikhon of Zadonsk, and so *you must set as the main task in your life obtaining experience in spiritual healing*, that is, in giving Christians guidance and instructions in fighting with sin and strengthening themselves in virtue.

Alas, we must admit that in this matter our clergy are completely inexperienced. They have been taught everything at school except this most important wisdom, and only those pastors have it who have obtained it through their own labours, either through reading the writings of the Fathers and the Holy Bible, or through acquaintance with an experienced elder, or through prayer and their own experience of observing themselves and their flocks, but chiefly through their own moral struggle with sin.

We have already mentioned that a spiritual father, in order to acquire skill, must work before all else on himself; what is this work? Answer: you must come to love people, to love man at least in those minutes when he has given himself up to you, given himself up to God. You are hardly likely to meet him in any better state than he is during those minutes, and if you do not try to love him now, you will never come to love him in the conditions of ordinary life.

But how can one command one's heart to have the appropriate feelings if it is cold? No, it cannot remain cold and unsympathetic if you take the trouble to realize what it is that you are performing and what is being performed around you; if you do not come to confession "incidentally", "by the way", if you tear your soul away from practical and family problems at that time. Look what an exceptional honour God has granted you, what a favour He sends you. You see, neither to his father nor mother, nor wife, nor friend, nor king will a Christian reveal those secrets of his soul which he now reveals to God and to you. And if a surgeon wields his knife with great care and fear, in order to perform his necessary but dangerous incisions into the human body, then, of course, you must tremble and pray many times more that you will heal, and not kill, the immortal soul.

Chapter Two

THE SPIRITUAL FATHER'S OWN DISPOSITION

"If we had taken thought, we would not have been condemned", writes the Apostle.[1] Three quarters or, perhaps, nine tenths of our sins, mistakes and even of our crimes occur because people do not want to stop and think before speaking or acting. Anyone who does not work on himself does not know what enormous significance for the soul and for living sensibly lies in cutting oneself off, if only for a moment, from the surrounding vanities and concentrating one's thoughts and conscience on what the Lord requires of one in given circumstances or at a given time.

And so, when you are about to hear peoples' confessions, and have invoked the help of divine grace, if you concentrate your thoughts on what you have read here — if you remember how you yourself came to confess your sins, how severe your own struggle with your passions and how lamentable your falls — then you have already done much good to your flock. There is no doubt that you will say compunctionate and soul-shaking words, if not to all of your spiritual children, then to many of them, words which you would not have said if you had not carried out this advice of mine, unsophisticated though it may seem. You will ask, "Can making such a small effort really bring about such great results as giving a moral shaking to several of my neighbors, for whom Christ was crucified; or even making them repent and change their whole lives? And all this now, when religion is universally despised and nobody even wants to respect bishops: how can I, an ordinary, insignificant priest, hope that my words will have such power?!"

Try it and see, is my answer, and do not be astonished. Is it difficult for a millionaire to make a whole village happy and rich by a single stroke of his pen on a bank cheque, or for a village elder to give out a hundred bushels of flour to the starving by giving a single brief command? But you are spiritually rich, very rich, even if you yourself are neither wise nor holy; you are rich not through your own spiritual strength, but through "the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophesy; with the laying on of hands of the presbytery" (1 Tim. 4:4). Your words are not powerful of them-

[1] See above, p. 31.

selves, but the soil, the earth on which your spiritual seed is falling, is fertile. This fertility has been cultivated by centuries of Church life; although Church life has been shaken in our days, it still bears in itself the traces or reflection of the countless spiritual feats, struggles and sufferings of the society that educated the Christian and his family, and also by his own efforts, even if not very constant, to overcome evil and implant good and faith in his heart. And now, in accordance with the Church's teaching, he looks upon you as God's herald, as a prophet, and he supplements the value of your words and thoughts from his own uplifted state and his faith, as if he were listening to the words of God. And this is almost how it really is. If you have taken this man's grief and struggle upon yourself, if you have loved him and abased yourself before the Lord in your heart, and called in prayer on the help of His grace, then even though you be a sinful pastor, the words of the Lord will be fulfilled in you: "It is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you" (Mt. 10:20). This is not to be understood in the fully supernatural sense, that the priest receives each time a special revelation from God which by-passes his own head and heart; but in the sense that the grace of God, invoked in humble prayer by him who is accomplishing this great mystery, enlightens his soul with spiritual love and compassion towards those repenting, and then, as St. Tikhon of Zadonsk says, addressing himself even to zealous lay people, "love seeks out the words which can be of use to your neighbour and this does not require great learning — it requires only remembering (about God and one's conscience)."

This is why we remain deeply convinced that the principal condition for fruitful spiritual direction consists in being convinced that it Is not our wisdom that enlightens our spiritual children and strengthens them in good intentions, but the grace of God, enlightening their souls and your own soul, as you are an intermediary between them and God. If I could instill such a conviction and feeling into the priestly reader, I would consider my guidance quite adequate and even finished, in view of the words of St. Tikhon which have just been cited. If we still continue our talk about confession and even touch on the question of its outward order, then this is primarily so that the priestly reader, after examining the matter in detail, should thus find an even stronger stimulous to fill his own soul with zeal to attain the spirit of faith, humility and compassionate, pastoral love towards penitents.

Nevertheless, it requires great persistence to convince spiritual fathers to embark on this inner struggle, and even so, unfortunately, they often remain unconvinced; for to the same degree that this ascetic task of being a spiritual father is great, holy and fruitful — to that same degree do evil temptations distract our souls from it. First we will consider those which come not from our evil will but from faint-

heartedness and inexperience. Here is the first thing that an inexperienced priest will tell you in reply to the idea that he can have a profound influence on the souls of penitents: "Half the people coming to confession are used to doing it as a burdensome and boring social convention; when social convention ceased to require this, especially since the time of the Revolution, the majority of them also ceased preparing for Communion, and of those who still carry out this custom, all but a minority do it just out of habit. Saying words of love to them and giving them fiery exhortations is just the same as pouring water into a sieve". I do not agree with you, dear brother, but I will not argue with what you have said. Of course, it would be too bold to claim to convert to a life of virtue all those who receive the sacrament of confession from you. But read the Book of Acts. Did the preachers of conversion to God manage to make all the inhabitants of the towns they visited believers in Christ without exception? No, they concentrated their attention and feelings on the few who did believe and then imparted to them the word of God and also their own soul (1 Thess. 2:8). Of course, those who heard them were people of other faiths, not their flock, their spiritual children, as the Christians who come to you for confession are. But I would like to convince you that if you receive even a few humble sinners into your soul as a father, exhort them with a voice of sympathy and love in the name of God and teach them to struggle spiritually, then even that will be a greater moral feat in the eyes of God and the Church than all the other things you do to serve Him. If you are the active secretary of a diocesan council, the manager of a candle factory or take part in the administration of a seminary, all these respected labors are worth nothing in comparison with returning even one soul from the path of perdition into the way of salvation. In theory of course you yourself agree with this; but unfortunately, with the majority of priests these worldly or semi-worldly matters take up much more, not only of their time, but also of their heartfelt concern and diligence than does caring for that which is dearer than the whole world — the human souls which have been entrusted to them.

You are afraid of being repulsed by the people you try to exhort? Begin with those from whom you can expect a different attitude; just begin — just work on yourself, as I have written here, and approach this mystery with good will and prayer. If only God would let you taste that spiritual sweetness with which you could repeat the words of the father in the Gospel: "For this my son was dead and is alive, was lost and is found" (Lk. 15: 32). You will do just as much good to him spiritually as you are doing to yourself. Like a young woman who has given birth to her firstborn, you will find completely new feelings in your soul — feelings hitherto unknown to you and unseen by worldly people — abundant waves of the holy feelings of love,

compassion for people, exultant glorification of the Savior, and hence boldness for the holy faith and readiness to bear everything for the truth of Christ. Then you will understand, even if you did not undrstand it before the day of your ordination, that a priest is not an ordinary Christian, not an ordinary person, but a co-participant in the redemptive feat of Christ, bearing in his own soul the multitude of souls that has been entrusted to him. Then you will understand that the grace of the priesthood which has been given to you is not just "the right to perform Church services", but a definite *moral* gift, a special virtue of spiritual love, of which St. John Chrysostom, defining the essence of the priesthood, says: "Spiritual love is not born of anything earthly; it proceeds from above, from Heaven, and is given in the mystery of the priesthood, but the assimilation and maintenance of this gift also depends on the strivings of the human spirit." I have quoted these words of this Church Father more than once in my writings, for they set a seal with great precision on everything that has been written above.

Chapter Three

THE INFLUENCE OF CONFESSION

Here is a penitent, after humbly confessing his sins, listening to the gentle voice of his spiritual father, filled with love and reverence: "The Lord forgives those who repent; He is close to your soul and wishes you victory over your sin more than you do yourself, just as you wish your children to be strengthened in good more than they themselves do. When the struggle begins in your heart, remember that your Guardian Angel is following the vacillations of your soul with anxious grief; take pity on your own soul. You can see that even I am sad for you, and God loves us so many times more than we love each other. If you yourself do not repulse His help, He will not give you over into slavery to your former passions. Call upon Him in time of temptation, sign yourself with the sign of the Cross, turn your gaze away from the temptations, keep away from people who incline you towards evil or irritate you, and then you will be a victor over your invisible enemies". With words like these, gentle though they are, the spiritual father has already deeply moved the soul of the penitent, which was shaken even before that. Renewed in spirit he returns to his everyday occupations after communing the Holy Mysteries and his whole household notices that something special has happened to him, changing his disposition and, indeed, his life itself.

He himself will probably share with others the holy feelings which were wafted upon him by the pastor's heartfelt exhortations. He will feel the most heartfelt gratitude and love towards the latter, and will begin to advise everyone to go to that priest for confession. Nevertheless, we are obliged to fulfill our duty irrespective of the success or failure of our exhortations, as the Lord said to the prophet Ezekiel (Ch. 2). But you have a blessing to succeed. When you have heard people's confessions once or twice, or even just the confession of one person, new spiritual children will come to you one after the other. One will come to you at home and weep over his spiritual wounds, or ask consolation for the woes afflicting his soul; another will ask for confession in church, even outside the usual time. The news about the warm-hearted, loving and reverent pastor will rapidly spread, not only throughout the village but also through the local

town, and may God grant that you manage to respond to all these entreaties for spiritual healing that are put before you.

"What? In our Bolshevik times, when zealous pastors are reviled, driven out and killed?" Even in our time murderers are murderers and atheists are atheists, but there are still incomparably more who believe and pray than there are atheists, and they will nestle close, probably more fervently than before, to the footstool of a pastor who treats their confession not as a sounding board but as a loving and compassionate father — a pastor such as we are all obliged to be who have received the grace of ordination and so should feel like St. John the Apostle: "There is no greater joy for me than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 Jn. 4). Of course, the pastor will not be free from clashes with unworthy children, with sons of disobedience, even when performing the mystery of confession, but your soul should be filled with joy over the children of obedience, and repeat the words of the psalm (50), "I shall teach Thy ways to the lawless and the Godless shall return to Thee". You will not convert all the iniquitous, for even the blood of the Lord was shed "for many", and did not draw all to the Crucified One, and the Apostle Paul said, "I am made all things to all men that by all means I might save some" (I Cor. 9:22). This is true, but even so the obstacles to your worthily fulfilling your vocation as a spiritual father are not in people, not outside you, but in you yourself — if you do not want to make a start with this holy work, as the Lord commands.

"Of course, you are right", many spiritual fathers will answer me. "Of course, if I were a saint, if I could irradiate my heart with such sympathy towards people and such faith. I could probably attain, with the assistance of God's grace, everything that you are talking about. But we haven't been taught that; my soul is callous, I can hardly ever pray with warmth and compunction, and to acquire such evangelical love for people from whom you constantly bear insults and offences — this is beyond my strength and I have never even thought that such a disposition was obligatory for me; nor do my brother priests or relatives ever speak about that."

I expect answers like this from many sincere pastors — perhaps even from the majority — but their woe is not in this, nor is the woe of their flock. If you make such an admission in a spirit of self-reproach, if you say these words with a contrite heart, this is already victory (Mk. 9:24). The other possibility is terrible: it is terrible if you say such words with haughty contempt and mockery of man's repentance, of your neighbour's soul; if it is with humble grief over yourself, then "a broken and contrite heart God will not despise" (Ps. 50:19) and "the Lord is near to the contrite in heart and saves the humble in spirit" (Ps. 33:19). The more profoundly you become aware how far you are from that spirit of all-embracing love and compas-

sion with which Christ's pastor should be filled, the more you lament over your hard-heartedness, the nearer is God's grace to you and the more accessible is your soul to radiant illumination. A thought will suggest words of despondency to you: "Well, how are you, an unfeeling, self-loving and irritable man, to take to heart the sins of others as if they were your own and crucify yourself before God together with all the people confessing, when you are weary with labouring at confession for a whole day? Just listen to the sin and read the absolution and it is quite all right if you do not do anything more". But you must reply to the thought, "Suppose that's what I really am like, suppose I am not capable of taking the correct attitude to this high pastoral duty, and for the majority of my spiritual children turn out to be just a formal witness of their repentance. Even so I will do as much as I am able, that is, as much as the Lord helps me to do. And now I am going to begin by humbly entreating Him to bring me to my senses and teach me to soften my heart and bestow upon me the spirit of compassionate love and guiding wisdom, in order to teach my spiritual children how to struggle with sin. In addition to that I will try in good time also to organize the outward arrangements for confession so as to be able to give as much time as possible to each of the faithful; and I myself will learn from the Holy Fathers about guiding the human soul in its struggle between good and evil".

If you made a firm resolution like this, then sooner or later you will become an excellent spiritual physician for the faithful. Only hold to this resolution and do not give in to despondency, when impatience, irritability and tiredness rise up in your soul and begin tempting you against God's work. If at first you speak sincerely, in a fatherly and brotherly way, with even a few out of many, and then offer to God sincere repentance that you were not a spiritual father for all of them; then you will come to the next confession already more mature spiritually, with a more softened soul, with clearer faith in the grace-given strength of God, and thus you yourself will gradually grow into a perfect man, and your spiritual children into the fulness of the stature of Christ.

Chapter Four

THE OUTWARD ARRANGEMENT OF CONFESSION

It is difficult to arrange confession any better than it is now in the majority of Orthodox parishes — where four or six hundred persons' confessions have to be heard in one day, and confession takes place only during five or eight days out of the whole year.[1]

Spiritual fathers will confirm this and say, "It certainly is difficult: indeed, it is quite impossible. In the first year of my service as a priest I tried to increase the number of days for confession, but my parishioners just didn't take any notice". I am ready to believe you, dear brother: the customs of village life are very tenacious and the peasant is bound in his way of life by a multitude of things in his life as a farmer and as a family man. He and his family will not change these if the new batiushka[2] limits himself to making an announcement at the beginning of the period of preparation for Communion that those who wish to take Communion may come to confession both on Tuesday and on Wednesday. The exhortation of your parishioners to come to confession not only on the four or seven Fridays of the Great Lent and on the eve of the Annunciation should not be left till four days before the actual confession. No, start as early as the Feast of the Nativity of the Saviour to tell your parishioners what significance an unhurried confession of their sins and a talk of ten or even five minutes with their spiritual father have for the soul. Explain in advance that there is no necessity whatever of going to confession on the eve of Communion or of taking Communion unfailingly on a Saturday. Read to them from the Lenten Triodion that, "Those who are overburdened with work take Communion during Lent at any Presanctified Liturgy and on Sundays." If not many people

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[1] In pre-revolutionary Russia most lay-people received Communion very infrequently, usually only once a year; it was customary to commune on one of the Saturdays of Great Lent after preparing oneself by attending the special Lenten services during the preceding week. Thus on a few days of the year priests would be overburdened with confessions and unable to give each person sufficient attention. In most Russian churches of the emigration people usually receive Communion more often and as the parishes are not so large, this problem is not so acute; but it persists to some extent, especially in large parishes during Holy Week.

[2] Batiushka: a Russian term of endearment and respect for priests; it is a diminuitive of "father."

take advantage of that which you have explained to them during the first Lent, then later those who came to confession not on Friday, but earlier, will tell the others how compunctionate it was to reveal their soul before their spiritual father, how "It was just as if batiushka had taken a heavy weight off my shoulders, and taught me how to get away from sin". The following year, or even at the next fast — i.e. St. Peter's fast or before Dormition, many others will follow the example of these Christians. And now that people have recognized you as an experienced and edifying spiritual father, you will acquire in their eyes the right to assign days and times for confession according to your own discretion, provided only that you announce them well in advance and then appear punctually at the appointed days and times to hear confessions.

Each time you must precede confession with a detailed and inspiring sermon, or even more than one. In the first one, exhort people to sincere repentance before God and to a sincere confession of sins before their spiritual father. In the second one, which you will deliver at the reading of the prayers of the rite of confession, recall what penances were prescribed by the Church at the Ecumenical Councils and read out several of them from the *Trebnik* (for fornication seven years exclusion from Communion, for adultery, fifteen years, for not keeping the fasts, two years). Then read the words of the Nomocanons[3] in the *Trebnik*[4] by which it is permitted to reduce the penances on account of tearful repentance, fasting, almsgiving or tonsure into the monastic order, and explain that without these conditions — i.e. without great contrition of heart and ascetic struggles — the sins of perhaps the majority of those standing before you would prevent them being allowed to take Communion. If contemporary pastors dare to take upon themselves the responsibility before God of admitting them to Communion, then it is in view of the general corruption of Christian morals and the Christian way of life, which has made the struggle with sin incomparably harder for the sons of the Church than it was before, when there was a general zeal for salvation, when people stimulated each other to moral struggles and were ashamed of their sins before each other. Now society's attitude to

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[3] Nomocanon: a collection of canon laws arranged according to subject matter. This is not available in English translation — the English "Rudder" ("Pedalion") contains the canons grouped according to the councils and fathers who decreed them.

[4] Trebnik (Book of Needs, Euchologion): a book containing services performed according to the needs of individuals (e.g. Baptism, Marriage, Confession, Memorial Services). Many of these services, including the full Rite of Confession, may be found in "The Service Book" translated by I. Hapgood. Since, however, it does not contain the references to the canons to which Metropolitan Antony refers in his text, we have translated them and included them as Appendix B of this book.

sins and virtues is exactly the opposite, and so it is already necessary somewhat to soften the requirements of the book of penances, but only within certain limits, lest the priest should also burn in the same flames as the sinners he had unlawfully admitted to Communion, as is said in rule 183 of the Nomocanon. In general, read without fail in this sermon the words under the headings "He says to him ..." and "Pay attention also to this ..." (three paragraphs), which are in the chapter "Exhortation from a Spiritual Father to his Spiritual Child"; at this point also read without fail the concluding instruction under the heading "How Spiritual Fathers Should Dispose those Confessing to them", which is based on the rules of the First and other Ecumenical Councils and on the seventy-fifth chapter of Matthew Vlastaris[5]. Then, in order to avoid misunderstandings, remind those standing before you of the self-evident truth, that, even if a priest has the great daring to admit great sinners to Communion when they have offered sincere repentance, he still has absolutely no right to do the same for those Christians who do not admit some notorious sin of theirs to be sinful, or even admit that it is sinful but do not express any determination to stop it, desiring to continue in their sinful state — for example, of illicit cohabitation. Absolution of sins and communion of the Holy Mysteries have sense only on condition of a resolution to get out of one's criminal, sinful state and correct one's life. Without this condition, Communion will only be a new and serious sin, both for the sinner who does not wish to correct himself, and for the priest who has admitted him to Communion. Therefore, those who continue in illicit cohabitation, or a so-called civil marriage, should not be admitted to Communion until they have separated from their concubines, realizing that this is what they are.

Try to give Christians Communion not only in the Great Lent, but also in the others, and in the Great Lent, not only on Saturdays, but also on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays, and on the Annunciation and on Polyeleos days[6] when the Presanctified is appointed. Either do it this way, or else persuade them to confess not only on the eve of Communion but also on the preceding days. Then at confession your heart will not have that uneasy feeling: "however shall I manage to dismiss before nightfall all the four hundred people who have come to confession?"

Also try to ensure that the person coming to confession unfailingly hears the confession prayers and the exhortation printed in the Trebnik: "Behold, child, Christ stands invisibly before you..."[7]

[5] See Appendix B.

[6] i.e. great saints' days. Those occurring during Lent are the Feasts of the First and Second Findings of the Head of St. John the Baptist, February 24, and the feast of Forty Martyrs of Sebastia in Armenia, March 9.

[7] See Appendix A.

Of course, all this should really be re-read to each person who comes, but since it is impossible to do this, these prayers should be read after the service for all those who are preparing for confession, and since not all those coming to confession are in church by then, these prayers should be repeated several times as new groups of people enter the church during the course of the whole day. Further, if a whole crowd of people is waiting in line for several hours in the church or near the church, it is profitable for some respected parishioners or seminarians to take turns reading either patristic counsels from the Synaxarion, or lives of saints deliberately chosen beforehand, or — and this is especially profitable — the Sermon by St. Cyril of Alexandria on Death and the Dread Judgement, which is in the combined Psalter and Book of Hours[8]. When this sermon is read during the blessing of many people after vespers on Forgiveness Day[9] (which lasts about two hours), a large number of the people do not leave church even after the blessing, but listen with tears to the awesome words of the saint. With such compunction Christians also listen to the life of St. Mary of Egypt on the eve of the Thursday of the fifth week of Lent. These things should unfailingly be read in Slavonic and in a somewhat singing tone, so that the listeners can make out the words.

The great number of people confessing does not make it possible to read the preliminary confession prayers for each of them individually, but unfailingly read over each of them the most important prayer "Lord God, the salvation of Thy servants . . .", and stop thinking that the essential prayer of the mystery — which is the only one read by virtually the majority of priests — is the following: "The Lord and God Jesus Christ . . ."[10]. This prayer was introduced into our order of confession quite recently, less than three hundred years ago; neither the Greeks nor the Edinovertsi[11] have it, but it came to us from the

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[8] This sermon may be found (abridged) in "Eternal Mysteries Beyond the Grave", Jordanville, 1968, pp. 62-68.

[9] Forgiveness Day, or Cheese-fare Sunday, is the day before Great Lent begins. After vespers on this day Orthodox Christians prostrate before each other in church and ask mutual forgiveness before embarking on the spiritual struggles of the aproaching fast. First each person asks forgiveness of the priest who also asks forgiveness and blesses each person in turn. In a large parish this can take several hours.

[10] See Appendix A. The second prayer contains the expression, "I, His unworthy priest... do forgive and absolve", which is foreign to the Orthodox approach to confession, in which it is God Who forgives, and not the priest.

[11] Edinovertsi: Old Believers who have re-united with the Orthodox Church but have been allowed to retain their old (pre-Nikonian) ritual. In the opinion of Metropolitan Antony and others this ritual was in some points purer than that of the Orthodox Church as it had not been subject to western influence. Of course, this correctness in outward matters was of no benefit to them so long as they cut themselves off from the Church — "straining at a gnat but swallowing a camel", in the words of our Savior.

Roman Catholics. Of course, now it should be read also, but even more so must that prayer which the Universal Church of Christ established from patristic or even apostolic times be repeated over each person.

Besides this, explain to people on each confession day that they must unfailingly read or reverently listen to the entire rule of Prayers before Holy Communion,[12] and afterwards all of the Prayers of Thanksgiving, without which Communion will be unto judgment and condemnation, as it was for Judas. Do not expound these thoughts as if they were your own, but read them from the "Instructive Notice" in the combined Psalter and Book of Hours, and from St. Simeon the New Theologian on tears during Communion.[13]

[12] The Russian Church requires her faithful to say three canons and one akathist, in addition to the Prayers Before and After Communion; all of these may be found in the English "Prayer Book" (Jordanville, 1960). Other Orthodox Churches such as the Greek Church do not have a single rule for everyone, but leave it to the discretion of the individual and his spiritual father.

[13] These are not available in English. Something similar could be read from the *Prayer Book* (p. 370): "Those who are preparing for Holy Communion..."

Chapter Five

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

In a few words we have given directions about how a spiritual father should establish in penitents that disposition of soul — a disposition of repentance, faith and hope — with which confession becomes fruitful. But this is not enough. When they have noticed that the priest has pain in his heart for his children, the latter will also persistently expect from him guidance and directions for the correction of their life. In general this is the first demand of an awakened conscience. The Jews asked St. John the Baptist what they had to do in order to enter the Kingdom of God; both the rich youth and "a certain lawyer" asked about the same thing, about eternal life, when they drew near to Jesus, as did the three thousand witnesses of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles.

Russian people do not go to monastery elders for any other reason than to ask them directions on the path into the Kingdom of Heaven. When they met Fr. John of Kronstadt in railway stations, in church, in the street, they seized him by the cassock with the plea: "Batiushka, teach me not to swear, teach me not to quarrel with my wife; tell me if I should go to a monastery or get married". It is difficult even for an experienced spiritual father to give intelligent answers to such unexpected questions amid a crowd of jostling people; but our spiritual fathers experience even greater difficulty at confession, even if it is unhurried. This is because most of them do not have spiritual experience, and have not endeavoured to borrow it from the Holy Fathers. At theological school the usual lay teacher could not teach them to do this, preferring to be not a servant of the Church, but a Titular Councilor,[1] and thinking only of how to transfer from pastoral theology — a subject hateful to him since childhood — to civil history or at least to the Latin language.

What then should I read in order to acquire spiritual wisdom? Read much, but know that the principal means of learning are attention

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[1] Titular Councilor: a rank in the civil service. Metropolitan Antony is referring to the attitude prevalent in pre-revolutionary Russia which regarded theological schools merely as schools for priests' sons without sufficient regard for their sacred function to prepare the pastors of the future. Metropolitan Antony had fought against this and sought to make both students and teachers more aware of their spiritual calling.

to oneself, checking on the life of one's own soul, reverent prayer and observation, compassionate and full of love, of the souls surrounding you, of your flock, your family and your acquaintances.

But what should you read? First of all, read the Bible, concurrently from 1) Pentateuch and Kings, 2) from the Prophets and Wisdom Books and 3) from the New Testament. Read every day, for at least half an hour. If you make yourself read through the Bible twice in this way, then subsequently you will re-read it at your own desire and inclination. Anyone who has read the Holy Bible three times cannot help becoming a religious philosopher and moralist.

However, this is important principally for the priest's general spiritual development; there also exist patristic works directly relating to the guidance of penitents. But before you begin reading them I advise you to master the key to the understanding of spiritual life, i.e. to read the book *The Path to Salvation* by Bishop Theophan the Recluse (d. 1894)[2], with attention and, I think, not just once; then start reading the *Synaxarion*.[3] But do not read it in order in which it is written; if you will soon have to start hearing confessions, look in the table of contents and find articles which relate to human weaknesses and passions and teach how to struggle with them; such articles are listed at the end of the *Synaxarion*.

I am pointing out the primary importance of the *Synaxarion* for counselling penitents firstly, because most churches have this book, except for those built recently, but chiefly because this book, as well as the *Limonarion* of Sophronius of Jerusalem, or the *Spiritual Meadow* by John Moschus, or similar collections of the "memorable sayings about the holy fathers", expounds the rules of piety in parables, as did the Savior, or in events from the lives of righteous men, which are more easily assimilated than direct advice, and are remembered longer, on the most part, for one's whole life. I will give just one example. A monk who had long been fighting against temptations with terrible struggles became faint in spirit and started praying to God to lighten the cross which had been placed on him in life: "Is it really impossible for me to reach the Heavenly Kingdom and spiritual perfection with a less painful cross?" An Angel appeared and led him into a spacious upper room, on the walls of which hung many varied crosses: heavy iron ones and lighter wooden ones; among both the former and the latter were some very large crosses, some smaller and some very small. "The Lord has heard your prayer," said the Angel, "and permitted you to choose a cross for yourself".

[2] Available in Russian ("Путь к спасению"), but unfortunately not in English. To some extent it may be replaced by the present work.

[3] The *Synaxarion* is not available in English, but many other books of similar content are; for example, *The Desert Fathers*, translated by Helen Waddell, and the *Lausaic History* of Palladius.

"Do you suppose God will forgive me", said the hermit, "that I, after struggling for many years, am now taking for myself this, the smallest of the little wooden crosses?"

Then the Angel said to him, "This is the very cross you have been bearing up to this day and which you considered too exhausting; all the other crosses are incomparably heavier". Then the monk understood his foolishness and offered repentance, realizing that the Lord never lays on people a burden beyond their strength; but a Christian must accept it submissively and pray for the help of divine grace.

If a priest assimilates the contents of similar stories in the *Synaxarion* and continuously reads at least this and a few other similar books, then he will learn quite thoroughly to guide Christians in their struggle with sins and passions. But there is a whole library of such spiritual cures. Such primarily is the collection of patristic writings in five volumes called the *Philokalia*[4], collected by the same Bishop Theophan the Recluse. The volumes of this can be obtained separately, and especially useful are the first two, in which the writings of the greatest ascetics are collected: Anthony, Pachomius, Isaiah and so on. One of the most highly developed themes in the fathers is the teaching about the eight chief passions of the human heart and struggling with them. If you cannot now obtain the *Philokalia*, those same fathers can be bought separately. Especially useful is the book of Sts. Barsanuphius and John, containing the "Answers" to the monks' questions on matters of piety, and also the *Ladder*, by St. John, abbot of Mount Sinai, in which there is a special word or "epistle" "To Pastors".[5]

Among more contemporary works there is "Advice to the Priest on Performing the Mystery of Confession" by Archbishop Platon of Kostroma, written sixty years ago, but this advice is somewhat formal and scholastic. More practical are the exemplary "Questions to Penitents" by Metropolitan Jonah, Exarch of Georgia, which many spiritual fathers in monasteries had in manuscript, and it is unlikely that they remained unpublished.

[4] Selections from the *Philokalia* are available in English under the titles *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart* and *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, both translated by E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer. Of these, the first deals with the higher stages of spiritual life and the second corresponds approximately to the first two volumes of the Russian edition which are especially recommended by Metropolitan Antony.

[5] The present English edition of the *Ladder* (translated by Fr. Lazarus Moore) omits the "Epistle to Pastors". A new translation including the "Epistle" is being prepared by the fathers of Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Brookline, Mass.

However, the priest should be concerned not so much with having the printed material for guidance through confession in perfect readiness, as with immersing his attention in this field of spiritual pathology and therapy, which is revealed by the holy ascetics. Then he will add to it his own independent activity, will make use of the Fathers' experience consciously and adapt it to those states of soul which his parishioners will reveal to him at confession and in general in spiritual talks.

Chapter Six

SPIRITUAL HEALING. UNBELIEF AND WEAK FAITH.

In our academy lectures on pastoral theology, we gave instructions about how to give edifying advice at confession to people with various dispositions and from various walks of life. Of course, even then we could make no claim to enumerate all the varied conditions of inner life and external situations of Christians, conditions which are endlessly variable. Here, where we are living at present, far from the short summaries which we made for delivering the lectures, we can manage only to set forth what little we remember of what we borrowed from the writings of the Fathers and from our own spiritual experience.

To begin with, let us consider the most acute cases. The person confessing declares that he does not believe. Nowadays such a person would probably not even come to confession, but then (I was teaching until the last years of the 19th century, until the spring of 1900), he would explain that he came because of the requirement of civil law for officers and civil servants, or the requirements of a school for its pupils, or finally, at the insistence of his parents or wife, or in order to observe family customs. But I am still convinced that at the present time of triumphant nihilism such people must appear not infrequently at the confessional. First of all, one must ask if they seriously and sincerely want to talk to the priest, or if they have only come to make mock of him; in the latter event they should simply be sent away. It is essential that your question be affectionate and full of sympathy. If he answers that he would like to be convinced of the truths of faith, or at least re-examine his contalk with him in another place before confession, especially if he is an adult and an educated person. If you notice that his unbelief is victions, then of course it is better to offer to have a preliminary only imaginary or passing, and feel that he can be brought to his senses in a few minutes, then ask him why he lost his faith. Was it from reading books, and if so, which ones? Or from various soul-shaking events — disillusionment, misfortune, prayers unanswered by God (this happens especially often with women) or for other

reasons? If he names Tolstoy[1] or Renan[2] or other writers as being responsible for his loss of faith, then say: "Of course, these books strive to kill faith in people, but it cannot be that they are a sufficient reason for you not to believe. You probably did not take the trouble to read a single book in defence of the faith, or even one book devoted to refuting the thinkers you mentioned. Admit that you started reading these books with a desire to be delivered from faith; and if this is not so, then still, before reading them you must have found religion burdensome, since if this were not so you would not have come to part with it so easily, but, sick at heart, you would have sought a person or another book which could have dispersed your doubts. On the contrary, did you not seek out those books and companions who could destroy even what remained of your faith? Why did you begin to find it burdensome, and when? Wasn't it when you lost your chastity, or wished to lose it, but faith and your conscience prevented you, and you began to hate them just as a mischievous schoolboy hates the person in authority over him? It is not reason, but unchastity which is the enemy of faith, as the Lord said: 'Whoever shall be ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation,' and so on (Mk. 9:38). He did not say: 'in this lazy or self-interested generation,' but 'adulterous generation,' for He knew where and whence enmity against God begins. Many people have read your Tolstoy and Renan and not lost their faith, and others have compiled detailed refutations, both of these writers and of Darwin, Marx and so on. I will give you the refutations I know, and those which I do not know I will find out for you from people who do, if you really want to study these questions deeply, and are not simply covering up your immorality by naming books and philosophers.

"Thus you have admitted that it was not a book, but your evil will which took you away from God. Repent before Him, but if you are very far from Him, then admit to yourself your heavy guilt against truth and your conscience, and then you will receive the desire to ask God for the remission of your sin, your renunciation of your Redeemer. If you are already full of such repentant feelings, then let us pray; I will say the prayer of absolution over you. But as to approaching the Holy Mysteries, think about it first. If the Lord returns faith and hope to your heart, then receive Communion; but if the spirit of un-

[1] L. Tolstoy: The novelist who towards the end of his life was so carried away by religious philosophy that he invented his own kind of Christianity. He blasphemously attacked the Orthodox Church in his later writings such as *Resurrection*, for which he was excommunicated by the Holy Synod of the Russian Church in 1901. *(Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church)*

[2] E. Renan: A renegade French theologian famous for his *Life of Jesus* (1863), in which he repudiated the supernatural and moral aspects of Christ's life and portrayed him as just a charming and amiable Galilean preacher. *(ibid.)*

belief remains in your heart, then wait a while: but do not put off thinking about and investigating this, which is the most important thing on earth, and which is all that remains when we part from the earth. You said that you accept only facts, but death is an indubitable fact. Tell me, is there any sense in our life, if it comes to an end here just as the soul has been brought to fufillment by maturity and thirst for understanding? Is there any sense in all that is good and great, if there is no God? For then, you see, there is no difference left between good and evil; all those who deny God have been compelled to admit this, the latest of them being the famous Spencer.[3] Believe me, no sincere and thoughtful person can deny God and accept these conclusions about good and evil and the senselessness of life; when people talk of denying Him, they are just boasting and wanting to escape their pangs of conscience."

A man can be brought to his senses by such words, or similar ones, provided they come from heartfelt sympathy and compassion, and often such a person who imagined he was an atheist will there and then admit how grievously he was in error and ask for absolution. But if this does not happen straightaway, even so he will bow his head and become thoughtful, and will not refuse to continue his talk with the priest outside the church, or go to see someone who in your opinion can disperse his doubts. Of course, I am far from thinking that such a talk can bring about a conversion in the soul of every person who declares that he does not believe. It is necessary to speak to one person one way and to another person, differently. But I am giving an example of how the voice of pastoral love and the conditions of confession enable you to talk about faith and unbelief on a completely different plane from the usual one; usually people start talking about a book or attack, perhaps correctly, the unbelieving author named by the person they are talking to. The latter then starts employing subtle arguments to defend his teacher. But here you are calling upon the person to place himself under judgement and admit those sinful desires which drew his attention and sympathy to the enemies of God, and so tore him away from God.

If the unbeliever to whom you are speaking is stubborn and does not yield or even becomes angry and starts quarreling, however gentle you are, then still do all you can to ensure that he does not consider this talk as final, but remains willing to come and see you again or to go to some other better informed teacher to whom you can direct him. You know, in one of Gogol's fantasies, the soul of a sleeping girl is separated from her and says, I think to some magician or other,

[3] H. Spencer: A famous English philosopher of the nineteenth century, the leading exponent of agnosticism, the doctrine that only material phenomena can be the subject of real knowledge and that all knowledge of such entities as a Divine Being is impossible. *(ibid.)*

"Marusya" (I probably have the name wrong) "doesn't know a tenth of what her soul knows". If someone who considers himself an unbeliever has come to a priest, that means that in his soul, unknown to himself, there remains a considerable desire to get his faith back, although he also has the opposing desire to avoid it. Keep your pastoral eye on such a person and know that the more sharply and angrily he speaks to you, the more strongly his soul is struggling within him, his conscience struggling with the demon of unbelief and opposition to God. Unbelievers are converted to living faith in various ways, but rarely as the fruit of a gradual refutation of all the pseudo-scientific arguments against the existence of God or the immortality of the soul which they had accepted. Usually, after an inner struggle, at once both intellectual and moral, the turning point comes suddenly, and the person is no longer even interested in refuting his former arguments, but discards these theories as useless husks, as empty sophisms. It becomes clear that they only propped up his unbelief, which came from embitterment or insubmissiveness. Now, softened by a word of pastoral love, the soul has itself found a way out of its gloomy dungeon into the light, and soared to God in prayer. Of course, it would do no harm if the penitent thoroughly studied everything that has been said or written for and against his former atheistic ideas. But only a few will agree to this — they more readily start carefully reading the word of God, listening attentively to the Church prayers and devoting themselves to works of love. O, how blessed you are, minister of God, if you have found the key that enables you to enter into the soul and heart of such a person and open up for him a truthful outlook on himself. This is what the Lord brought about in the soul of Zaccheus, who himself understood what was necessary for him to begin living in God: "Behold, the half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold" (Lk. 19:8).

It is considerably easier for a priest to overcome partial unbelief, or weak faith, on the part of a penitent. Many people confess that they cannot convince themselves that Holy Communion is really the Body and Blood of Christ, or of various miracles performed by the saints, of the necessity of the fasts, of the existence of the devil, and so on. This sort of unbelief is nearly always based on thoughtlessness and the habit of credulously repeating things that are constantly to be heard in the worldly conversations of stupid people. The priest should ask the doubtful person what he does believe in particularly strongly: in the Gospel? In the words of Christ? — Yes! — and all these questions which he finds doubtful have been clearly and definitely answered by the Saviour Himself, in words which he has either forgotten, or to which he has never paid attention. "Either deny belief in God Himself, the Lord Jesus Christ and His

words, or believe as He taught us. No kind of geography or ethnography or zoology can tell you whether the devil exists or not; lead a religious life and you will find out for yourself the difference between temptations from the devil and those from your own evil will, and until you believe your Saviour, do not believe those deceivers and idiots either, who assert that those possessed by demons were just epileptics: did the Lord drive epilepsy into a herd of pigs? Did He not distinguish demonic temptations from those temptations due to faintheartedness and passions, as in the parable of the sower?"

About the fasts, are not these His words?: "But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father Which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly" (Mt. 6:17-18); "They will fast when the bridegroom is taken away from them"; "This kind are not expelled except by prayer and fasting". Besides this, without fail direct the doubting person's attention to the words spoken by Christ in His parting talk with His disciples after the Mystic Supper: "He that believeth on Me, the works that I do he shall do also; and greater works than these shall he do, because I go unto My Father" (Jn. 14:12). If you believe in Christ's miracles, and do not consider Him a dishonourable fraud, then you must also believe these words of His, which He confirmed before His Ascension: "These signs shall follow them that believe..." (Mk. 16: 17), and so on. The irrational Protestants believe in the miracles performed by the Apostles which are reported in the book of Acts, but they do not believe in those which are set forth in their "Lives". Why? Was one of Christ's promises not to be fulfilled? "If they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them" (Mk. 16:18). You see, there is no information about any such miracle in Holy Scripture, but there is in the life of the Apostle John (the Theologian). A vain attempt was made to put him to death by poisoning, but the poison did not harm the Apostle in the least. To those in doubt about the reality of Communion, repeat not only Christ's words at the Mystic Supper, but also His words about the bread which comes down from Heaven (Jn. 6), which they probably do not know. Besides this, obtain and give to people to read the short but very convincing pamphlet by St. Dimitry of Rostov, "To Those in Doubt about the Reality of the Transformation of Bread and Wine into the Body and Blood of Christ." Here the usual doubts about the Holy Mysteries are dispersed remarkably simply and clearly.