

Confession: A Critical Layman's Perspective

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The sacrament of confession is strongly encouraged for practicing Orthodox Christians throughout our life in the Church. And yet it is rare that a layperson's perspective on this practice is sought or offered. In the course of my life in the Church I have observed three types of confession: formal, controlling and responsible. While the first two approaches are widespread, the third requires a significant amount of work, self-awareness, and mutual respect from both the penitent and the confessor priest. In this article, I outline the characteristics of these different types of confession and suggest some ways in which we might make responsible confession the prevailing norm.

Confession Now

Our approach to the sacrament of confession is the result of numerous developments and cultural factors, many of them comparatively recent, and it is therefore likely quite remote from the vision of the ancient Church. It also varies significantly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and even from parish to parish.

Broadly, there are two major approaches, which I will call Russian and Greek for the sake of simplicity. The difference lies not in frequency of confession, as is often supposed,

but in whether confession is understood as a gateway to receiving communion—a prevalent view in the Russian tradition—or as a separate event in Christian life, as it is often regarded in Greek practice. Both approaches suffer from the consumption ethic that pervades the practice of confession in the contemporary Church, however. They turn confession into “paying dues,” either for immediate access to communion or as a regular contribution required to remain in good standing.

Such an attitude is quite foreign to the essence of the sacrament. The very word confession implies a penitent's sincere sharing of uncomfortable truths. By definition, the sacrament should be driven by one's conscious and voluntary decision to repent. This model of confession, wherein the penitent organically develops the desire to repent without being “sold” such a desire, has its biblical source in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32). In the parable, the son's confession is driven by a strong desire on his part to return to the father in spite of all that has transpired between them. It takes courage to overcome anxiety and shame and to appear before the eyes of the father. The father offers forgiveness to his son, but this act is driven by the son's choices, not vice versa.

Likewise, confession, a sacrament of reconciliation with the Church, cannot begin with the priest. The willingness to reconcile comes from the sinner, and the Church, in God's manner, has no other way but to forgive the sinner unconditionally. One might ask, "But what about all of the penance practices known as early as the times of Saint Basil?" We must remember that those practices were never a condition for forgiveness; they were merely restorative spiritual exercises routinely associated with certain kinds of transgressions.

In contrast to this ideal state of things, modern confession is frequently driven either by institutional expectations or by a priest. Let me dive deeper into the two prevalent types of confession I have experienced as a layman or heard of from other laypeople.

Formal Confession

This is arguably the only form of confession known to the majority of Orthodox Christians in churches of the Russian tradition. It comes from a late view of confession as a prerequisite to partaking of holy communion. This approach to the sacrament is burdensome for both penitents and the confessor priest. Anyone familiar with Russian-tradition churches knows the long lines of penitents on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings. In a small church served by a single priest, people are used to seeing the priest leave the altar as much as he can during the service to "serve" the line instead of offering service to God, especially during Vigil. Sometimes, a priest comes out during Liturgy after the Lord's Prayer to hear confessions, essentially interrupting the Liturgy for as long as an hour.

The line is always there. These are all the same people who have been coming to the same church for years and sometimes for decades. They go through this ritual every Saturday or Sunday. Some priests urge people to come to confession on Saturdays and refuse to hear confessions on Sundays, save for the sick and parents with small children. Still the ritual goes on, week after week, month after month, year after year. And it mostly consists of a litany of habitual transgressions, rushed and formal because of the dual pressure of the line and the time. What drives it? Why does it keep happening? Why do so few question its absurdity? The answer is twofold. First, it is hard to break traditions. People get used to repetitive actions as a coping mechanism and a natural defense against life's uncertainties. Dependence on rituals is part of the human neurological structure.

There is a second factor driving this familiar ritual, however. The unbreakable connection of confession and communion has assumed a sacred dimension in the Church's mind. Severing it is inevitably seen by some as ending a relationship with God. Lining up before every Liturgy and providing a priest with a 30-second brief of the same old stuff the priest already knows is viewed as non-negotiable. From the priests with whom I have spoken and from my own experience, people rarely come to such confessions with actual sins. Sins are the wrongdoings that create a distance between a person and God. Repentance is the eagerness to overcome this distance. During these routine confessions, however, people often complain about life, work, family, and acquaintances. The "sins" portion is confined to eating dairy on

Wednesday and Friday or watching Game of Thrones. Yet challenging this ritual brings fear, uncertainty, and genuine thoughts of desecration and blasphemy, as evident from discussion of the draft guidelines of the Russian Orthodox Church for participation in the sacrament of the Eucharist as recently as 2015.

This practice ultimately serves to create a comfortable and unchallenging environment of confession. A formal routine effectively replaces the need to take responsibility for one's own life and to bring it into alignment with the gospel, and especially for such difficult challenges as loving one's neighbor. Oftentimes such confession is informed by lists of "sins" whose many versions exist in brochures and on websites. The motivation to take part in the sacrament seldom comes from a person's conscience. A priest rarely says anything except for the absolution prayer at the end. The ritual is done and the dues are paid.

This type of confession is formal and boring, but in most cases it is harmless. It fails to deliver the reconciliation and the healing of the sacrament of confession established by the Church, but it does not cause direct spiritual, psychological, social, or physical harm.

Controlling Confession

The perceived need for regular confession and the perceived inability to approach the chalice without it have given birth to another, more harmful practice. While it is easily brought on by the mandatory confession specific to the Russian tradition, it is not confined to it. Anecdotal evidence from the Arizona monasteries under the jurisdiction of the Greek

Orthodox Archdiocese of America and of the practice of obedience to Athonite elders across half the world highlight the universal nature of this problem.

In this kind of confession, unlike the formal one, the relationship between priest and penitent comes very much into play. Whatever internal traumas lead people to engage in those relationships, at their center is a vast power differential. Just as Sith Lord Darth Sidious in the Star Wars universe lures Anakin Skywalker to the Dark Side of the Force by using the latter's fear of losing his wife, the priests who engage in this type of "spiritual fatherhood" build an initial relationship on the penitent's fear, by claiming a unique ability to contain and control the source of this fear.

Fear can be brought to the first confession, but it can also be born in the moment when a person talks to an elder for the first time. It can easily be a fear of hell created by the elder's sudden revelation that people who behave "sinfully" are destined for eternal flames. The reasons can vary, from a woman wearing pants to church to having services according to the "wrong" calendar to being engaged in sexual intimacy (even within marriage). From the moment of initiation, failure to follow the elder's guidance means certain, inevitable eternal suffering. Whatever the transgressions, people in such relationships of absolute obedience become enslaved by their own fear and lose all autonomy.

While extreme cases of such eldership may not be widespread, the temptation to abuse one's position poisons many priests, both monastic and married. A clear sign of this

kind of controlling, spiritually abusive behavior is asking unsolicited questions and giving unsolicited advice during confession. While the range of topics can be broad, the favorite one to exploit is the subject of sexuality.

I offer this example from my own experience during my first years in the Church. I was once a lay worker in a monastery. Around that time, I met my future wife and she sometimes came to the monastery. One day I was having a routine confession with a schema-monk. At some point he interrupted me and said: "So, it looks like you have a girlfriend. When you get married, do you plan to use contraception?" I was a bit confused because I had been talking about something completely different. But then he repeated, "Don't ever dare to use contraception. It's a grave sin."

I was fortunate to have avoided this kind of spiritual relationship, but many people get ensnared in them out of respect for what they perceive as authentic insight. It is especially easy for recent converts and former atheists to fall victims to such controlling priests, and usually there is no one to tell a romantic neophyte how remote such an approach is from the Orthodox understanding of confession.

This is when the sacrament of reconciliation with the Church becomes instead the tool of a toxic, controlling, divisive relationship. Self-identification with the universal community of the faithful is replaced by being the disciple of an "elder." While remaining formally Orthodox, people engaged in such relationships often reject the hierarchy, the clergy, fellow laypeople, and other church communities as

non-Orthodox or heretical. This can happen even if the elder is within the canonical boundaries of the Church. When the elder decides to separate from the Church, however, his disciples tend to follow readily.

Responsible Confession

Is it possible to bring the sacrament of confession back to its original place within the Church? It certainly is, if both priests and laity take on this responsibility. Responsible confession starts from a person's conscience, from a desire to reconcile with the Church. This implies a realization that previous actions have separated a person from Christ. The practice of confession then realizes the Church's acceptance of a person's desire to be healed and shows the all-merciful essence of God. In this approach, individual conscience replaces the "litany of sins." A priest is to remain respectful and caring, remembering his role as an intermediary but not a judge.

In the Orthodox Church, absolution is inevitable. Forgiveness is immediate. This is the only response that the Church has for repentance. As mentioned earlier, there have been multiple penance practices, but they belonged to a slightly different realm of pastoral care and served the purpose of gradual reinstatement of a person as a full member of the Church. Nonetheless, God's forgiveness is contained entirely in the very act of repentance.

For a person to put on the Prodigal Son's shoes there must be a real separation from Christ (not "dairy on Wednesday" or "listening to heavy metal") followed by a genuine desire for reconciliation. This kind of repentance is not possible in weekly

routine confession-for-communion nor when confession occurs within a relationship of spiritual abuse. Many maintain that confession before communion is like washing hands before a meal. Yet this approach trivializes the experience of true repentance. A sacrament that sometimes happened in history as rarely as once in a lifetime cannot be reduced to a weekly procedure based on social and ritualistic expectations.

As the First Epistle of John tells us, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves” (1 John 1:8). Sin is missing the mark—and we are always missing a mark. Therefore God has given us the Church, a community of fellow believers with whom we gather frequently to be nourished by the body and blood of Christ himself. Confession thus also happens in the Church—in the right time, in the right place, just as the sacrament of holy matrimony can only happen only when people are getting married.

Letting your consciousness drive the frequency and content of your confession is a degree of independence that is not immediately familiar to most Orthodox Christians. The way most of us are brought up in the Church is through adoption of rituals and practices without questioning them—often dubbed as “taking the yoke of the Lord.” But the yoke of the Lord is not about standing in line on Saturday night. It is about setting a benchmark for our lives based on the gospel. Our worship is rational, as Saint Paul says in Romans 12:1. It is about using all our will power and brainpower to reach out to God and restore his kingdom within us. God requires conscious choice, self-awareness, and responsibility when we take his yoke. Only by taking responsibility for the God-given vineyard of our souls can we embrace the true meaning and use of confession, and only then can it be fruitful for us on our journey to the kingdom. ✱



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