

# Young People and Confession

by Fr. Milton Efthimiou

The motivation for this article came from a young teenager who heard me speak on pornography and drugs. He asked me if it was a sin to read "dirty books," and to occasionally smoke marijuana. I told him that he should go to his priest and that if he wished to reconcile himself with God, he should go to the sacrament of confession. He called me back one day and said that his priest said that we no longer emphasize the confessional and that the confessional should be used for very serious sins.

What is the Orthodox position on confession or penance? (These two terms can be used interchangeably). Can it be an aid to modern day problems that the young encounter? Years ago, going to Confession was not very complicated. There was a certain anxiety about confessing serious sins, but confession was like not eating meat on Fridays or during Lent, and fasting before going to Holy Communion. I can remember in my first parish when, during Holy Week, just about every person of the five hundred families in that parish came to confession before receiving Holy Communion on Holy Thursday, and/or Pascha night. But now things seem to be different. Private Confession or Penance has become one of the truly "neglected sacraments."

## Pros and Cons

There are arguments on both sides of the question as to whether or not the sacrament of Confession is beneficial to the young. Those religious educators who wanted to delay the sacrament of Penance maintained that small children do not have a very clear idea of what sin is and that their confessions tend to be mere rote recitals. Besides not meaning very much from a religious point of view, these educators maintain, the practice of receiving the sacrament when children are too young can lead to a lifetime habit of superficial experiences of the sacrament of Penance. Young children can't really commit much in the way of sin, they maintain, so sorrow for sin and forgiveness are not yet an important aspect of their lives.

There are those who defend the traditional Orthodox practice of receiving the sacrament of Penance before Holy Communion saying that if children don't start receiving Penance at an early age, there is a good chance that they will never receive it, or at least will never get in the habit of going to the priest regularly. Besides, they say, children do have a sense of sin. Maybe, they can't yet commit serious sins, but they do wrong things, and they do feel real remorse about the wrong doings in life. A third group resort to another practice: that of receiving the sacrament at least four times a year, since the requirement, in their mind, is that you must receive Holy Communion four times a year. Most of this group says that since children are not capable of committing a truly serious sin - one that involves a complete turning away from God - there is no absolute obligation for them to receive the sacrament of Penance.

The point of this booklet is that our young people ought to be receiving this sacrament because it is a great tool for helping the young work through their adolescent problems. But how can we help them to perceive the meaning of the sacrament and help them want to receive it? A priest recently told me that he explained the sacrament of Penance at several youth meetings. When he asked the group whether they wanted to receive the sacrament of Penance, most of them said: "No way !" Some said, "I don't know." These responses may accurately reflect how most young people feel about this sacrament. I suspect that the reluctance has something to do with having to face one's guilt, one's own failures, and, consequently, one's own need for forgiveness and reconciliation. Today there are many voices suggesting that remorsefulness is a bad thing. Some propose that people should be without hangups, be "laid-back," or "hang loose," in the words of the young. But there is also such a thing as a healthy remorsefulness. All people do things that are wrong, and it would be subhuman not to be able to accept the responsibility for them. The problem people are not the sinners, but the ones who are no longer aware of doing wrong.

Resorting to drugs, obscene literature, valium pills, psychoanalysis etc., is a modern way to deal with guilt, something which we all have to cope with from time to time. In the long run, though, it is a very unhealthy tactic simply to deny responsibility. The advice often given is: "If it feels good, do it. If it feels bad, forget it." On the surface this is very attractive. But human growth doesn't come that way. To become more fully human, more truly ourselves, we have to face our failures. And not just our inadvertent mistakes but also the situations in which we more or less deliberately turn away from what we really want to be. The traditional approach of the Fathers of the Church is that if we don't admit our sin, we will never bring ourselves to go beyond it.

The main and tragic problem of adults is their own fear of accepting their own guilt. And this obviously would interfere with the ability to convey a sense of security and confidence about this sacrament to their children. Yet, all Greek Orthodox want their children to grow up to be good practicing Orthodox Christians. This means, that, at least to some degree, just as adults want their children to dress neatly, or to go to good schools, or to take piano lessons, is the realization that children's' ability to accept responsibility for their sins is a vital part of their growing up. In other words, if we ignore this problem by forever saying, "Well, they're not ready for the sacrament of Penance," we run the risk of letting them put off indefinitely one of the permanent tasks of maturing.

## **Acknowledgment, Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

Acknowledgment of one's guilt, forgiveness of one's sins, and reconciliation with God Almighty are the components of the human experience in the Church's sacrament of confession. In order to experience forgiveness and reconciliation we first have to be able to acknowledge that we are guilty of something. It is a sense of acknowledging responsibility, or even more simply, we need a sense of sin before we can experience forgiveness. To put it positively we need, "a sense of responsibility."

As Greek Orthodox, it is important to realize that a sense of responsibility and a sense of religion are not separate. The whole of human life was included in the humanity and

godliness of Jesus Christ. All human growth is likewise Christian and religious. What we do in our specific religious actions is make the religious dimension of our whole human reality explicit. Young people who are growing in self-control and in respect for others, who feel some responsibility and sense of sin for not living up to all they ought to be, are young people who are becoming more and more what God wants them to be. This kind of growth is very implicit in Orthodox teaching of the Fathers. This growth is Christian growth. Acknowledgment, forgiveness and reconciliation are Christian events even when we don't explicitly think about it.

It must be pointed out here that it is not always a good idea to be too explicit about religious motivation in nurturing the moral sense of young people - especially when it comes to punishment and threat. Parents should never give children the idea that God is some big policeman in the sky: "God will punish you if you do that." Just as it is important for children to learn their own goodness, it is also important for them to know God as love and goodness. This is the most fundamental lesson children must learn.

After the child has learned this lesson, the role of God as judge and critic can be better understood. This is the meaning when the priest calls out to the congregation, "In fear of God, those with faith and love come forth" to receive Holy Communion, as we profess in the Divine Liturgy every Sunday. For even as judge and critic, God's basic judgment is "You are forgiven" and God's forgiveness is effective in us to the extent that we really accept it. St. Paul said, "all who have sinned are deprived of the glory of God, all are now undeserveably justified by the gift of God, through the redemption wrought in Christ Jesus," (Romans 3: 23-24).

Another problem is that we usually think of forgiveness as something that is God's job not ours; and of course it is God who forgives us through the priest in the sacrament of Confession. The problem in forgiveness, though, is not on God's side but on ours. We often have a very hard time believing that we are really forgiven. Even when the priest puts his stole on our heads and reads the prayer of absolution. The good news seems to be too good to believe. Being able to accept forgiveness is also a gift. It has been my experience that both young people and adults can more readily realize that they are sinners, but have a hard time believing that they are really forgiven. Just as young people need a good self-image before they can face their inadequacies, so, too, they need the confidence that they are loved, to be able to accept forgiveness. The sacrament of Confession is a solemn celebration by the Church of something that happens all the time in our lives. It is accentuated in the ritual, face to face with the priest. People can recognize a need for forgiveness and the need to experience this forgiveness in a visible way.

## **The Christian Home**

The connection between marriage, the family and the Church is as old as Christianity. In the letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul talks about marriage and the love that ought to unite husband and wife. Then he says, "This is a great foreshadowing; I mean that it refers to Christ and the Church," (5:32). Paul's word, which is translated as "Foreshadowing," may also be translated as "mystery" (mysterion) or "truth" or even "sacrament." In this

passage from Ephesians, then, we have the same link between marriage, family, church, and sacrament that is expressed in Orthodox patristic terminology.

The emphasis here should be on the fact that the church is not just buildings, not just the bishops, priests, and not even just the community gathered for the Divine Liturgy or the sacraments. The Church is also present in the lives, in the concrete reality, of the Christians we encounter. The Church is more visible when it is gathered together in the local parish for Divine Liturgy, but the Church is also present when it teaches and exercises its sacramental function in the home. The whole family, not just the married couple, is a sacrament, a visible manifestation of what Christ really is, in the same way that the Church as a whole is a sign and sacrament.

If, however, the above will have meaning, it must be in the context of children, and it is a known fact that it takes a long while before children can appreciate community parish worship in the church. Children have a hard time taking part in large community events. This is why informal preparation in the family can lead up to participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion as well as the other services of the Church. In penance we experience God's love in the Christian communities proclamation of forgiveness and reconciliation with God. But just as all proclamations of the gospel in Christian life are related to its proclamation in the formal church setting, just as all love in Christian life (for example, that between Christian spouses and their family) is related to the formal celebration of that love in the churches Eucharistic celebration, so all forgiveness and reconciliation in Christian life is related to the explicit sacrament of reconciliation that is celebrated in the Church.

## **The Mechanics of Reconciliation**

When the Orthodox tradition speaks of the sacrament of Penance or Confession as the "rite of reconciliation," in the words of St. Maximos the Confessor, this is in reference to reconciliation with the community of the faithful, the Ekklesia. When reconciled with the Ekklesia, we are thereby reconciled with God as well. The priest in the sacrament of Penance speaks for the community as well as for God when he reads the prayer of absolution for forgiveness and reconciliation. When the priest forgives someone in the confessional, he is reinforcing God's forgiveness. When we ask someone for forgiveness, we are asking for God's too. Just as there is no sin which is not in some way an offense against my neighbor and against the community, there is no reconciliation with God which is not reconciliation with the community. The sacrament of confession is not something abstract and invisible. It has to do with my real relationship with actual people in my life.

The family can help the young in their psychological preparation for recognizing and acknowledging sin, accepting forgiveness, and realizing reconciliation. When parents help their young to come to a realization of what is right and wrong, help them cope with it, assure them that there is a way for God to forgive them and make them feel accepted back into the family circle, the family is really celebrating an event of Christian reconciliation. The experience is a fore-runner to the sacramental meaning of Penance, though of course, does not take the place of the full sacramental reality of the Church sacrament. The young are being prepared at home for the time when they can receive

this sacrament at the hands of the priest, where larger dimensions of sin and forgiveness are explicitly expressed.

## **The Meaning of Contrition**

There was a popular novel written a few years ago, *Love Story*, in which the most memorable line was the slogan, "Love means never having to say you're sorry." This is probably the silliest and most meaningless advice ever stated. In most peoples experience loving does mean having to say "you're sorry" - over and over again - and being willing to extend sincere forgiveness over and over again. Oscar Wilde once said sadly, "you always hurt the ones you love." This comes much closer to the truth. Many of us can be reasonably decent with people we come into contact with rarely, or on a merely superficial basis. It seems that we save our frustrations and disappointment for our closest relatives and friends.

The reason for this may be entirely negative. We generally let ourselves go with people we trust, people we feel will accept us in spite of all. If we felt insecure in our relationship, we wouldn't take the risk of being abusive. Husbands and wives may just take turns letting off steam. The one who is attacked and seems to feel instinctively, "I better not let this go too far," and avoids adding fuel to the fire, this may not always happen, but with normal tensions in normal families, it often does. Psychologists notice that abused children seem to fight less among themselves than children in normal families. Children in loving families unload their frustrations and hostilities on each other rather easily, knowing that the parents are there to assure that their whole world won't fall apart.

There comes a point however, when children and young people have to learn to ask for forgiveness and to forgive. With younger children this forgiveness has to be more subtle, less verbal than what might be expected of older ones. It should be expressed symbolically when it cannot be expressed in words. One child may let the other play with a toy for awhile. Candy is shared. One says something for the other on a completely different topic. Being human is a matter of being both flesh and spirit. Just as every offense is somehow visible and sensible, so every reconciliation must be something seen and felt in order to have reality for us. That is why it is absurd to say "love means not having to say we're sorry"; it contradicts the spirit and flesh reality of life.

Putting this in an Orthodox Christian context, reconciliation should have an explicitly Christian expression too. Not that religion should be brought up over every little family fight. Family prayers, perhaps around the dinner table, or in front of the iconostasis, could from time to time incorporate the theme of reconciliation.

One of the most intriguing stories of the New Testament is the one where children were being brought to Jesus. People were bringing their little children to Him, to have Him touch them, but the disciples were scolding them for this. Jesus became indignant when he noticed it and said to them: "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them. It is to just such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs!" (Mark 10: 13-14). Many scholars feel that this story was remembered and included in among the gospel memories of Jesus precisely to emphasize the participation of children in Christian life.

The story implies that there ought to be a real relationship between Jesus and children; that the young ought, on their own level, to have a fully Christian life suitable to their own age and concern. Today this would imply the right to participate in the sacramental life of the church following Baptism, including the right to experience God's forgiving love in ways they could understand. For the young, this grace of reconciliation might come initially through their parents and godparents, who are ambassadors of Christ to their offspring. It is through their parents and godparents that the young begin to feel God's healing blessing. As the story about Jesus and the children in St. Mark says at its conclusion, Jesus "embraced them and blessed them, placing his hands on them" - as He does still through parenthood and through the sacrament of confession reconciling love among the faithful and the ultimate Love of God.

## **The Confessional**

If you, the reader of this pamphlet, are a young person and have decided that the confessional is for you and that it will bring you closer to God, then the rest of this pamphlet will be devoted to how to prepare yourself for the highlight of the priest, penitent and God encounter; absolution. When the priest puts the stole on your head after a short service, he recites this prayer:

"Oh God and Saviour, who by Thy prophet Nathan has granted pardon to David repenting of his own transgressions, Who has accepted Manasseh's penitential prayer; do Thou, the same compassionate Lord, accept this Thy servant (name) who is repentant of sins that he (she) has committed. Overlook all that he (she) has done, forgiving all of his (her) unrighteousness, and overlooking his (her) iniquities. You have said, oh Lord, I desire not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should return from His wickedness and live; and that sins ought to be forgiven even unto seventy times seven. For as Thy greatness is incomparable, so is Thy mercy immeasurable. Who, oh Lord, would stand aright before you if Your judgment was to the extreme in what is amiss in our lives? You are a God of those who repent and unto You we ascribe glory, to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen."

If you read this prayer carefully, you will see that there are several ways in which you can prepare yourself to go to a Priest of your choosing in order to encounter God through the sacramental experience of confession.

a. Find a quiet place where you can be alone and where you can concentrate on the love of God; His love for the world and for you. Think of the Christmas story and how Our Lord became Man because He loved us, how He experienced death on the cross because He loved us, and how, at Easter, He resurrected, because He loves us.

b. Think of what God wants you to be and where you are in life, at this very moment. Ask yourself: Am I worthy to be called a creation of God? When Christ returns at the second coming, will we be able to tell him that in spite of our failures in life, we sincerely tried to make amends in our shortcomings?

c. Once we have gone through (a) and (b), we are now ready to face the most difficult question of all: How have we offended God? In examining ourselves, what sins have been committed? One easy way of doing this is to put down on a piece of paper all the

sins committed recently, or since your last confession. Details and unnecessary descriptions should be avoided.

d. Once you have completed your list, check them with the following "self-examination" questions based on the Ten Commandments, which will also help you to crystallize your thinking before you share your feelings with your Father confessor. (These were basically taken from a little Archdiocesan pamphlet entitled, "The Neglected Sacrament, A Practical Guide to Confession and Happiness.")

### **First Commandment**

"I Am The Lord Thy God; Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me." Have I loved God as much as I should? Have I been more interested in myself than in God? Have I tried to serve God and keep His Commandments? Have I been vain about my personality, personal appearance, clothes, possessions, my family, ability, success in games or in accomplishments? Have I given way to anxiety instead of turning to God for help? Have I failed to trust in God and His mercy? Have I failed to pray to God sincerely and faithfully? Have I put my self before God?

### **Second Commandment**

"Thou Shalt Not Make Unto Thee Any Graven Image." Have I put another person before God's law; by not going to Church, or by committing some other sin to please that person? Have I neglected my duties to God through fear of ridicule? Have I been insincere about my religion? Have I been receiving Holy Communion without the appropriate preparation?

### **Third Commandment**

"Thou Shalt Not Take Thy Name of The Lord Thy God in Vain . " Have I profaned the Holy Name of God? Have I misused the Holy Name of Jesus? Have I cursed anyone or sworn a false oath? Have I paid proper attention to holy persons and things? Have I broken any solemn vow or promise?

### **Fourth Commandment**

"Remember The Sabbath Day, to Keep it Holy." Have I missed Church on Sundays? Have I always kept Sunday as it ought to be kept? Have I done unnecessary work on Sundays? Have I been irreverent during Church Services? Have I caused anyone to profane the Lord's day? Have I been ashamed of my religion or my Church?

### **Fifth Commandment**

"Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother." Have I respected my parents and been grateful enough for all they have done for me? Have I disobeyed them or neglected them? Have I contributed as much as I should to the support and happiness of my parents? Have I

tried to bring my children up properly? Have I given as much care as possible to the religious life of my family; with regard to daily prayer, church going, etc? Have I honored God, my Heavenly Father, by working or treating my employers as well as other co-workers honestly and diligently?

### **Sixth Commandment**

"Thou Shalt Not Kill." Have I killed if not in outward deed, perhaps in my heart? Have I wished for some one's death? Have I been angry unjustly? Have I harmed others by ridicule or contempt? Have I defamed anyone who needed help? Have I gossiped about people? Have I been cruel to anyone? Have I failed to forgive anyone? Have I shown proper respect toward life?

### **Seventh Commandment**

"Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery." Have I been impure in thought, word, or deed? Have I committed unworthy actions alone or with others? Do I dwell on pornography and obscenity? Have I committed any sin with regard to my wife (husband) or other member of my family? Have I caused others to commit sinful acts?

### **Eighth Commandment**

"Thou Shalt Not Steal ." Have I ever stolen anything, or shared in stolen goods? Have I cheated in business, games or school? Have I kept things that did not belong to me? Have I given as much as I am able to charitable causes and to the Church?

### **Ninth Commandment**

"Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness." Have I lied often? Have I concealed the truth? Have I exaggerated too much? Have I let others receive blame for my faults? Have I judged others for sins which I also have committed? Have I been deceitful, unfair, hypocritical?

### **Tenth Commandment**

"Thou Shalt Not Covet." Have I been jealous of others? Have I envied them because they have more money; or are better looking; or more successful; or because people pay more attention to them? Have I been grieved at the prosperity of the others? Have I ever wished the downfall of anyone? Have I failed to thank God for what He has already given me? Have I thought that God is partial?

The meaning of this booklet, and all that has been written, may be summarized by Archbishop Iakovos, primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Americas: "Though God may intend man to destroy himself, he also has given man free will and the ability to cleanse himself and his world. The church will not be pessimistic, nor sit quietly in its

handsome houses of worship while the war rages outside its churches for the bodies, minds and souls of its parishoners."

*Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North & South America  
Department of Church and Society  
(212) 570-3551  
10 East 79th Street  
New York, New York 10021*