

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 stolen from God by failing to tithe?
- 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 Neighbors

- 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 harbored 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 perfection, 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 endeavors will bring upon you.

HOW TO FAST DURING GREAT LENT

If one truly desires to fast, s/he must not sin. The spiritual fast is the truest form of fasting – from evil thoughts, words and deeds. Being weak and vulnerable beings we find ourselves “prone” to sin. The Church recognizes our need to experience a physical fast to assist us to train ourselves to fast spiritually. Actually, our terminology is misused. During Great Lent we abstain. To fast is to not eat at all, like when we fast by eating nothing before receiving Holy Communion. We abstain from certain foods during the “fasting seasons” and often use the term to “fast” when we mean abstain.

For Great Lent:

- 1) Strive to do the best you can without condemning anyone else.
- 2) Select one degree of fasting listed below that you believe that you can accomplish. Then try to do a bit **more** than that.
- 3) Each Lenten period try to upgrade your previous degree of fasting to reach a level which inspires you to seek higher spiritual goals.
- 4) Pregnant women, persons who are ill, on prescribed medications, on special diets, or who have some other valid reasons are exempted from fasting disciplines which could harm their health.
- 5) In all cases please consult your parish priest for guidance and assistance.

The Minimal Degree

- a. abstain from meat during the first week of Great Lent
- b. abstain from meat on all Wednesdays and Fridays of Great Lent
- c. abstain from meat, fish, dairy (eggs, milk, butter), wine and oil during all of Holy Week – Holy Monday through the beginning of the Paschal service on Saturday night

The Light Degree

- a. abstain from meat, fish and dairy products for the first week of lent.
- b. abstain from meat on all Wednesdays and Fridays of Great Lent
- c. abstain from meat, fish, dairy, wine and oil during all of Holy Week through the beginning of the Paschal service on Saturday night

The Moderate Degree

- a. abstain from meat, fish and dairy products during the first week of Great Lent
- b. abstain from meat, fish, dairy products and wine on all Wednesdays and Fridays of Great lent
- c. abstain from meat during the fourth week of Great Lent (after the cross veneration)
- d. abstain from meat, fish dairy, wine and oil during Holy Week through the start of the Paschal service on Saturday night

The Conservative Degree

- a. abstain from meat, fish, dairy, wine and oil during the first week of Great Lent
- b. abstain from meat, fish, dairy and wine during all of Great Lent
- c. abstain from meat, fish, dairy, wine and oil during Holy Week through the start of the Paschal service on Saturday night

The Strict Degree

- a. abstain from meat, fish, dairy, wine and oil during all of Great Lent and Holy Week through the start of the Paschal service on Saturday night

Note: Even the strictest fast should be broken on The Feast of the Annunciation and Palm Sunday when fish, wine and oil are allowed.

ALSO DURING GREAT LENT

In all cases you should spend more time in worship by attending the services offered at your parish, as well as any common services with other Orthodox Churches that are scheduled i.e. Sunday Lenten vespers.

More attention should be given to private prayer, Christian meditation, Bible and other edifying spiritual reading each day.

Participate in the Church's sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion.

Give alms to those in need and/or donate to special Lenten collections at your parish.

Turn off excess noise – TV, radio (music in all its manifestations), web surfing and mindless chatter should be minimized. Pull out those ear buds and face the world, interact with other human beings - the brothers and sisters for whom our Savior died.

Do not judge anyone. Seek your own repentance.