

People often have the mistaken idea that the Church is full of saints, only to be scandalized when they find out that it is full of sinners! But Christ Himself said, *“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”* (Matt. 9:12) When a person is sick with some illness he will go to the hospital and see a doctor. He will tell the doctor what he feels and where he hurts and the doctor will prescribe the right medicine to cure him. All mankind is sick with sin and is in need of healing. We need to recognize our sins, repent of them and go to the Church, which is the spiritual hospital, to be healed of them. The doctors in the Church are the priests and spiritual fathers who prescribe the required medicine. This medicine takes two forms, firstly the sacramental life of the Church, that is, participating in the Mysteries. Secondly there is the spiritual and ascetical struggle against the passions. These two medicines are inseparable. The spiritual struggle is necessary so that we may participate in the Mysteries and it is through the Mysteries and in particular those of Confession and Communion that we receive the strength to continue the struggle.

The Mystery of Repentance and Confession has two aspects. First there is the personal repentance of each member of the Body of Christ or of the Body as a whole. The Greek word for repentance, *“metanoia”* literally means *“a change of mind”* - to change our way of thinking. It is the realization that we have departed from God and that we have done things that are against God’s will. It is the recognition of our weakness and sinfulness and the desire to return to God. Secondly there is the fact that God has given the power to forgive sins to those who bear the grace of the special priesthood – the bishops and priests. This forgiveness is granted in the mystery of Confession when we confess our sins in the presence of our priest/spiritual father who then reads the prayer of forgiveness. It is important here to note that when we go to confession we are confessing to God in the presence of the priest and that it is God, not the priest, who forgives our sins. God gives the priest the power to proclaim on His behalf that our sins are forgiven. *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they are retained”* (John 20:23) Some

claim that confessing to a priest is not biblical, but in fact it is quite the opposite. There is no biblical foundation to confessing to God alone, which is a refusal to acknowledge sin to the rest of the Body. St James says, *“Confess your trespasses to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed* (James 5:16) and St John warns that *“if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all our unrighteousness.* (1 John 1:8-9) In the ancient Church, as with all the Mysteries, the whole Church gathered and everyone confessed publicly. It was only as the Church grew and public confession became more difficult that the priest would hear confession individually on behalf of the people.

Many people argue that they can talk to their friends or a psychologist about their problems and it makes them feel better. It might make them feel better for a while but it doesn’t cure the underlying problem of sin. The forgiveness of our sins in the Mystery of Confession is the only true psychotherapy (*“soul therapy.”*) Once our sins have been forgiven they are wiped away. The penance that a priest may give is not a legalistic punishment but rather medicine for the healing of our souls. When a person is ill the doctor prescribes certain medicines in order to restore his physical health. If the person then chooses not to take them, he is only to blame himself if he doesn’t get well. The Church is a Spiritual Hospital and God’s commandments or the penance that our confessor might give us are medicinal prescriptions aimed at restoring our spiritual health. A sick person cannot function properly and so it seems illogical that someone would choose to remain ill instead being restored to health, both physical and spiritual.

Orthodox Christians should go to confession at least four times a year. However, it to our spiritual benefit to make frequent confession, thereby making peace with God and ourselves.

#### **Preparation for Holy Confession**

Before going to confession we need to examine ourselves, our thoughts, words and actions. This can be done using the Lord’s teachings from the

Sermon on the Mount which is a summary of the Christian life.

#### **Blessed are the poor in spirit...**

*Am I poor before God and men? Do I cultivate the attitude of poverty? Do I realize that all is God’s and from God? Do I use my life and everything I have as that which belongs to God? Do I share the goods of the earth with others, knowing that all is God’s? Do I take my opinions and ideas from God? Do I acknowledge my spiritual and intellectual poverty before God, accepting His Wisdom and Truth? Am I possessive, selfish, self-satisfied, self-righteous, self-seeking? Am I an idolater of my own opinions, ideas, possessions? Do I lust after status, power, authority, wealth, position? Do I really love and value poverty as a perfect ideal?*

#### **Blessed are those who mourn...**

*Am I a person who mourns? Do I lament over the suffering of men? Do I weep over the troubles of the Church and state, family and society? Do I suffer with all who suffer, in poverty and squalor, in misery and sin? Do I weep over sickness, disease tragedy and death? Or do I simply “take it as it is” passing off as courage what is really hard-heartedness and lack of sympathetic concern? Do I have compassion on the lowly, the lustful, the addicted, the selfish, the wretched, the evil and the sinful world without judgement or condemnation? Am I sad over the sins and faults of others? Or do I in fact laugh and gloat and mock and take perverse pleasure over that about which true Christians, in imitation of Christ, can only mourn?*

#### **Blessed are the meek...**

*Am I meek with the meekness of Jesus? Am I meek in the sense that I only fight evil with good? Do I accept and practice the fact that humble love and truth and courage in goodness is the only weapon available in any battle with sin and sinful people? Do I lord it over others at home, at work, at Church? Do I love and actually use force, brute command, blind authority, intimidation, coercion, to accomplish my will? Do I bless those who curse me, pray for those who abuse me, do good to those who hate me, serve those who misuse me, speak to those who shun me? Do I love my enemies and forgive my offenders? Do I believe in the method of the meekness of Christ as the only way for genuine achievement?*

**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness...**

*Do I hunger and thirst for God? Do I desire to be righteous? Do I work to be holy? Do I read or study or make a continued effort for Love and for Truth, for the Spirit of God? Do I pray? Do I fast? Do I do any "spiritual exercises" which train me in goodness? Do I come to Church? Do I partake in the sacraments? Do I go out of my way to help, to teach, to serve in some way? Do I do the things, which I know bring righteousness?*

**Blessed are the merciful...**

*Do I show mercy to others? Do I forgive those who offend me? Do I try to understand those who are different? Do I take pleasure in judging and condemning? Do I talk about others? Do I revel in gossip? Do I say things, though possibly true, which need not be said but only can cause harm? Do I rejoice in wrong? Am I legalistic, loving the law more than the Spirit? Do I smooth things over and cover offenses, or do I stir things up by picking and condemning? Am I petty and small? Do I slander and shame? Am I prejudiced, making judgements and coming to conclusions without the proper facts but with preformed opinions? Do I actually prefer strict judgement to tender mercy?*

**Blessed are the pure in heart...**

*Do I love purity, cleanness and wholeness? Am I polluted by filthy thoughts and words and actions? Is my mind stained by demonic rationalizations and prejudices? Or am I pure in my openness to all that is good? Is my body corrupted by beastly sensuality and lust? Are my thoughts and deeds pure or are there always hidden motives and intentions? Am I trusting and trustful with a singleness of purpose and total integrity in everything? Or do I connive and deceive, cheat and lie? Am I hypocritical and pretentious? Am I caught by some passions: eating, drinking, smoking working, playing, sleeping, or something else which has more control over me than I have over it? Is there any darkness or impurity which blinds me and holds me from freedom and wholeness with God?*

**Blessed are the peacemakers...**

*Do I love and make peace? At home, at work, at church, in society and the whole world? Am I angry and impatient? Do I look for fights and arguments? Do I provoke others to be angry? Do I believe in*

*"turning the other cheek"? Or do I take refuge in physical force? Do I love violence? Do I worship aggression and power? Do I seek inner peace and quiet which is the basic condition for peace in the world?*

**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake...**

*Am I ever persecuted for what is right? Am I ready to be? Am I ready to give my life without vengeance for what is true? Do I participate in good activities which may bring criticism from others? Or do I take the easy road of non-involvement in human affairs, in family or job or church or society at large? Do I go along with things that are wrong from fear or cowardice or laziness? Do I flee responsibility? Do I worship security? Am I defending my own small life in contradiction to the righteousness of God? Am I in fact ashamed of Christ?*

**Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven...**

*Is my joy and gladness in God? Or is it in this world with its passions, powers, possessions and praise? Am I mean and grouchy or jealous and moody? Am I despairing and without hope? Am I pessimistic and anxious? Do I complain and spread darkness and irritation to others? Is my faith of no consequence in my actions and attitudes to the events of my life? Do I really "consider the lilies of the field..." and trust in God and rejoice in this trust? Is my treasure in God or in myself? Is my life "hid with God in heaven" or am I in fact a man of this age in body mind and spirit? Do I believe and have in truth the "joy of believing"?*

*(By Julia Bridget Hayes. Preparation for Holy Confession from "If we Confess our Sins" by Fr Thomas Hopko)*

**Orthodox Church of St Nicholas of Japan**

Holy Archbishopric of Johannesburg and Pretoria  
156 Fulham Road, Brixton  
Johannesburg

# The Mystery of Repentance and Holy Confession

