

# Coming to Holy Confession

*by Phyllis Meshel Onest, M.Div.*

From the very beginning of the Church, Christians came together to worship God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The culmination of their worship was the breaking of the bread and drinking of the wine - receiving the Eucharist! This is the same for us today, although a visitor may not realize it by observing the faithful during the Liturgy. Because of various events in the history of the Orthodox Church, the true understanding of frequent communion was lost.

In the last thirty years many of our churches in America have experienced a revival of the ancient ways. Through education, the translation and reading of ancient texts, and preaching, the faithful have been taught that frequent communion is the "norm" of Christian life. This is difficult to accept for some parents because it is not the way "they were brought up." Yet, since it is our task to grow in faith so that we can lead our children to Christ, we need to reexamine what we have been taught, and compare it to the ancient ways.

If we look at our history we also learn that the Sacrament of Confession is also an integral aspect of our spiritual growth and life. The frequency of confession varies among different Orthodox jurisdictions, and again, history plays a vital role in understanding what has happened. Today, it is important for us to reexamine what we have been taught, to regroup, and to overcome any fears or misconceptions so that we "do the right thing" with our children.

It's hard to believe people who say they have nothing to confess. It's even harder to believe anyone who says he hasn't sinned. Perhaps they have not committed one of the "Big 10," but when the Ten Commandments are expanded, we've all broken them in some way! Even if we stay home, by ourselves, and speak to no one, we can sin. We can succumb to temptations of thought about others and ourselves.

Confession is one way the Orthodox Church offers to reconcile ourselves to God, examine the state of our faith, and get spiritually fit. It is an act of repentance which literally means to change ourselves, turn, or transform. When we confess our sins we reveal our innermost selves to Christ and ask God's forgiveness. Since our sins move us away from God, when we confess them we actively return to Him. It's fundamental to our growth in faith.

In confessing our sins we acknowledge where we have made wrong turns, bad decisions, been negligent or careless, insensitive to others or to ourselves, or had a "bad attitude." It's not just a "laundry list", because all these actions affect our relationships with God and with others. When we come to God with sincerity of heart and humility, we can say we are sorry for what we have done. When we put our words and feelings into action, true change and transformation occur. Where else can we go to be forgiven by God and be given the opportunity to start anew? Psychologists and psychiatrists hear people's confessions, but they cannot offer God's forgiveness. That, according to the Scriptures, is limited to the Apostles, and subsequently to the Bishops and clergy.

It is also a pious practice to ask forgiveness of family members before one receives the Eucharist.

If there is someone in particular that you have knowingly offended or harmed, go to that person to say you are sorry *after* you have gone to confession. Isn't that what we want our children to do when they have a falling out with their friends? Now that we have a "clean heart," as the Church Fathers say, we are ready to partake of the Eucharist and renew ourselves as the Body of Christ.

Fr. Peter Gillquist, a well-known priest, author and speaker - formerly with the Campus Crusade for Christ organization - reminds us that if we want our children to stay in the church when they are older, we need to introduce them to confession when they are young, before they "need" it, before they are burdened with guilt. It is this unresolved guilt that keeps them and us away from the Church, and subsequently, from God. He believes that the reason children and young people do not go to confession is because they do not see their parents go! We know that if it's not important to Mom and Dad, it won't be important to the children.

Maria's first confession was at age 3! After seeing Jim, Michelle and I go to confession, she thought she should go, too. When I asked our priest what to do, he said to bring her. They sat on the step of the pulpit and talked - his arm around her, her dolly in her arms. Then he placed the stole on her head and said a prayer. Later on, when she was eight and it was time for her "First Confession", she reminded me that she already had her "First Confession."

### **What to Expect during Holy Confession**

If you are approaching your First Confession (as a child or adult), or preparing for Holy Confession for the first time in a long while, here is what you can expect.

Confessions may take place in the church before the iconostasis, in a chapel area of the church before a special icon, or even in the priest's office.

God is the judge, not the priest. The priest is the witness on behalf of the Church.

The priest will stand to one side of you or a bit in front of you, with you both facing the icon. Think of this as a prayerful attitude with both of you listening and praying together.

Each priest may do things differently. Usually he will say several prayers, then you will give your confession. During your confession:

- State your sins clearly and openly.
- Take your time.
- Don't indulge in vulgar details.
- Don't skirt the full force of their evil either by speaking in generalities.
- Don't be too hard on yourself; don't worry if you forget something.
- Never doubt God's mercy.

The priest will listen; he may then ask you questions and offer advice or suggestions.

Afterwards you will kneel before the priest bowing your head, and he will place his stole on your

head and offer the prayer of absolution.

*This section taken from "Challenge", Orthodox Observer, March 1995.*

## **One Parish's Practice of Celebrating First Confessions**

The Slavic custom is one that can be practiced in any of our churches, with the blessing of the parish priest and cooperation of the Church School. In our parish the first- and second-grade class alternates between **Making Things Right** and a series of lessons written by Dr. Constance Tarasar to prepare the second graders for their First Confession. During this time they visit the area where confessions are heard and meet with our parish priest to talk over any questions they may have.

The weekend of the third Sunday of Lent the second graders, their parents and teachers come for confession. At the Sunday Liturgy they receive the Eucharist together and at the end of Liturgy are called forth to receive a prayer book from the priest. Often there is a cake during the Coffee Hour in their honor, and their names are listed in the bulletin. At times the students are given flowers to wear. Photographs are taken of the students with the priest and teachers. One year the Bishop was present and distributed the prayer books. Once a luncheon was scheduled on that Sunday, so the students sat together and the table was decorated to single them out. Parents and students continue to be excited to have this "rite of passage" acknowledged publicly.

If your family has never participated in Confession, speak with your priest about the sacrament itself, prepare yourselves, and come back as a family.

It's time to return to the ancient practices of our Orthodox Church. They worked then, throughout the years, and will do so into the future.

## **Resources**

The following books concerning preparing for and partaking in Holy Confession are available from OCEC, P.O. Box 69, Colvin Station, Syracuse, NY 13205, Phone/FAX: (800) 464-2744.

for Primary Grades:

- **Making Things Right**; Teacher (\$10), Pupil (\$5), Activity Packet (\$3)
- **We Return to God** prayer booklet (\$1.50)

for Grade 5 to Adult:

- **If We Confess Our Sins** by Fr. Thomas Hopko (\$3)

Copyright © Phyllis Meshel Onest, M.Div. This article may not be further reproduced without permission from Phyllis Onest, Director of Religious Education, 2507 Nedra Ave., Akron, OH 44305 pmonest@neo.rr.com