

# Ticket to Heaven: Sketches on Confession

Alexis Vinogradov

The Mystery of Confession in the Church is far from being a well-described science, with universally accepted rules and guidelines—hence the term *mystery*. We have, however, perhaps far too long acted as if the science and its application were indeed clear. After forty-two years as a pastor, and some twenty five years prior to that as a lay sinner in the Orthodox faith, and seven gloriously sinless years as an innocent youth even before that, I have no prescriptions for the formal Rite of Confession. I hope here to propose a few sketches or notes on confession for a conversation that may be long overdue, to which confessors and penitents might continue adding their wisdom and experience as long as we don't think the tradition has somehow been perfected and frozen in time.

Leaving seminary in 1978, I felt well equipped to lead parish discussions on *hesychasm*, the *filioque*, and *theosis*, but scarcely prepared to face the concerns that the faithful would bring for confession, other than fundamental intuitions on that theme that were part of my own religious formation growing up in a Russian parish. One left seminary with the illusion that after three years of lining up for confession with other students in a dark, smoky chapel in the fasting seasons, a young student, himself just starting out in life, was qualified to receive and process the most intimate concerns of struggling parents and grandparents, divorced persons and adult siblings car-

rying decades of separation, grudges, and injury—not to speak of the deepest afflictions caused by misuse of the human body. We were, of course, pointed to bibliographies of pastoral direction, but no academic discussion or guidelines can prepare a young priest for an agonized human sufferer's stark unveiling of his own soul, trusting everything to this inexperienced man and perceiving him as God's very voice.

In my early ministry at clergy gatherings where I had hoped to learn the ropes from seasoned priests, I raised the question of confession and asked how my elders approached this most difficult of priestly responsibilities. What I heard all too often sounded much like this: "Father, the people have grown lax, they just saunter up to the Cup and don't come to Vespers. We must reinstitute confession as a prerequisite for communion. The Church's prayerbooks and pamphlets explain the various sins and examination of conscience; we just need to put them out so the faithful will read them!" You can further imagine the answers provoked by my question: "Fathers, do you think we should teach confession as *obligation* or *opportunity*?" Eventually one stops asking, because the question itself finds little resonance when ritual supplants reason.

*Mystery!* We hide masterfully behind that word in the religious world. The hiding is legitimate on one level, be-



Alexei Ivanovich Korzukhin, *Before Confession*, 1877. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

cause we are in the realm of ineffable realities, but on another, we claim to offer God our “rational worship”—and so the “why” and “what” must be answered rationally.

For starters, let’s consider the mysterious yet also rational term *relationship*.

Confession can be relegated to and examined within the province of law, mating justice with penance. Or it can be restored to its rightful place within personal relationship, which unites mystery and mercy. And here the distinction is monumental and foundational. In the first instance, we measure Confession as *obligation*, and consequently something that can be prescribed, delineated, accomplished, and sealed. In the second instance, its very initiation, its starting point, is in *grief*—in the tragedy of a reality recognized as broken, and yet a break whose roots may be superficially undetectable. And here, in this domain, there are no formulaic delineations, no prescriptions, methods, rules, or strategies of the kind that apply in the mechanical workings of law. For relationship be-

gins with the mystery of *encounter*. God is never imposed. God is encountered, and in that encounter, the person created in God’s image is free to recognize the Source of his being. Or, if that person has been psychically traumatized, presented with a remote, inaccessible, impersonal, and judgmental divinity, he approaches such a *God* not with the trepidation of awe and wonder but with raw fear. And here, especially here, the confessor has to have the time to ascertain which “*God*” has been residing in the consciousness of the penitent.

*God, love, sin, repentance, salvation . . .* there is a veritable buffet of foundational religious terms that no longer carry the same universal meaning that we all too easily assume, when we casually employ them in preaching, teaching, conversation. In confession they acquire particular “power” because they can heal or they can accuse, depending on how the penitent has heard these terms through the course of her life. Thus, a confessor asking the penitent in some habitual formula—“Do you, O *penitent*, come *humbly* before the *Judge* seeking

*salvation?*”—must realize that this short formula can set up instantly two diametrically opposed worlds. The Judge can either be a merciless Accuser and Executioner, or he can be a merciful Healer and Physician. How has such a Judge been modeled in life? What is judgment in its positive manifestation? And how have *humility* and *salvation* been understood? Is *humility* groveling or truth? For the penitent, is *salvation* some future reward or is it profound spiritual freedom and liberation even now?

At the Divine Liturgy on Pascha, the Gospel of John announces: “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

What *law* did we see growing up? As a kid I went to Russian church classes that were called *Zakon Bozhiy*, God’s Law. This was presented as a precise delineation of what we sinful fallen humans must do on our lifelong path to overcome God’s sorrow (if not anger) over our miserable refusal to follow his orders or commandments. Like hosts of kids who went through similar Roman Catholic catechisms, by our late teens most Russian kids, realizing they were not yet struck by lightning (read *God*), decided they had no use for a heaven acquired through a constant digging in one’s inadequacies. We did not need the Church to reinforce the guilt some parents had been successfully instilling in us all along. My peers dumped the Law of God happily as debris from the past, and regrettably threw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Those of us who stayed may have been fortunate to have supportive parents and to encounter priests and lay models who could open to us the dimensions of mercy and mystery, but the majority who remained in Church simply accepted the inevitability of an essentially secular life that would peripherally include time spent in church. That church time would ensure

a post-mortem mysterious “afterlife,” entirely distinct from this life, satisfying a remote Judge, who might after one’s death open his kingdom, if in this life one did not mess things up too badly. Part of that hope was bolstered by the formal prescription of confession as a recitation of missteps from available lists of typical and known transgressions, which in the West achieved heights of precise categorization from *venial* through *mortal*, and which the East readily adopted.

This is not the place to review how, historically, practices of confession were recruited to guarantee conformity to the cult and became tokens of membership and sanctity. I can still recall heated debates during my early priesthood at national conferences of the American Church that ultimately codified “membership-in-good-standing” through minimum annual participation in the sacraments of confession and communion. The very rites that evolved in early Christian experience as the revelation of new life in Christ and release from the Pharisaic accretions of Religion now became enshrined as passports between two realms, Earth and Heaven, to be monitored by duly assigned customs officers, the clergy. Secularism was born as Religion tragically yet successfully divided the domains of man and God, and no one noticed. The incarnation, that great “scandal” of the unification of humanity and God in the person of Jesus Christ, was neutralized, Jesus returned to his “rightful” place in the heavens, and the clergy became occupied with prepping the faithful for the “next” life, where they might encounter Jesus if they were good.

It is sufficient to glance through the available supply of pamphlets on confession to notice that their primary focus is not on the joyous union of man and God, but rather on the lists of transgressions by which man has offended the majesty and love of God. The distance

represented metaphorically by Adam's exile from paradise is bridged by running the gauntlet of unrequited deeds, the yearning for a mercy that appears more and more elusive. Finding herself drawn by the joyous resonance of the Paschal night, the newly illumined catechumen soon finds herself unable to reach the heights of Orthodox piety, as more and more she browses the shelves of "spiritual writings," in ample supply in seminary bookstores and collecting dust in parish libraries. Having climbed up to Tabor, having beheld the empty tomb, herself released from her sins by the Gardener who calls her by name, she is ushered on the new path of penitence. If she is fortunate and innately humble, she will tread the middle way. If she is overly zealous, she will soon become the parish's new expert on *metanoia* and *theosis*, gladly sharing with her new spiritual family the treasures that they have carelessly neglected. Her own recital of transgressions will rival the rungs on the Ladder of Saint John.

Fortunately, in our times there has evolved, particularly in Western Christian consciousness (I have in mind especially the work of the late Father André Louf), an approach to Confession called spiritual companionship. This encounter of *friends* removes the vertical crush of authority, and recognizes that the only valid return to God occurs when pilgrim and guide set out together on the same path. But this implies an entirely new revival of the meaning of *friendship*, as expressed by the Son of God to his disciples: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from the Father I have made known to you." (John 15:15).

I have found this understanding of companionship of immense value in teaching about confession. How often we are told

about the need to discern and accomplish "God's will for us": a theology built on the divine Master Plan, into which each component (every human creature) must fit and fulfill a preset destiny. But if Christ uses this term, if he calls us friends, he specifically casts this relationship in terms of the sharing of knowledge: "I have made known to you all that I have heard from the Father." The confessor is not a shaman holding the codes to freedom, waiting to dispense them ("by the grace bestowed upon" him) to the genuinely penitent, or to prescribe specific penances to satisfy the offended master. The confessor speaks and listens on behalf of the Friend, and here the only possible "offense" is the breach of the love that unites friends. Valid questions for the penitent are: In my friendship with God and neighbor, how have I disrupted this friendship? In what ways have I injured the love that binds us? In what ways have I neglected this friendship? Have I expected more from this friendship than I have been willing to bring into it?

Here, Father Alexander Men offers a classic answer about the value of confessing to a priest. As we read this, it is important to notice that it is given by a priest whose fame spread as a true pastor of a widespread flock, who had earned the trust of those who freely brought him their burdens. When he describes the priest as "merely a witness," it is to spare us priests the arrogance of thinking we are gatekeepers determining the fate of the faithful. His final thoughts diffuse the pernicious idea of the "creativity" of sin:

*Inquirer:* Father Alexander, what is the value of confessing our sins before a priest?

*Father Men:* We're quite cunning with ourselves, and always find an excuse for everything. When



there's a witness (and a priest is only a witness) we have to carry out our first redemptive, as it were, spiritual feat: we have to name our sin. This can be so excruciating and repulsive that we would sooner repent of a thousand sins to ourselves than to tell a priest (or especially a friend) the truth about ourselves. And then we don't tell it straight, we speak in interjections or empty words, and what's important is obscured. The natural desire to appear better than you are is often at work as well as the natural fear that the priest will think less of you once he knows of your sin. But it's not true, my friends. I have hundreds of friends who make their confessions before me, and their sins have not in the least kept me from loving them. I simply forget their sins; they completely slip straight out of my consciousness. But then, believe me, Satan hasn't managed to come up with anything ingenious; all sins are extremely monotonous and can be counted on the fingers of one hand. It seems to us that our sin is quite a special one but alas sin is a synonym for banality, they're all commonplace.<sup>1</sup>

We notice how readily and easily Father Men speaks of friendship. This relationship is foremost in the mind of this pastor. I think of a concrete example of describing the "banality of sins" related to me about Father Alexander Schmemmann by his son Serge. At a college retreat at which Serge was among the students, at the end of Vespers and General Confession, after a day of conversations on Christian spirituality, Father Schmemmann addressed the gathered students: "I know your schedule says that there will be an opportunity for personal confessions after Vespers, and I am happy to oblige. Only let me say that if any of you had in mind to unburden yourself of an

unusual or particularly grave sin, let me assure you that in my life I have heard everything possible, and in conclusion must tell you that in essence sin is banal and boring!" Serge says that the atmosphere of youthful intellectual self-exaltation that plagues students suddenly became a burst balloon and brought everyone back down to the solid ground of simple humility, and everyone felt a wonderful wave of release.

But this was Father Schmemmann's gift, and those of us privileged to have had him as our confessor remember that warm, large, liberating hand he would rest on our shoulder, and say something like, "Well, Alex, tell me about life; the family is well? Kids are happy? Work overwhelming no doubt, but otherwise?" In similar, brief words, one felt: here is a snapshot of my life, I should be grateful, and yet I have arrived with a long list of failures, from which this man has just liberated me. Yes, kids, family, work, happiness, the normalcy of being at times overwhelmed. He knew all this and was indeed a "witness," a witness to tell you that it was OK, you'll make it through, you're not alone.

Confession is born out of what the church fathers call the "nostalgia for paradise." One might say this is an oxymoron: how can you remember a place where you have never been? But the paradise of which they speak is our inescapable communion with the core divine image within us, planted at our very creation. We all have this longing for what is deepest within us, but occluded by a systematic overdose of activity, information, social and peer pressure, and the lure of our own thirsty ego.

Finally, yet paradoxically foremost, we must answer why confession is an act of the Church, part of the Church as corporate reality and not a private *требѧ* ("need" in Russian). Undoubt-

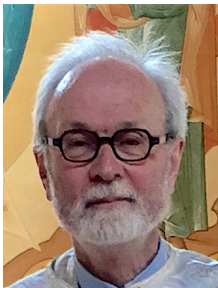
<sup>1</sup> "From Conversations with Father Men," trans. Steve Griffin from Alexander Men, *Культура и духовное восхождение* (Moscow: Искусство, 1992), [http://www.alexandermen.com/From\\_Conversations\\_with\\_Father\\_Men](http://www.alexandermen.com/From_Conversations_with_Father_Men).

edly, it is why in her consciousness the Church required that long absentees re-enter into the body of faithful through the Confessional Rite. It is that vestigial remnant that ended up codified in our own American church statute defining a member—confession and communion once a year at minimum! Underneath such prescriptions is an awareness that sin divides us from our primordial union as God’s children, manifest in the common union of the sacred body. Our sin is not a legal transgression but an organic rift, a tragic disintegration within the body. Here, of course, the faithful would ask today: “How could my sin possibly have affected the stranger standing next to me in church?” In his commentary on the Rite of Forgiveness for the first day of Great Lent, Father Schmemmann says: here is precisely my “sin,” that standing beside you week after week, I have never actually made the effort to know you, to ask why God has placed us next to each other in worship, to ask why have I been coming just to *get* my private communion and you yours (like a commodity), and why have not both of us been aware that in reality we have been coming to *be* in communion with each other in God? It is no wonder that we have come to think of Holy Communion not as the meal that binds all of us to one another and God, but rather as a kind of personal yet individual reward that I receive for my private spiritual well-being. For if it is in fact such a private “gift,” it stands to reason that I can earn it through the con-

fession of my private sins, which are no one’s business but my own and that of the priest with the special power to hear and forgive them. Restoration and healing, then, is distorted into nothing more than a business transaction with God!

These are only a few preliminary thoughts, offered here as sketches toward a hopefully more fruitful conversation among the faithful about this gift, which the Church has always borne within herself, and which has been called a second baptism for its power to reset and renew us in life. This is the nuanced and very delicate domain of our fragile inner life, the remnant sanctuary of the soul in a world that reduces men to social utility, or in the religious sphere makes us into agents of God’s will on the planet, ranked in order of success in fulfilling an unspecified Master Plan.

The Son of God becomes the Son of Man, the Lover who comes chasing down His beloved Bride, to bring her spotless to the kingdom of joyous life in communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Is not confession perhaps simply a plea placed before the Son, before the Friend? “Lord, I know you are with me; open my eyes, remove the spiritual scales that bind me from seeing your glory and that keep me apart from the boundless, divine life of which you have made me a sure participant, by having united with me to the extent that being sinless yourself, you took upon yourself my great sin, my separation from your Father and my Father.”✽



The Very Rev. *Alexis Vinogradov* studied architecture at McGill University and theology at St. Vladimir’s Seminary. He has designed Orthodox churches around the United States, several buildings at St. Vladimir’s Seminary, and a studio and residence for writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn in Vermont. He has translated a number of Russian works by Alexander Schmemmann and Alexander Men. From 1978 until his retirement in 2015, he was rector of the Church of St. Gregory the Theologian in Wappingers Falls, New York.