

WE MUST CONFESS CORRECTLY

—adapted from the writings of Elias Miniatis—
(Bishop of Kerniki and Kalavryta)

A wise man once said, “to fear the law is fearlessness.” In other words, whoever fears, respects, and obeys the law is not worried about being punished. If we want to be unafraid of the fearsome Judge and His fearful Tribunal, then we must fear both the Judge and the Day of Judgment. What makes us dread the Second Coming of Christ? Our sins. If we free ourselves from our sins, we will fear neither judgment nor the consequential punishment. How can we free ourselves from our sins? There is no way other than through the mystery of confession. Through the grace of this divine mystery of confession, the mute, evil spirit (Mt. 9:17), which does not allow us to reveal our sins in order for us to receive forgiveness, is expelled from within us.

God has appointed two courts for all the sins we human beings commit. One takes place here on the earth, and it is called confession; the other will take place in heaven, and it is referred to as the Second Coming. Here on the earth, the judge is a fellow human being, a priest, who is full of understanding and sympathy; there, the Judge is God Himself Who will administer justice. Whoever is examined here is forgiven; whoever is judged there will be condemned. There is no other option. We must be examined in either one of these two courts. It is up to each one of us to decide at which one of these two courts we prefer to be tried.

Before you sin, dear Christian, guard and distance yourself from sin. Fear God’s just judgment like the righteous Suzanna, and, if necessary, prefer to give up your life rather than to willingly fall into sin. If you have sinned, however, have hope in God’s infinite mercy, as the prophet David did, and you will be forgiven. David was forgiven for the two great evils of adultery and murder. Manasseh was forgiven for abandoning God and worshipping the idols. The Publican was forgiven for his crimes and injustices. The harlot was forgiven for all her immoral and filthy deeds. The thief on the Cross was also forgiven for all the atrocities he had committed. Even the people who crucified the Lord Jesus Christ would have been forgiven if they had sincerely and truly repented. (Sir. 2:18). All you have to do to be forgiven is to take one simple step. Hasten into the arms of God by making a sincere and correct confession. Proceed to the spiritual father in the following way:

Two of the Apostles sinned greatly: Peter, who denied Christ three times, and Judas, who betrayed Jesus Christ for thirty pieces of silver. One of them, namely Peter, was forgiven; he regained his title of an apostle, and he became a friend and disciple of Christ once more. The other one, that is

Judas, remained unforgiven; he proceeded to hang himself, leaving his body suspended on a tree and handing his soul over to eternal hell. Why did Peter receive such grace, and why was Judas deemed unworthy of obtaining similar favor?

Judas publicly confessed that he had sinned: **“I have sinned by betraying innocent blood” (Mt. 27:4)**. Simultaneously, he gave money; that is, he returned the thirty silver pieces that he received for betraying Christ: **“then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed” (Mt. 27:5)**. Doesn't it seem like he acted correctly? He confessed and he returned the money. Nonetheless, his confession was of no benefit to him.

What did Peter do differently to be forgiven? After denying Christ three times in the courtyard of Caiaphas, **“I do not know the Man!” (Mt. 26:72-74)**, as soon as he heard the rooster crow a third time, he remembered what Christ had predicted. He recognized his sin. His heart ached and was shattered to pieces. He then immediately exited the courtyard; he immediately distanced himself from the evil company of the servants; he immediately withdrew to himself and, bringing to mind what he had done, he wept bitterly: **“He went out and wept bitterly” (Mt. 26:75)**. Oral tradition tells us that throughout the remainder of his life, every time the Apostle Peter would hear a rooster crow, he would recall his sin, and two streams of bitter tears would flow forth from his eyes. This type of confession was very beneficial. This is why Christ asked Peter three times, **“do you love Me?”** after His Resurrection. According to St. Gregory the Theologian, with these three questions, Christ expunged Peter's three denials. And according to St. John Chrysostom, when Christ said, **“feed My lambs ... tend to My sheep” (Jn. 21:15-16)**, He reinstated Peter to his former apostolic authority and honor.

Take note, dear reader, how a true and perfect confession, one that is capable of giving rise to the forgiveness of sins, the Grace of the Holy Spirit, and the love of God, does not consist of merely saying that you have sinned and confessing your sin; for such a confession may take place only with your mouth and not your heart. It may be done out of habit and not with a humble spirit. Nor can you buy forgiveness by giving some money, as if repentance is some type of transaction. The confession which I am speaking about, and which I advise you to make, consists of doing what the Apostle Peter did when he recognized he had sinned. The Holy Scriptures say that **“he went out and wept bitterly.”** First, he quickly fled from the accursed dwelling of the archpriest, where he had denied his divine Teacher, Jesus Christ: **“he went out.”** Similarly, when you decide to go for confession, flee from and no longer return to the accursed dwelling where you repeatedly deny God with your immoral deeds daily. Distance not only your body, but

also your mind and heart.

Peter **“went out”** and separated himself from the company of the soldiers and servants who had apprehended Christ. You, as well, should **go out** and part from the evil company, from the immoral friendships, from the profane paths you have walked upon until today. Peter stepped away, and all alone he brought to mind the great evil he had committed. He was deeply hurt, he was filled with remorse and contrition, and he **“wept bitterly.”** In other words, he did not only shed a couple of tears, but he poured out his entire heart: **“having gone out, he wept bitterly.”** If you are accustomed to visiting your spiritual father without any preparation, withdraw to your room alone beforehand, let go of every other concern, collect your scattered thoughts, pray fervently, and ask God to enlighten you, so that you may recall your sins. Bring to mind the Ten Commandments, and see which one of them you have transgressed. Bring to mind the seven deadly sins, and consider to which of them you have succumb. Examine your conscience carefully, and identify what sins you have committed with your mind, with your words, and with your actions. Determine in what ways you have transgressed against God, against your fellow man, and against your own self.

Furthermore, if you have enmity with anyone, it is necessary to forgive them with all your heart. If you have in your possession something that does not belong to you, you should return it to its owner. If you have harmed anyone in any way, seek to rectify matters. Feel pain and contrition. Sigh and weep bitterly. Above all, assume responsibility for your faults and blame yourself. Resolve to put and end to your previous sins, and be determined to never repeat any of them again. If you proceed to your spiritual father with this type of preparation and intention, you can be certain that you will receive forgiveness; for, **“a broken and humble heart, the Lord will not despise” (Ps. 50:19)**. In brief: Do you want to go confess to a spiritual father? Do not offer only empty words and money as Judas did. Offer your change of heart, sincere regret, and true repentance.

When you arrive before the spiritual father, it is necessary to do two things: First, you should confess without shame; second, you should confess without making excuses. Confession must take place without shame because we all live in this world with Pharisaic hypocrisy. We want to portray ourselves to others completely different than what we really are. This is where the shame we feel during confession stems from. We are embarrassed to show and admit that we are sinful, we who pretend and like others to believe that we are holy. Additionally, it must take place without excuses because I am aware that, unfortunately, when we come for confession, as soon as we disclose our sin we immediately begin to twist our words. We admit that we have sinned, but we straightaway come up with excuses to justify ourselves.

Worst of all, for each of the evils we have committed, we oftentimes lay the blame on others. Thus, instead of criticizing and blaming ourselves, we accuse others for our faults. This sin is indeed an ancestral sin.

When our ancestors Adam and Eve transgressed God's commandment by eating from the tree of knowledge, God called them to explain themselves. "Adam, where are you?" "Eve, what have you done?" But woe! If only they had confessed their sin eagerly! If only Adam had said, "I have sinned, my Lord." If only Eve had admitted, "I have sinned, my Creator." Unfortunately, shame and self-justification prevented them from making such a statement. They felt embarrassed and they hid. **"Both Adam and his wife hid from the face of the Lord their God" (Gen. 3:8)**. They justified themselves; each one of them blamed the other for their transgression. "It is not my fault," argued Adam. "The wife whom you gave me is at fault." **"The woman you gave me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12)**. Eve in turn insisted, "It is not my fault. The serpent tricked me." **"The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (Gen. 3:13)**. Alas, both Adam and Eve were consequently exiled from Paradise, taking with them the divine curse. Today, when a Christian proceeds to the mystery of holy confession, the spiritual father may question them: "Adam, where are you? Eve, what have you done?" The person feels embarrassed, and he hides. Sometimes he reveals part of the truth; other times, he decides to conceal certain sins altogether.

According to Saint Basil the Great, sin is like a wound. If it is not shown to the physician, it will become infected and, eventually, incurable. "Adam, where are you? ... Eve, what have you done?" asks the confessor. Unfortunately, people attempt to defend themselves by **"making excuses in sins" (Ps. 140:4)**. It is truly distressing and shameful to describe what we hear in our days from men and women during confession. One person blames her husband; another person blames his mother-in-law; another blames her daughter-in-law; another blames her son; another blames his worker; and so on ... People contend, "it is the devil's fault ... the devil tempted me." **"The serpent deceived me" (Gen. 3:13)**. How much patience does the spiritual father exercise as he silently sits and listens to people's gibberish, who during the mystery of confession speak about everything else except their own sins! But when during the mystery of confession you accuse and blame others, and justify yourself, this is not a confession—this is called criticism! In this manner, you go to the spiritual father with one sin, and you leave with two sins. You go to him sinful, and you leave even more sinful.

It should not be such, dear Christian. Proclaim your sin earnestly without shame and without making excuses. Admit that no one else is responsible for your sins other than you and your evil inclination. A sin that is confessed is no longer a sin: **"The Lord has put away your sin" (2 Kg.**

12:13). A sin that is not clearly confessed, but is disclosed with self-justification results in condemnation: “A sin that is hidden is an insidious illness of the soul,” says St. Basil the Great.

If, with God’s Grace, you manage to confess without shame and without making excuses for yourself, and in following your confessor reads you the forgiveness prayer, and you receive his blessing and depart from the confession room, is there anything else left for you to do? Yes. There are still two things of paramount importance for you to do. First, you must carry out the penance that the spiritual father has given you; and, second, you must make every effort to correct your life and wrongful deeds. Otherwise, according to St. Basil the Great, what you did is not termed a confession, but idle chatter: “When one confesses without subsequently correcting himself, he has actually spoken idle words.”

There are three things chiefly you must correct. First: If you on bad terms with anyone for whatever reason, regardless of whether or not the other person is at fault, you must forgive him with all your heart. For, if you do not forgive, you will not be forgiven either. It is a decision and ruling given from Christ Himself: **“If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Mt. 6:14-15).** Unfortunately, today people mimic what two Athenians once did in ancient Greece. Themistocles and Aristidis were dire enemies and always at odds with each other. At one point, the Greek nation appointed them as ambassadors to represent Greece on a particular matter. What could they do in this instance? They necessarily had to be in agreement and work together. Having set off for their journey, just before crossing over into the foreign land, Aristidis turned to Themistocles and asked, “Would you like to leave our enmity here at the borders for now, and, if you like, take hold of it again upon our return?” This is indeed what they did. They dropped off their enmity and hatred at their nation’s borders, they cooperated with each other and executed their republic’s directive, and when they returned to Greece they took hold of their enmity and became spiteful enemies as before.

Today, this is what Christians who are bitter enemies and always at odds do as well when it comes time for them to go to confession. They drop off their enmity for a time. Where? Right at the entrance of the church. They ask each other for forgiveness so they can go receive Holy Communion. However, as soon as they exit the doors of the church, where they temporarily set down their enmity, they take hold of it again and become enemies once more. Can their visit to the spiritual father be deemed a true confession? Certainly not! On the contrary, it was idle chatter.

Second: Do you have an immoral tie and sinful relationship with

someone? Sever the bond once and for all, and cut it off permanently. Because it is not possible to love God and fornication simultaneously. A certain philosopher was once travelling by sea. During the course of the journey, such a fierce storm developed that the ship sank and he was able to save his life by the skin of his teeth. He returned to his home. Wanting to ensure that he would never be overcome with the desire to travel by ship again, he proceeded to close off one of the windows in his house that had a view of the ocean. If you similarly have run the risk of losing your soul on account of lustful relationships, and have up until now been spared from death of the body and the soul, flee from the causes of sin, no longer walk down that road, never again enter that house, no longer peer through that window, and close your eyes shut, so that the serpent, the devil, does not slither into your heart again. Otherwise, you did not confess; you spoke idle chatter.

Finally: Do you have in your possession anything that rightfully belongs to another person? Have you wronged or cheated anyone? Return it immediately, restore what you have acquired unjustly, because otherwise it is not possible for you to receive forgiveness.

Dear Christian: Do you want to make a true and perfect confession? First, before going to the confessor, examine your conscience. Second, when you are standing before the spiritual father, confess without shame and without making excuses. Third, when you leave from the spiritual father, carry out the penance he has given you, wholeheartedly forgive your enemies, abandon your immoral and ungodly relationships, repay what you have acquired through injustice, and then you will indeed be completely forgiven. Then the deaf and mute evil spirit will depart from you (vid. Mt. 9:17).

O Holy Spirit! Grant to me first, and to everyone who will hear these words in following, Your Divine Grace, so that we may understand them, and give us the strength to execute them, for they are words containing Your Divine Truth.