

One way of describing a serious sin is to say it is any act which breaks our communion with God and with our neighbor. It is for this reason that examination of conscience-if necessary, going to confession-is part of preparation for Communion. This is an ongoing process of trying to see my life and actions with clarity and honesty-to look at myself, my choices, and my direction as known by God. The examination of conscience is an occasion

to recall not only any serious sins committed since my last confession, but even the beginnings of sins. The word *conscience* derives from a Greek verb meaning "to have common knowledge" or "to know with" someone, a concept that led to the idea of bearing witness concerning someone, especially oneself. Conscience is an inner faculty that guides us in making choices that align us with God's will, and that accuses us when we break communion with God and with our neighbor. Conscience is a reflection of the divine image at the core of each person. In *The Sacred Gift of Life*, Fr. John Breck points out that "the education of conscience is acquired in large measure through immersing ourselves in the ascetic tradition of the Church: its life of prayer, sacramental and liturgical celebration, and scripture study. The education of our conscience also depends upon our acquiring wisdom from those who are more advanced than we are in faith, love, and knowledge of God." Conscience is God's whispering voice within us calling us to a way of life that reveals God's presence and urges us to refuse actions that destroy community and communion.

TOOLS OF SELF-EXAMINATION

In the struggle to examine conscience, we have tools that can assist us, resources that help both in the formation and the examination of conscience. Among these are the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and various prayers, as well as lists of questions written by experienced confessors. In this small booklet, we will look at only one of these, the Beatitudes, which provide a brief summary of the Gospel. Each Beatitude reveals an aspect of being in union with God.

FINDING A CONFESSOR

Just as not every doctor is a good physician, not every priest is a good confessor. Sometimes it happens that a priest, however good his qualities in other respects, is a person not well suited for witnessing confessions. While abusive priests are the exception, their existence must be noted. God has given us freedom and provided each person with a conscience. It is not the role of a priest to take the place of conscience or to become anyone's drill sergeant. A good confessor will help us become better at hearing the voice of conscience and become more free in an increasingly God-centered life. Fortunately, good confessors are not hard to find. Usually your confessor is the priest who is closest, sees you most often, knows you and the circumstances of your life best: a priest of your parish. Do not be put off by your awareness of what you perceive as his relative youth, his personal shortcomings, or the probability that he possesses no rare spiritual gifts. Keep in mind that each priest goes to confession himself and may have more to confess than you do. You confess, not to him, but to Christ in his presence. He is the *witness* of your confession.

You do not require and will never find a sinless person to be that witness. (The Orthodox Church tries to make this clear by having the penitent face, not the priest, but an icon of Christ.) What your confessor says by way of advice can be remarkably insightful, or brusque, or seem to you a cliché and not very relevant, yet almost always there will be something helpful if only you are willing to hear it. Sometimes there is a suggestion or insight that becomes a turning point in your life. If he imposes a penance-normally increased prayer, fasting, and acts of mercy-it should be accepted meekly, unless there is

something in the penance which seems to you a violation of your conscience or of the teaching of the Church as you understand it.

Don't imagine that a priest will respect you less for what you reveal to Christ in his presence, or imagine that he is carefully remembering all your sins. "Even a recently ordained priest will quickly find that he cannot remember 99 percent of what people tell him in confession," one priest told me. He said it is embarrassing to him that people expect him to remember what they told him in an earlier confession. "When they remind me, then sometimes I remember, but without a reminder, usually my mind is a blank. I let the words I listen to pass through me. Also, so much that I hear in one confession is similar to what I hear in other confessions-the confessions blur together. The only sins I easily remember are my own."

One priest told me of his difficulties meeting the expectations that sometimes become evident in confession. "I am not a psychologist. I have no special 'lifts'. I am just a fellow sinner trying to stay on the Path.

A Russian priest who is spiritual father to many people once told me about the joy he often feels hearing confessions. "It is not that I am glad anyone *has* sins to confess, but when you come to confession it means these sins are in your past, not your future. Confession marks a turning point, and I am the lucky one who gets to watch people making that turn!"



HOLY CONFESSION

St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church, Winnipeg



CONFESSION AS A SOCIAL ACTION

It is impossible to imagine a healthy marriage or deep friendship without confession and forgiveness. If we have done something that damages a relationship, confession is essential to its restoration. For the sake of that bond, we confess what we've done, we apologize, and we promise not to do it again; then we do everything in our power to keep that promise.

In the context of religious life, confession is what we do to safeguard and renew our relationship with God whenever it is damaged. Confession restores our communion with God and with each other. It is never easy to admit to doing something we regret and are ashamed of, an act we attempted to keep secret or denied doing or tried to blame on someone else, perhaps arguing to ourselves as much as to others that it wasn't actually a sin at all, or wasn't nearly as bad as some people might claim. In the hard labor of growing up, one of the most agonizing tasks is becoming capable of saying, "I'm sorry."

Yet we are designed for confession. Secrets in general are hard to keep, but unconfessed sins not only never go away, but have a way of becoming heavier as time passes—the greater the sin, the heavier the burden. Confession is the only solution. To understand confession in its sacramental sense, one first has to grapple with a few basic questions: Why is the Church involved in forgiving sins? Is priest-witnessed confession really needed? Why confess at all to any human being? In fact, why bother confessing to God, even without a human witness? If God is really all-knowing, then He knows everything about me already. My sins are known before it even crosses my mind to confess them. Why bother telling God what God already knows? Yes, truly God knows. My confession can never be as complete or revealing as God's knowledge of me and of all that needs repairing in my life. A related question we need to consider has to do with our basic design as social beings. Why am I so willing to connect with others in every other area of life, yet not in this? Why is it that I look so hard for excuses, even for theological rationales, not to confess? Why do I try so hard to explain away my sins, until I've decided either that they're not so bad, or even that they might be seen as acts of virtue? Why is it that I find it so easy to commit sins, yet am so reluctant, in the presence of another, to admit to having done so?

We are social beings. The individual as autonomous unit is a delusion. The Marlboro Man—the person without community, parents, spouse, or children — exists only on billboards. The *individual* is someone who has lost a sense of connection to others or attempts to exist in opposition to others—while

the *person* exists in communion with other persons. At a conference of Orthodox Christians in France a few years ago, in a discussion of the problem of individualism, a theologian confessed, "When I am in my car, I am an individual, but when I get out, I am a person again." We are social beings. The language we speak connects us to those around us. The food I eat was grown by others. The skills passed on to me have slowly been developed in the course of hundreds of generations.

The air I breathe and the water I drink is not for my exclusive use, but has been in many bodies before mine. The place I live, the tools I use, and the paper I write on were made by many hands. I am not my own doctor or dentist or banker. To the extent that I disconnect myself from others, I am in danger. Alone, I die, and soon. To be in communion with others is life. We are social beings. The individual as autonomous unit is a delusion. The Marlboro Man—the person without community, parents, spouse, or children — exists only on billboards. The *individual* is someone who has lost a sense of connection to others or attempts to exist in opposition to others—while the *person* exists in communion with other persons. At a conference of Orthodox Christians in France a few years ago, in a discussion of the problem of individualism, a theologian confessed, "When I am in my car, I am an individual, but when I get out, I am a person again." We are social beings. The language we speak connects us to those around us. The food I eat was grown by others. The skills passed on to me have slowly been developed in the course of hundreds of generations.

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An essential element of confession is doing all I can to set right what I did wrong. If I stole something, it must be returned or paid for. If I lied to anyone. I must tell that person the truth. If I was angry without good reason, I must apologize. I must seek forgiveness not only from God, but from those whom I have wronged or harmed. We are also verbal beings. Words provide a way of communicating, not only with others, but even with ourselves. The fact that confession is witnessed forces me to put into words all those ways, minor and major, in which I live as if there were no God and no commandment to love. A thought that is concealed has great power over us. Confessing sins, or even temptations, makes us, better able to resist. The underlying principle is described in one of the collections of sayings of the Desert Fathers:

If impure thoughts trouble you, do not hide them, but tell them at once to your spiritual father and condemn them. The more a person conceals his thoughts, the more they multiply and gain strength. But an evil thought, when revealed, is immediately destroyed. If you hide things, they have great

power over you, but if you could only speak of them before God, in the presence of another, then they will often wither away, and lose their power.

Confessing to anyone, even a stranger, renews rather than contracts my humanity, even if all I get in return for my confession is the well-worn remark, "Oh, that's not so bad. After all, you're only human." But if I can confess to anyone anywhere, why confess in church in the presence of a priest? It's not a small question in societies in which the phrase "institutionalized religion" is so often used, the implicit message being that religious institutions necessarily undermine spiritual life. Confession is a Christian ritual with a communal character. Confession in the church differs from confession in your living room in the same way that Getting married in church differs from simply living together.

The communal aspect of the event tends to safeguard it, solidify it, and call everyone to account those doing the ritual, and those witnessing it. In the social structure of the Church, a huge network of local communities is held together in unity, each community helping the others and all sharing a command bless the main events in life, from birth to burial. Confession is an essential part of that continuum. My confession is an act of reconnection with God and with all the people and creatures who depend on me and have been harmed by my failings, and from whom I have distanced myself through acts of noncommunion. The community is represented by the person hearing my confession, an ordained priest delegated to serve as Christ's witness, who provides guidance and wisdom that helps each penitent overcome attitudes and habits that take us off course, who declares forgiveness and restores us to communion. In this way our repentance is brought into the community that has been damaged by our sins—a private event in a public context. "It's a fact," writes Fr. Thomas Hopko, rector of St. Vladimir's Seminary, "that we cannot see the true ugliness and hideousness of our sins until we see them in the mind and heart of the other to whom we have confessed."

A COMMUNION-CENTERED LIFE

Attending the liturgy and receiving Communion on Sundays and principal feast days has always been at the heart of Christian life, the event that gives life a eucharistic dimension and center point. But Communion—receiving Christ into ourselves—can never be routine, never something we deserve, no matter what the condition of our life may be. For example, Christ solemnly warns us against approaching the altar if we are in a state of enmity with anyone. He tells us, "Leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:24). In one of the parables, He describes a person who is ejected from the wedding feast because he isn't wearing a wedding garment. Tattered clothing is a metaphor for living a life that reduces conscience to rags (Matthew 22:1-14). Receiving Christ in Communion during the liturgy is the keystone of *living* in communion—with God, with people, and with creation. Christ teaches us that love of God and love of neighbor sum up the Law.

