

## **Reflection on the Seal of the Confessional in the Russian Orthodox Church [ref para 2.4 of the Report]:**

Confession in the Orthodox Church is very much a visible part of church life: something which every member of the church practices, or should practice, regularly and certainly it is a necessary requirement before receiving Holy Communion.

Confession in Orthodox churches happens face to face between penitent and priest in front of a stand on which lie the Cross and the Gospel, but it is Christ whom the person confessing addresses, and the priest is “but a witness”. But a witness such as the Apostles witnessing Christ’s suffering, and not a mediator between man and God; but more on this later.

Confession is not merely a listing of sins; the emphasis is the identification that one has broken communion with God and therefore with fellow man.

“There are no entirely private sins. All sins are sins against my neighbor, as well as against God and against myself. Even my most secret thoughts are, in fact, making it more difficult for those around me to follow Christ.” (Metropolitan Kallistos Ware)

“Confession is a sacrament, a mystery, it is Divine Grace at work. Confession like all other sacraments, is God’s action in which we, both penitent and priest, are invited to share”.

“We do not see the ugliness of our sin until we see it in the heart and mind of the other before whom we have confessed.”

The Seal of the Confessional may be understood if one truly appreciates what Confession is. It is more than a disclosure of sins. In confession the Orthodox recognize the might and love of God and profess their faith. People come to confess because their inner being compels them to. Confession is at the very centre of our Christian life.

“An essential element of confession is to try to right what the wrong that one has done. Open up, tell your sins to your spiritual father. Do not hide them. The more you conceal them the more they multiply and gain strength. Speak of your sins before God in the presence of another and very often the sins lose their power and wither away”.

(Geronticon) Beg forgiveness not only of God but of those you have wronged.

A significant element of confession is to do all one can to set right what wrong one has done. The sacrament of the mystery of confession is the most frequent sacrament which the faithful partake – it is the sacrament of the heart, it is the heavenly grace and the gateway to salvation. It also is, perhaps, least treasured by those who partake of it. Whereas Holy Communion is approached as a profound privilege; confession is seen quite wrongly by some, as an obligation, a duty, even by some clergy, and as a responsibility, perhaps a frightening one, that comes before that unparalleled joy of the Divine Liturgy. Confession is recognizing that one has turned away from God, has wounded Him and is begging His mercy. Repentance follows whereby the penitent must have a sincere intention to make every effort not to repeat the sin again, asking for His help, because without God’s aid we fall again and again. The help the penitent receives is the grace of the Holy Spirit which provides the strength to battle with temptation, which is never far away from each one of us.

Confession is one of the great mysteries of our life and one of our great fears, fear of what we confront in our hearts, and fear to reveal that secret to another. The heart, as the Holy Fathers say, is at the centre of our being. It is a small vessel that contains so much; “it is a microcosm of all creation, it is a mystery, in it there are wild beasts, lions, dragons and every evil, there

are rough roads, deep precipices and darkness; but, in the heart there is also God Himself and the angels, apostles, light and life, the heavenly cities, great treasures of grace and all the glories of creation. All the incomparable realities of this life are manifest in that small space". What a deep and wonderful creation that contains all this! And, the mystery of this heart is at the very centre of the mystery of Holy Sacrament of Confession.

When the penitent faces the priest in confession, he comes voluntarily, he comes because his conscience, his soul and his whole being seeks to wash away the dirt, the heavy load that he has gathered and the pain that he feels. He comes to face Our Lord and open up from the depth of his heart and soul the ugly secret that he has been harboring. "There are no private sins all sins have an affect on the community". (Metropolitan Kallistos) In the early period of the church there was of course public confession. Now the priest represents that community and we confess to God in the presence of our fellow man. The penitent begins confessing while the priest prays and under guidance inspired by the Holy Spirit may respond. That response, that word, God willing, has sacramental force and healing grace.

The priest does indeed have a great responsibility hearing confession, Love is at the heart of confession, he needs to make aware that we are all creatures of God who fashioned us out of love and created us for sanctity and holiness, for eternal life. The priest is a carer of souls and must know and make known to the broken creature before him that one CAN be healed, that restoration and being made whole again IS possible. The priest through homilies and heartfelt empathy for the salvation of the penitent helps him to overcome the fear that enslaves, the fear of God's wrath, the fear of voicing his sins, the fear of being found out in the community. This fear may give fuel to anger and hatred because this fear is the opposite of love. It is here that one must try to fill the soul and heart of the penitent with the word of God, to show that whatever darkness he experiences, by disclosing every sin the soul may be healed. The priest consoles, comforts, perhaps admonishes, but helps to take away the poison from the faithful. So often this requires the priest to strive with every fibre of his being to drive out fear and hopelessness and replace it with trust, hope and faith.

The priest can never be an observer or a passive bystander he must enter into the heart of the penitent and stand together with him and say: "It is not I but Christ who hears your confession, I am but a witness to what you say". Not a legal witness, God does not need a witness, but one who shares the burden, one whose heart is touched, one who imitates The Saviour who was with the disciples, walking, eating and participating in their life. So the priest participates here as a companion.

At the end of the confession, if the penitent has truly repented and has hidden nothing the priest covers the penitent's bowed head with his alb and says the prayer of absolution, pronouncing the penitent's name clearly. This is so important.

There may be an occasion when the prayer is not said because no true confession, was declared and no repentance was visible i.e. there was no change of heart. The penitent goes away just as he came. This is a great sadness; but it happens very rarely indeed! However what happens more frequently is that the penitent does not prepare for confession sufficiently, and during confession is searching for what to say, or one senses that something important was not said, that penitent requires help and encouragement from the priest. Here as elsewhere the pastor must offer his own heart in which the Holy Spirit lives, works and speaks, to the person confessing. In the case of a very grave sin the priest must make every effort to encourage the sinner to pursue an appropriate legal action. This may become a most difficult situation, as THE SEAL of the CONFSSIONAL is ABSOLUTE! Incidentally in

pre-revolutionary Russia the only occasion that a priest could break this seal was if in the confession it became evident that the Emperor's life was threatened.

So no prayer of absolution is offered where there is clearly no repentance as when murder or paedophilia has been committed and the person confessing has no intention of giving himself up to the legal authorities. As the sanctity of the confessional is absolute this may become is a very big issue!

So far the Church has not pronounced on the sensitive topic though private, local discussion is taking place.

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