

Q. *What about Confession? How often do I have to go? When I grew up, we were taught that we had to go to Confession once a year, before Pascha. Now, the priest is telling us that we should go more often and some people seem to go every week. What is right?*

A. It is the Church's teaching that those who are regular in the reception of Holy Communion ought to prepare themselves through the frequent and regular participation in the Mystery of Holy Confession. Those who are irregular or infrequent in their reception of Holy Communion ought to prepare for each Communion through Confession.

What is meant by "frequent and regular" is a subject for discussion, but it certainly means more than once a year. In the official encyclical of the Holy Synod, we are told that it means once a month. A good way to implement such a personal schedule would be to mark on a calendar certain dates such as The Sunday of the Pharisee and Publican, Lazarus Saturday, the Sunday of All Saints, The Procession of the Holy Cross (1 August), The Elevation of the Holy Cross (14 September), St. Phillip's Day (14 November), and The Fore-feast of the Nativity. To these seven dates, one might add his or her name day, wedding anniversary and other special occasions or Holy Days that will round out the year and provide for scheduled confessions on, more or less, a monthly basis. In addition to this, of course, one should receive the Mystery of Holy Confession whenever his conscience is burdened with a particularly serious sin, or whenever he has been absent from the Holy Mysteries for three or more consecutive weeks.

In the past, under the influence of Medieval Roman Catholic practice, many Orthodox adopted the practice of "Doing their 'Easter Duty,'" by which was meant making a compulsory Confession and receiving Holy Communion once a year, during the Paschal Cycle. In addition to this, some added Christmas as a second occasion, but in many parishes throughout the world, as well as in our country, the Priest Celebrant would turn around with the Holy Chalice and give the invitation "In fear of God and with Faith and Love, draw near," and immediately return the Chalice to the Holy table and prepare to conclude the Liturgy.

In the last half of the twentieth century, an effort was made to restore the ancient practice of more frequent Communion. Unfortunately, this successful effort was not accompanied by an equally vigorous effort to encourage more frequent Confessions. In fact, the introduction of so called General Confession services, in which no private acknowledgement of sin is made to the priest who has the responsibility from Our Lord to "Bind and Loose," has actually resulted in some folks never making a real confession.

Holy Confession is sometimes called "The Forgotten Medicine," and what is most often forgotten by our people is, precisely, that the Mystery is a Means of Grace and Healing and not an annual ordeal to be endured. Many of the physical and psychological illnesses from which our people suffer are the consequences of unrepented, unconfessed and, therefore, unforgiving sins.

Perhaps, at the root of the reluctance to make more frequent Confessions is a failure to comprehend the therapeutic and positive effects of the Mystery. It is, literally, a channel of Grace by which we are empowered to avoid temptation and sin.

The very evening of the Day upon which Our Lord arose, He spoke to His Apostles, saying, "Whosoever's sins ye forgive, they are forgiven..." By this our Lord did not set His Priests as judges but as "Witnesses". Witnesses before God, that those who are confessing are sincerely repentant and contrite (Sorry for their sins and not merely "sorry about" them.), and that, by God's Grace, they intend to turn from their sins and to repair, as far as possible, the damage which these sins have caused. For such as sincerely and earnestly repent and confess, there is the certainty that their offences are "consigned to oblivion," and that their hearts and bodies are prepared for the limitless Grace which is poured into a Christian soul in the Mystery of Holy Communion. We should recall, in conclusion, that Holy Confession is called "Another Baptism," and ask ourselves how often we wish to be made new by the rebirth which was, once and for all, imparted to us "by water and the Holy Spirit."

A man once complained to me that "My priest wants us to go to Confession once a month." My answer was in the form of two questions. "What possible harm could there be in doing so? What possible Grace are you losing by your stubborn refusal to do so?"