

Self-Examination Before Confession

The Whole Armour of Truth

by Saint Nicolas Varzhansky

19. CONCERNING THE HOLY CROSS OF CHRIST PREPARATION FOR CONFESSION

During Great Lent, and the other fasts of the Church Year, it is customary for all Orthodox Christians to go to confession to their priest. Properly this should be done several times a year, the exact frequency depending upon how often one is blessed to receive the Holy Mysteries and on the counsel and blessing of one's spiritual father. As a preparation for this sacramental confession and to help one examine one's conscience before coming to confession, the following questions are sometimes distributed in parishes and, although of course the list is not exhaustive, it may be a help to those of our readers who are Orthodox Christians.

Sins Against God

Do you pray to God in the morning and evening, before and after meals?

During prayer have you allowed your thoughts to wander?

Have you rushed or gabbled your prayers? or when reading in church?

Do you read the Scriptures daily? Do you read other spiritual writings regularly?

Have you read books whose content is not Orthodox or even anti-Orthodox, or is spiritually damaging?

Have you pronounced the name of God without reverence, joking?
Have you asked God's help before starting every activity?

Have you made the sign of the Cross carelessly, thoughtlessly? Have you sworn? Have you murmured against God?

Have you sinned by forgetting God?

Have you been slack in attending church?

Have you consecrated even part of the feast days, particularly

Sundays and the Twelve Great Feasts, to God?

Have you tried your best to attend church on these days? or have you spent them more sinfully than ordinary days?

If unable to attend church for some reason, have you nonetheless tried to devote some part of these days to prayer and spiritual reading?

Have you joined with people not of the Faith in prayer, or attended their worship services?

Have you kept the fasts?

Have you behaved irreverently in church, or before the clergy and monastics?

Have you laughed or talked in church, or moved about unnecessarily, thus also distracting other people from prayer?

Have dressed modestly and in a becoming manner when in church?

Have you tried to pay reverent attention to the readings, hymns, and prayers in church?

Have you striven to pray with the service, crossing yourself, etc., or have you rather simply stood and day-dreamed?

Have you prepared for the services beforehand, looking up the Scriptural readings, making sure you have the texts to follow the service etc., especially if the service will be in a language you do not readily understand?

Have you ever left church after the Divine Services, and particularly after receiving the Holy Mysteries and immediately engaged in light talk and thus forgotten the blessings and graces you have received?

Have you been ashamed of your Faith or the sign of the Cross in the presence of others?

Have you made a show of your piety?

Have you used your Orthodox Faith or its teachings merely to browbeat others or belittle them?

Have you used it as a shield or excuse for your own inadequacies rather than humbling yourself?

Have you believed in dreams, fortune telling, astrology, signs and other superstitions?

Do you give thanks to the Lord for all things?

Have you ever doubted God's providence concerning yourself?

Do you at least try to perceive His purpose in all the things that come upon you?

Sins Against Your Neighbours

Do you respect and obey your parents?

Have you offended them by rudeness or contradiction?

(These two apply also to priests, superiors, teachers and elders.)

Have you insulted anyone?

Have you quarreled or fought with anyone? Have you hit anyone?

Are you always respectful to old people?

Are you ever angry, bad tempered or irritable?

Have you called anyone names? Do you use foul language?

Have you derided any that are disabled, poor, old or in some way disadvantaged?

Have you entertained bad feelings, ill will or hatred against anyone?

Have you forgiven those who have offended you?

Have you asked forgiveness from those whom you have offended?

Are you at peace with everyone?

Have you left the needy without help when you could have helped?

Have you attended the sick or elderly when they have asked you to do so?

Have you shown kindness and attention to all, remembering that God is expecting just such an attitude from you?

Have you hit animals without a cause or been cruel to them, or neglectful of those in your care?

Have you stolen anything?

Have you taken or used other people's things without asking?

Have you kept money or things that were lent you without returning them?

Have you wasted your employers' time or resources? Have you taken things from work for your own use, used the firm's phone or other facilities for your own purposes without permission or repayment?

Are you obstinate, and do you always try to have your own way?

Have you been inconsiderate of other people's feelings?

Have you tried to have your revenge against those who have offended you?

Have you harboured resentment? Have you deceived people?

Have you gossiped?

Have you told untruths?

Have you judged and condemned others?

Have you taken pains before approaching for confession to be reconciled with all?

Sins Against Yourself

Have you been proud? Do you boast of your abilities, achievements, family, connections or riches?

Do you consider yourself worthy before God?

Are you vain, ambitious? Do you try to win praise and glory?

Do you bear it easily when you are blamed, scolded or treated unjustly? Do you think too much about your looks, outward appearance and the impression you make?

Have you sinned in thought, word or deed, by a look or glance, or in any other way against the seventh commandment? (Adultery, fornication, all extra-marital sexual relationships with others, masturbation, engaging in unnatural sexual acts, fantasizing, pornography, etc.)

Have you envied anyone anything? Have you been over-sensitive?

Have you been lazy? Have you done your duties heartily?

Have you wasted your time, energy or abilities in things that do not profit the soul?

Have you become obsessive about anything? Have you been despondent or listless?

Have you had thoughts of committing suicide?

Have you brought a curse on yourself or others or ill-wished them, being impatient?

Have you a weakness for alcohol? Have you drunk too much, or become dependent on drink?

Have you taken drugs, other than necessary medicines? Have you smoked?

Have you watched television too much or indiscriminately? Have you given yourself up to any other similar pastime which wastes your time and energy and might have harmed you?

Have you been greedy, either with regard to food or to possessions?

Have you indulged in comfort-eating? Have you become accustomed to eating between meals?

Have you been picky about your food, or wasteful of foods, forgetting that so many people are without proper nourishment? Have you been extravagant? Have you been wasteful?

Do you care for and seek first the salvation of your soul, the spiritual life and the kingdom of God, or have you put earthly considerations in the first place?

Is there any other sin, which burdens your conscience, or which you are ashamed to tell?

Anyone preparing for confession must ask God to help his resolve to tell all his sins. A penitent should prepare for confession and collect his thoughts regarding his sins at least a day before confession. The most valuable thing in the eyes of God is the confession of the sin which weighs most on the conscience.

The questions listed are intended to help the Orthodox Christian examine himself and identify the symptoms of his spiritual ills; they should not be taken as some kind of test to ascertain how well we are doing as if there was a certain "pass-mark." Before God's perfections, we shall always fail. It is for that reason that, as believing Christians, we throw ourselves on the mercy of the Lord and do not trust in our own righteousness.

Remember that our sins can never outweigh God's love towards us. Even if we should seem to have failed with regard to all the points mentioned above and more, we should not lose heart but confess our sins unshamefacedly, we should regret the wrongs we have done, be resolved to make amends, and receive whatever remedy our confessor should be guided to lay upon us. Most of all, one should be assured of the blessing of God which these endeavours will bring upon you.

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Preparation for Holy Confession

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The gift of God's forgiveness is received through private prayer, corporate worship, the disciplines of prayer and fasting, penitential services and above all through the sacrament of Holy Confession.

The value of Holy Confession is twofold. First, through this sacramental act of the ordained priest and the Christian believer we have the assurance of divine forgiveness, according to the words of Christ (Jn 20:23). Secondly, Holy Confession provides the opportunity to talk about one's deep concerns, to receive counsel and to be encouraged toward spiritual growth, all of which are universally recognized as extremely beneficial to personal life.

Holy Confession is appropriate whenever an Orthodox Christian feels the need for it. It is also a part of our total spiritual preparation during the fast periods leading up to the great feasts of Easter, Christmas, the Falling Asleep of the Theotokos and the Feast of Twelve Apostles. However, Holy Confession is especially necessary:

1. when a serious sin has been committed;
2. when a habitual sin has overwhelmed a Christian, or
3. when a Christian has stopped growing spiritually and needs a reexamination of priorities.

We confess our sins to God and the power of forgiveness is God's. However, the gift of God's forgiveness, although assured, is not magical. It does not automatically spare us from spiritual struggle - the continual vigilance against evil and the unceasing warfare against sin. Holy Confession will bear fruits in the Spirit only when the believer hates evil, utterly rejects sin and patiently cultivates positive habits of the life in Christ. "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to Christ Jesus. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life" (Rm 6:11, 13)

How can one prepare for Holy Confession? Preparation for Holy Confession is a prayerful examination of feelings, thoughts, words, acts, attitudes, habits, values, priorities, goals, direction and way of life. This prayerful self-examination includes not only the personal religious life, but also family relationships, social activities, job conduct, business dealings, political commitments and even recreational pursuits, because our entire existence should be lived in under the light of the Holy Spirit is not to condemn ourselves, but to affirm our true selves in Christ who has given us access to God's mercy and forgiveness and who has taught us to live for God's glory.

Pray and think and your confession over several days. Ask God to help you perceive your sins and to make a thorough confession of them. Sometime before the sacrament of Holy Confession, offer selected prayers from the following Confessional Prayers, Psalm 51 or the following prayer of repentance:

PRAYER OF REPENTANCE

O Lord my God, I confess that I have sinned against You in thought, word and deed.

I have also omitted to do what Your holy law requires of me.

But now with repentance and contrition I turn again to Your love and mercy.

I entreat You to forgive me all my transgression and to cleanse me from all my sins.

Lord, fill my heart with the light of Your truth. Strengthen my will by Your grace.

Teach me both to desire and to do only what pleases You. Amen.

Now, without justification or self-pity, make a prayerful examinations of your conscience regarding all things. As a help, reflect on your life in the light of the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes. Take pencil and paper and specify your sins so that, at the time of the sacrament, you will be able to make a thorough confession from the list, without confusion or lapse of memory.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

I am the Lord your God, and you shall have no other gods before me.

Has God been the source, center and hope of my life? Have I put myself, others or things before God? Have I failed to trust in God's existence, love and mercy? Have I failed to pray to God, to worship Him and to thank Him for His blessings? Have I tried to serve God and keep His commandments faithfully? Have I murmured or complained against God in adversity? Have I praised and glorified God through my words and deeds?

You shall not make for yourself a graven image in order to worship it.

Have I valued anyone or anything above God? Have I given to anyone or anything the love, honor and worship that belongs to God alone? Have I made an idol of any person, idea, occupation, or thing?

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Have I blasphemed God's holy name in any way? Have I sworn a false oath? Have I broken any solemn vow or promise? Have I entered into an agreement, promise or contract against God's law? Have I cursed or used foul language?

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

Have I worshiped regularly on Sundays and major feast days and have I helped others to do the same? Have I worked unnecessarily on Sundays or major feast days or caused others to do so? Have I spent the Lord's Day in a wholesome and edifying way?

Honor your father and mother

Have I loved and respected my parents as I should? Have I neglected them or failed to help them? Have I disobeyed them, deceived them or caused them pain by my words or deeds? Have I treated all my family members with patience and love?

Thou shall not kill.

Have I caused the harm, injury or death of anyone? Have I wished my own or anyone's harm or death? Have I been cruel to animals or destroyed any life unnecessarily?

You shall not commit adultery.

Have I committed any immoral acts alone or with others? Have I caused others to commit immoral acts? Have I committed immoral acts in my heart?

You shall not steal.

Have I taken anything that was not mine from anyone or from anywhere? Have I cheated anyone? Have I caused others to steal or cheat? Have I tried to find the owners of lost things I have found? Have I damaged or destroyed anything that belonged to another? Have I defrauded anyone of rightful wages? Have I paid my debts? Have I given to the poor and to philanthropic causes in proportion to my means?

You shall not bear false witness.

Have I given false testimony against anyone? Have I spoken evil, told lies or spread rumors about anyone? Have I disclosed to anyone the sins and faults of another? Have I made careless statements or done anything else to harm the name and reputation of another? Have I engaged in idle gossip?

You shall not covet.

Have I looked with envy jealousy or hatred toward the possessions talents or achievements of others? Have I desired the downfall or loss of others out of evil intent that I might benefit? Have I grieved that God has bestowed greater blessings on others than on me?

THE BEATITUDES

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Have I truly recognized my complete dependence on God? Have I been proud arrogant and self-righteous in my ways? Have I been selfish, possessive and self-seeking? Have I sought after status power and wealth?

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Have I endured difficulties and afflictions with faith and patience? Have I felt sadness for the sufferings of the poor, the hungry, and addicted; the sick, the lonely and the sinful of the world? Have I truly been sorrowful for my sins and faults?

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Have I tried to serve or rather to dominate others at home, school, work, office, Church and elsewhere? Have I nursed against anyone? Have I been resentful, bitter, unforgiving or insulting and abusive to others? Have I loved my enemies?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Have I truly yearned for God's will to be done in all things? Have I worked for justice in my family, society and the world in ways within my reach? Have I tried to cultivate a righteous life through prayer, fasting, worship, receiving Holy Communion and deeds of love toward others?

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Have I shown compassion and help toward the poor, hungry, lonely and needy around me? Have I tried to understand and forgive others? Have I been indifferent judgmental or legalistic?

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Have I loved goodness, purity and holiness? Have I succumbed to evil motives and intentions? Have I given way to impure thoughts, words or deeds? Have I been guilty of bias and prejudice? Have I been hypocritical, pretentious or self-indulgent to sinful passions?

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Do I have God's peace in my heart? Have I been unfairly angry, aggressive or impatient? Have I worked for peace at home, work, Church and in society? Have I been irritable, polemical, or divisive?

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Have I complained when persecuted for God's sake? Have I prayed for my persecutors? Have I failed to defend anyone in the truth for fear of humiliation or persecution? Have I had the courage to stand up for what is right despite criticism, ridicule or persecution?

Blessed are you when they revile you and persecute you on my account; rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven

Is the joy of Christ in my heart even in trying moments? Have I been pessimistic despondent or despairing? Have I truly delighted in the promise of God's treasures in heaven?

PRAYERS TO CHRIST

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, Shepherd and Lamb, You offered Your life on the cross to take away the sins of the world. You granted forgiveness to Peter and to the harlot who turned to You in tears. You forgave the debts of the two debtors and also said, "him who comes to me I will not cast out." Lord, receive me, a sinner, and hear my prayer of repentance (Confess to the Lord your specific sins.) I acknowledge my sins and transgressions, voluntary and involuntary, known and unknown. I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace, to turn away from my sins and to amend my life according to Your teachings. Help me to walk in the way of the righteous and to offer praise to Your glorious name forever. Amen

Sweet, Jesus, my Lord and Master, through Your holy passion You have healed my evil passions, and through Your sacred wounds You have cured my sinful wounds. Grant me, compunction. Purify my body with the fragrance of Your life-giving Body, and casting out the bitterness with which the adversary has fed me. Lift up my earth bound mind to You and take me out of the pit of perdition. I have no sincere repentance, I have no true compunction, I have no consoling tears to lead me as a child of God to my spiritual inheritance. My mind has been darkened through worldly passions. I cannot look up to You in grieving remorse. I cannot warm myself with tears of love for You. But, Lord Jesus Christ, the treasury of blessings, grant me through repentance and a diligent heart to seek You. Grant me Your grace and renew in me the form of Your image. I have forsaken You; but, Lord, do not forsake me. Come out to seek me; lead me to Your pasture; number me among the sheep of Your chosen flock and nourish me with the food of Your sacred mysteries, through the intercession of Your all-pure Mother and of all the Saints. Amen.

PRAYER OF ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

Lord, deprive me not of Your heavenly and eternal blessings.

Lord, deliver me from everlasting torments.

Lord, if I have sinned in word or deed, in mind or spirit, forgive me.

Lord, deliver me from all distress, ignorance, forgetfulness, laziness and stony hardness of heart.

Lord, deliver me from all temptations and spiritual abandonment.

Lord, enlighten my heart which has been darkened by evil desire.

Lord, being human, I sin; but You, being God, have mercy on me.

Lord, take heed of the weakness of my soul, and help me with Your grace that Your holy name may be glorified in me.

Lord Jesus Christ, inscribe the name of Your servant in the book of life, granting me a blessed end.

Lord my God, I have done nothing good; yet by Your compassion help me to make a new beginning.

Lord, refresh my heart with the dew of Your grace.
Lord, God of heaven and earth, remember me, who am sinful, wretched, evil and impure,
in Your kingdom, according to Your steadfast love.
Lord, receive me in repentance and do not forsake me.
Lord, put me not to the test.
Lord, grant me good thoughts.
Lord, grant me tears of repentance, remembrance of death and contrition.
Lord, grant me sincere confession of my thought.
Lord, grant me humility, deliverance from my own will and obedience.
Lord, grant me patience, forbearance and meekness.
Lord, implant in me Your holy fear, the source of all blessings.
Lord, enable me to love You with all my soul, my mind and my heart; and my neighbor
as myself.
Lord, protect me from evil people and demons, from impure passions and all unseemly
things.
Lord, as you commanded; Lord, as You know all things; Lord as You desire I desire
Your goodness; let Your will be done in me.
Lord, let Your will, not mine, be done through the intercessions of the all-holy Theotokos
and of all the Saints, for You are blessed forever. Amen.

THE PRAYER OF MANASSEH

This prayer is a classic prayer of repentance attributed by tradition to Manasseh, a wicked
king of Judah (2 Chr 33:11-13), who pleaded God's forgiveness for his many sins.
Lord almighty, God of our fathers, of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and of their righteous
posterity,
You have made heaven and earth with all their adornment.
You have bound the sea with Your word of command.
You have confined the abyss and sealed it with Your fearful and glorious name.
All things shudder and tremble before Your power.
The magnificence of Your glory cannot be endured.
The wrath of Your threat against sinners cannot be resisted.
Yet immeasurable and unsearchable is Your promised mercy.
For You are the Lord Most High, compassionate, long-suffering and merciful, turning
away from the evils of people.
You, Lord according to the abundance of Your goodness, have promised repentance and
forgiveness to those who have sinned against You;
And in the multitude of Your loving kindness You have appointed repentance for sinners
unto salvation.
Surely, Lord, God of the heavenly powers, You have not appointed repentance for the
righteous, for Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, who did not sin against You;
But You have appointed repentance for me a sinner.
For the sins I have committed are more in number than the sands of the sea.
My transgressions are multiplied, Lord, they are multiplied!
I am unworthy to look up and see the height of heaven because of the multitude of my
iniquities.
I am weighed down with many evil bonds and cannot lift up my head because of my sins.

I have no relief because I have provoked Your wrath and have done evil before You, not doing Your will, nor keeping Your commandments, but setting up abominations and multiplying offenses.

And now I bend the knee of my heart beseeching Your goodness.

I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned and I know my transgressions.

Do not be angry with me forever or store up evils for me; and do not condemn me to the depths of Hades.

For You, Lord, are the God of those who repent, and to me You will show Your goodness.

Unworthy as I am, You will save me in Your great mercy and I will praise You continually all the days of my life.

For all the powers of heaven sing Your praises and Yours is the glory forever. Amen.

Source: "My Orthodox Prayer Book" from the Department of Religious Education