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# CONFESSiON: THE SACRAMENT OF FREEDOM

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ST. BENEDICT ORTHODOX CHURCH  
3808 Old Seymour Rd ✆ 940-692-3392  
Rev. Fr. Peter Kavanaugh

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## WEEK 2 ~ *What Does the Church Say About Confession?*

### I. Introduction (Review)

- *What is Confession?* Our chance on earth to learn how to be real with God; radical intimacy with God; the door that opens up the soul to God's purification
- *Why go to confession?* The more confession becomes a part of life, the greater chance we have here and now to find deeper peace, self-discovery, & transformation.

### II. Confession From Day One

- Adam and Eve > Man sins and hides. God asks: "Where are you?"
- Cain and Abel > The Lord says to Cain: "Where is your brother Abel?"
- Jewish atonement rites and public confessions

### III. The New Testament on Confession

- "Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan" (Matthew 4:6)
- Christ forgives sins (Mk 2:5-11)
- Christ gives power of forgiveness to his disciples:
  - "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19)
  - "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:22-23)
- Book of Acts
  - "Many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds" (19:18).
- Epistles
  - "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the **priests** (presbyterous) of the church, and let them pray over him...and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:14-16)

### IV. 1st Century Writings on Confession

- **Didache (Teaching of the Apostles – 48 A.D.)**
  - "Thou shalt confess thy transgressions in the Church...and shalt not come unto prayer with an evil conscience" (4.14)

- “On the Lord’s Day gather together, break bread, and give thanks [*in Greek*], *first* confessing your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure” (I4.I).
- **Letter of Barnabas (70 A.D.)**
  - “Thou shalt confess thy transgressions in the Church, and shalt not come unto prayer with an evil conscience” (19)

## V. The Church Fathers on Confession

- In all the writings of the Church Fathers we see that confessions were always made to a priest.

- **Tertullian of Carthage (200 AD)**

“[Regarding confession, some] flee from this work as being an exposure of themselves, or they put it off from day to day. [\*SOUNDS FAMILIAR] I presume they are more mindful of modesty than of salvation, like those who contract a disease in the more shameful parts of the body and shun making themselves known to the physicians; and thus they perish along with their own bashfulness. Why do you flee from the partners of your misfortunes as you would from those who deride? The body is not able to take pleasure in the trouble of one of its members. It must necessarily grieve as a whole and join in laboring for a remedy....With one and two individuals, there is the Church [cf. Matt 18:17ff]; and the Church indeed is Christ. Therefore, when you cast yourself at the knees of the brethren, you are dealing with Christ, you are entreating Christ.”

- **Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition (A.D. 215).**

Bishops have authority to forgive sins > "Father who knowest the hearts of all grant upon this Thy servant whom Thou hast chosen for the episcopate to feed Thy holy flock and serve as Thine high priest, that he may minister blamelessly by night and day, that he may unceasingly behold and appropriate Thy countenance and offer to Thee the gifts of Thy holy Church. And that by the high priestly Spirit he may have authority to forgive sins..."

- **Origen, Homilies on Leviticus (A.D. 248).**

"In addition to these there is also a seventh, albeit hard and laborious: the remission of sins through penance...when he does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord."

“remission of sins through penance...when the sinner...is not ashamed to make known his sin to the priest of the Lord and to seek a cure.”

- **Basil, Rule Briefly Treated (A.D. 374).**

"It is necessary to confess our sins to those whom the dispensation of God's mysteries is entrusted."

- **Augustine, Christian Combat (A.D. 397).**

"All mortal sins are to be submitted to the keys of the Church and all can be forgiven; but recourse to these keys is the only, the necessary, and the certain way to forgiveness. Unless those who are guilty of grievous sin have recourse to the power of the keys, they cannot hope for eternal salvation. Open your lips, them, and confess your sins to the priest. Confession alone is the true gate to Heaven."

- **Jerome, Commentary on Matthew (A.D. 398).**

"Just as in the Old Testament the priest makes the leper clean or unclean, so in the New Testament the bishop and presbyter binds or looses not those who are innocent or guilty, but by reason of their office, when they have heard various kinds of sins, they know who is to be bound and who loosed."

- **St. Isaac the Syrian (Homilies 7I)**

"Whoever hates his sins will stop sinning; and whoever confesses them will receive remission. A man can not abandon the habit of sin if he does not first gain enmity toward sin, nor can he receive remission of sin without confession of sin. For the confession of sin is the cause of true humility."

## VI. Modern Saints on Confession

- **St. Silouan the Athonite, Writings, XVII.I3, XIII.II, II.I**

"Tell everything to your spiritual father, and the Lord will have mercy on you and you will escape delusion. But if you think that you know more about the spiritual life than your spiritual father, and you stop telling him everything about yourself in confession, then you will immediately be allowed to fall into some sort of delusion, in order that you may be corrected."

"The Holy Spirit acts mystically through the spiritual father, and then when you go out from your spiritual father, the soul feels her renewal."

Whoever wants to approach prayer without a guide, and proudly thinks that he can learn from books, and won't go to an elder, is already halfway into delusion. But the Lord helps the humble, and if there is no experienced guide, and he goes to a confessor, whoever he may be, then the Lord will cover him because of his humility.

## VII. American Priests on Confession

- **Fr. Michael Shanbour**

"The Grace of God is given in Confession. There is an incredible and undeniable power and grace in Confession. The Sacrament is more than what we might see with our eyes. A drinking fountain that is not being used does not look refreshing. But turn the knob and water gushes forth. It is the same with Confession. Great Grace is imparted to those who take advantage of this Sacrament. Some remarkable and extraordinary "miracles" have been known to happen in Confession...miracles of release from burdens, epiphanies, something said which pierces the heart and effects change, etc. It is not so much that God gives the "authority" to the Priest. Rather, He works in His Church through the Priests. His grace and power are available and accessible in and through the Church, Her prayers, Her teachings, Her whole life and atmosphere."

## VIII. Metropolitan Joseph on Confession

"As Orthodox Christians, Confession is not an option which we can choose or not choose to do. It is absolutely necessary for our spiritual healing and well-being, and those who think they can go without Confession for long periods of time are setting a trap for themselves that will be evident when they encounter tragedy and loss.

Orthodox Christians benefit greatly from Confession, when we repent of our sins and receive freedom from the bondages of our heavy consciences, which are soiled by the memories of our sins and resentments. In Confession, we can forgive ourselves and others, and release the heavy load that unforgiveness sets on our shoulders.

Why do we confess to another person? If humans could fix themselves, the world would not have psychologists and counselors. Even secular people realize that our human problems are too great for one person to deal with alone. In the process of Confession, we build a loving relationship with someone more advanced in the spiritual life, who guides us through the maze of our thoughts and memories, leading us to Reality. We eliminate the things in our minds that keep us from God. We become free. The person who rejects Confession also rejects true freedom, preferring the slavery of 'privacy.' Sadly, the 'private' person is usually blissfully unaware that everyone around him knows his sins but him.

Confession is not merely the reading off of a list of sins, but delving deep into the heart to discover the passions and suffering that drive us to sin. Once found, we can take steps to receive the cure for these passions through spiritual exercises called Penances. A Penance is not a 'punishment,' but an act which helps us gain greater awareness of the passion under treatment, so that we can more fully invite the Holy Spirit into us and receive healing. When someone commits a serious sin, such as marital infidelity or violence against another, he or she should not receive the Sacraments for an extended period, so that the penitent can achieve greater realization of the seriousness of such a sin, so that he or she will not fall into it again. Penances aid us in becoming better persons, freeing us from enslavement to repetitive sins."

## IX. Concluding Thoughts

- Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. And His ways are the same.
- We too have not changed and need confession all men have.
- Nowhere in the scriptures does it ever say that sins can be forgiven privately.
- So sin is private. No sin is forgiven privately.
- Sin must always be forgiven by Jesus Christ through His representatives in the Church.