



Confessing in the Presence of a Priest¹

By
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In the early Church, confession was public; that is, one confessed one's sins in the presence of the entire faith community. When this became impractical, it was the priest who "stood in" for the community, as its presiding officer and as its witness to the penitent's repentance.

Further, while we can indeed confess directly to God – even a casual reading of the daily prayers reveals that we should do this – we often find that we need help and advice in overcoming the very things we have confessed.

We do not confess "to" the priest; rather, we confess to God "in the presence of" the priest who, as the prayer before Confession clearly states, is God's "witness" and who, having witnessed our confession of sins offers pastoral advice on how we can better our lives and overcome the very things we can confess. Just as one would not attempt to diagnose, much less cure, one's own physical ailments, so too one should not attempt to diagnose, much less cure, one's own spiritual ailments.

It is often the case that those who object to revealing their sins in the presence of a priest or to seek his advice have no qualms about revealing their sins to their neighbors, friends, psychiatrists, and so on, usually with the intention of obtaining advice – advice that is not necessarily godly or spiritually profitable, or even just plain "good," for that matter.



Many years ago, a woman cornered my wife at coffee hour and told her that she was having an affair. She asked my wife's advice.

My wife advised her that perhaps she should speak to me about this. The woman replied, "But he's a priest – I couldn't tell him that!" This is somewhat akin to the person who finds a huge lump on his or her body, goes to the doctor, and then asks the receptionist to diagnose it. No doubt the receptionist would suggest that he or she have a seat and allow the doctor to look at it, only to find that the person with the huge lump replies, "But the lump's much, much too big for me to show to the doctor!"

So, we confess in the presence of the priest to acknowledge that our sins, whether we wish to accept it or not, affect the entire faith

¹ Note from Petr: Look for my personal comments and reflections about this at the end of the document.

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community on the one hand, and that we cannot “heal ourselves” on the other. The priest is there to help us overcome those things for which we seek forgiveness, to give advice that a friend or neighbor might not be in a position to give, and to bear witness on behalf of the faith community, of which he is the spiritual father, that we have indeed repented and been forgiven by God.



Yes, one can confess directly to God – but refusing to confess in the presence of a priest implies that one can also be one’s own spiritual physician. If this were so, then one wouldn’t find that one is generally confessing the same sin, over and over again – which not only implies that one is not making progress in overcoming one’s sin and also implies, perhaps, that one really doesn’t want help in overcoming one’s sins in the first place! [There are indeed those who commit certain sins, ask God’s forgiveness, feel that the slate is “clean,” and then plan the next occasion upon which the same sin can once again be committed. This is not “confession” in any sense, and this does not generate forgiveness, precisely because there is no desire to “repent,” or “change.”] On the spiritual level, one who refuses to seek spiritual advice from one’s father confessor is somewhat like the person who refuses to see a surgeon because he or she would rather perform his or her own brain surgery. While I suppose one could pull out a few knives and a can opener and attempt this, it is not likely that it will be a success!

By hiding what one has done, one commits another sin. Have you ever told a lie in order to get yourself out of a situation, only to find out that by telling the lie you are required to tell additional lies – and so on and so on and so on?

Consider this: One day, when our daughter was four years old, I was taking a mid-afternoon nap on the couch. She came running into the living room in an agitated state, demanding that I give her a Kleenex. [In the past, she had always gotten her own Kleenex, so this was rather odd.] I told her to get her own Kleenex, as she had done so many times in the past, but she insisted I give one to her. I did. She ran up the steps to her bedroom and slammed the door shut.

A few minutes later, she woke me up, asking for a piece of scotch tape. Again, this was odd behavior, since she knew where the tape was and never hesitated to get it herself. So, once again, I got up and gave her the tape. And, once again, she bolted up the steps and slammed her bedroom door.

Figuring that something was up – the silence was deafening! – I went up stairs, where I found the Kleenex taped to the wall, about two feet from the floor. I asked her what this was all about; “nothing” was her reply.

Since in my opinion “nothing” usually means “something,” I removed the Kleenex that was taped to the wall, as she watched in absolute horror.

There, under the Kleenex, was a crayon mark.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she replied.

But it wasn’t “nothing.” She knew quite well that coloring on the walls was “something” that was clearly not acceptable. She “sinned” by doing that which she had been told was not permitted – coloring on the wall. And she tried to cover it up, hoping that I would not notice.



Now, had she not asked for the Kleenex and tape, I probably would have never noticed her colorful “sin” in the first place, as I rarely, if ever, inspected the walls for crayon marks. But by trying to cover up the crayon marks in the hope that I wouldn’t notice them, she only made them more obvious, and committed a second sin in the process – one by which she tried to deceive me.

My point here is that when we refuse to confess what we have done, we commit a second sin – a sin of pride, by which we are unwilling to acknowledge what we have done to another person, often justifying this by thinking, “Well, I didn’t really hurt anyone.” We also sin by thinking that we are “pulling the wool over” God’s eyes, which we cannot do. He knows our hearts and He alone judges the sincerity of our repentance – and a key element in genuine repentance is acknowledging to God and to others that we are indeed sinners.

I assure you that there is no sin that would shock a priest out of his sensibilities; at the same time, should a priest in whose presence you choose to reveal even the most shocking sin in a spirit of true repentance reject you for doing so, consider it a blessing and find another confessor.

But I don't know a priest who would shun one who genuinely repents and genuinely seeks the means by which even the most serious sin can be overcome and brought under control, and I know plenty of priests who would, in fact, applaud one who confesses openly, honestly, and with a true spirit of repentance.

A saint of the Church once opined that the angels in heaven dance for joy when a sinner repents; believe me, the priests on earth do the same thing!



So continue to ask God daily for forgiveness, but please do not overlook the need everyone has – including priests! – to seek guidance and direction in overcoming sin. And never forget that, if it true that God often heals the physically ill by guiding the hands of a surgeon, He also heals the spiritually ill by guiding the words and advice of a priest.



Allow me to share with you what I experienced personally in this area. Although I'd been countless times to confession, this particular time was above and beyond all the others. And it was then that I discovered the true healing power that's available through this sacrament.

I sin. Constantly. Creatively, even! And then I curse myself for my own failings. Some sins seem inconsequential. "I made an off-color comment." "I snapped at the receptionist this afternoon." These are the easiest for me to confess to a priest. They seem like minor shortcomings, surely not worthy of excommunication or denunciation!

And then there are those sins that are so grotesque that they sap you of all your strength and leave you feeling like the most pitiful person on the planet. For many, these sins deal with one or more aspects of sex and desire. For others, the temptations that torment their souls are in areas totally unrelated to sex. The concept of confessing these sins to a priest is incomprehensible! It's like Bob Dylan once sang,



"And if my thought-dreams could be seen
They'd probably put my head in a guillotine
But it's alright, Ma, it's life, and life only."²

I see my sins. And the more I pray, the more I see. Thanks be to God, my spiritual optometrist! And while I'm grateful that He's working on me, confessing these problems to a priest and risking his reaction is – for me – absolutely terrifying. I don't deal well with rejection!

Fortunately, as I was reading a book I'd picked up at our church bookstore,³ I came across the following quotation:

"Oh, Christian, I will say, it is not that shameful to disclose your sin in Confession, but it is shameful to remain closed in it, that is, to conceal it from your priest. St. Basil the Great said: 'The hidden sin is an incurable sickness of the soul.' How can you be cured from your illness if you hide it from the doctor?" (Archimandrite Seraphim Aleksiev, *The Forgotten Medicine: The Mystery of Repentance*, pp. 45-46)

² From "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" by Bob Dylan.

³ Thank God for Charlie Cowling and the books he picks out to sell!

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And in another volume from the bookstore:

“This deceiver and corrupter of souls has often driven many out of their mind. No other thought is so difficult to tell in confession as this. That is why it often remains with many to the very end of their lives. For nothing gives the demons and bad thoughts such power over us as nourishing and hiding them in our heart unconfessed.” (St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, p. 184)

I felt convicted that the Lord wanted me to take the next step in my spiritual walk and see Fr. Ken in confession.

To say I was nervous would be an understatement! I took a deep breath and began my confession. Much to my amazement, Fr. Ken responded calmly and with great compassion. Without a word of judgement, he encouraged me and helped me see how so many others struggle with similar sins. I wasn't alone and I was still accepted! That evening, he confirmed the words of Fr. Matusiak:

“So, we confess in the presence of the priest to acknowledge that our sins, whether we wish to accept it or not, affect the entire faith community on the one hand, and that we cannot ‘heal ourselves’ on the other. The priest is there to help us overcome those things for which we seek forgiveness, to give advice that a friend or neighbor might not be in a position to give, and to bear witness on behalf of the faith community, of which he is the spiritual father, that we have indeed repented and been forgiven by God.”

Because I summoned up the courage that evening and confessed to Fr. Ken, I found a freedom I never thought possible. I no longer have to hide anything from him. I can come to him for confession, advice, and healing. He counsels me on my bad days and encourages me on my good days. And he reminds me just how much the Lord loves me!



Was I afraid to do this? Yes! Was it worth it? Most definitely! In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “Free at last! free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!” What a feeling!



“Preparation for confession does not consist in recalling your sins as fully as possible and even writing them down. It means striving to attain such a state of concentration, seriousness and prayer that your sins will become as clear as if they had been exposed to the light. In other words, you should bring to your confessor not a list of sins but a feeling of repentance, not a minutely studied dissertation but a contrite heart.” (John Chryssavgis, *Repentance and Confession*, p. 86)

[Note: Pictures, closing quotation and comments added by Petr Chudoba.]

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