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FREEING THE SOUL

Reflections on Thirty Years as an Orthodox Confessor

Ordained in 1988 at the dawn of the restoration of the Russian Orthodox Church and mentored by priests, hierarchs, and monastics who had preserved a deep spirituality through the troubled years of the Soviet Union, Protopriest Artemy Vladimirov of the Church of All Saints at the Novo-Alekseevsky Stavropegial Women's Monastery in Moscow is today one of the most experienced confessors in Russia.

As with all Slavic churches, confession before receiving Holy Communion is the gold standard, and standing in the All Saints' confession crowd of several hundred penitents on a weekend or festal service is a unique experience. Working men, mothers with children, pensioners, university students, business people, visitors from other cities of Russia and abroad, all wait, sometimes for hours, to confess or just speak for a few moments with Fr. Artemy or one of his assistant priests.

The feeling in this crowd, however, is unusual. While most confession lines are characterized by a somber sadness, this one gives off patience and joyful expectancy. Frequently, Fr. Artemy pauses the confessions at the analogion to make his way through the waiting crowd, greeting and blessing people, handing out small icons or sweets, hearing whispered on-the-spot confessions of children, the elderly, and infirm, accepting written confessions from regular parishioners, and making warm and humorous remarks that leave both parishioners and visitors delighted. Even if they have arrived burdened

Opposite: Protopriest Artemy Vladimirov and parishioner. Church of All Saints, Moscow, Russia.

and anxious, no one leaves without feeling that their soul has been touched by God's grace and without a smile.

The testimony to a confessor, ultimately, consists in the souls saved, the lives transformed, the prayers answered, and into this spiritual realm we cannot easily penetrate. But in confessing to Fr. Artemy, whether once or over many years, one invariably comes to a deeper trust in God and a better understanding of one's neighbor.

While Fr. Artemy's interviews have been featured in several *Road to Emmaus* issues, this one is unique in that the following questions on the practice of confession have been submitted by North American Orthodox priests of varied jurisdictions and years of experience, and by Orthodox Christian laypeople.

Life Confessions and First Confessions

RTE: Thank you for speaking with us once again, Fr. Artemy; as always, it is a pleasure to interview you. Let's begin with several questions on confession from both experienced and newly-ordained Orthodox pastors. The first is, "How do you go about a life confession for someone who is being baptized or chrismated?"

FR. ARTEMY: A life confession is not only called for in these cases but every time a new person comes to me as a priest and I sense that they are unaccustomed to confessing. Possibly they were baptized as a child but have not attended church until now. Or perhaps this person has come to me particularly to share some difficulties of his or her life; for example, a mother who wants to tell me of her child's troubles.

In most of these cases, when I feel that this person has little experience of confession, I help with questions. I try to assist this Christian to remember all of their previous life, and 99% of the time these people are eager to confess and they willingly answer my questions. This is the best way to help a person enter the Church and begin a Christian life. It coincides with the Lord's words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." This is the cornerstone of spiritual life, and if a priest tries to be attentive and zealous, confession is the main remedy by which contemporary man can rid his heart of its awful burden and come to Christ. A life confession helps him to free

himself of the influence of demons, of enslavement to the passions, and this is the best way for him to feel himself a Christian spiritual warrior.

RTE: In Russia, where people confess much more frequently (and briefly) than in the Greek Orthodox tradition, you always have a large crowd of people waiting to confess at Saturday vigil and on Sunday morning, some who come weekly, and others for the first time. Although it is usually assumed that a life confession should take a great deal of time, you do it thoroughly but rather quickly, don't you?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, if I have a spiritual blueprint, so to speak, it is that I give my heart to this procedure. I try to ask my questions not in a cold manner, as if I was a judge in a courtroom but with the mildness of a father. So, I just put my questions one after another, beginning from childhood, and it should only take about five minutes to enumerate the main sins.

I accommodate my questions to the stages of a person's life: childhood sins, then the graver sins of the teenage years, and after that, more serious sins up to the present. If a person has never confessed, it is better to start with questions concerning very light and childish sins, such as those concerning disobedience, children's thefts, or stubbornness; then sins of the tongue such as cursing or falsehoods. Next, you reach the period of youth, which certainly begins to involve carnal sins and falls. You should add questions about both external sins, such as beating or deceiving someone, and more interior sins like pride, despair, anger. After this we reach the later ages, with things concerning marriage and betrayals against faithfulness, and so on. They might say a few words about the situation, or simply answer "yes" or "no." If they are anxious or embarrassed, they can just nod or shake their head; that is enough.

With my manner of confessing – energetically but not hastily – we can open the depths of someone's life in five minutes. Although some people want to speak in greater detail, there is no need to subject a timid or anxious person to a long interrogation.

This is like surgery because you help the person to expose the deep wounds of his heart, often for the first time in his life. Each of us has an image of what it is to truly be a person, and we often hide our faults and shortcomings. We have a tendency not to exist but to seem to exist. We have an image of what we should be, but then we hide our real face and turn away from God. So, this surgery, a first confession, is one of the most important events in a person's

life. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this five-minute talk with a priest, particularly if the priest himself understands that this meeting takes place in the name of the Holy Trinity.

RTE: And if this is a person who is used to confessing?

FR. ARTEMY: If I see a person for the first time and understand that he attends church regularly, certainly I have no intention to penetrate into his heart, but I allow him to confess what he wants. My task is not to investigate anything, but to soften his heart, to let him feel the touch of holy grace. How I do this depends on my priestly psychology, my attitude, and my style of confessing.

If I try to be like a father who manifests the depths of spiritual love, this newcomer will certainly immediately feel my intention as a priest. We know that the action of grace does not depend on my inner state, and the result of this or that Mystery or sacrament does not depend on my moral qualities. Nevertheless, my psychological state and the state of my soul as a priest is important because people either feel my intention to help them, or they understand that I do not truly participate in their life.

Therefore, if a priest is attentive and tries to be an instrument in God's hand, the impact of holy grace is quite evident. If I am not attentive, if I am just a functionary of the institutional Church with a formal approach and not at all interested in the things that concern your soul, I may look as if I am close to you but I am not really. This is something like western medicine, where many physicians smile but have no real personal interest or manner, no confessional talks, just a computer display, some remedies, some bandages. "These are your problems, and you need to take this or that medicine," but often there is not a real relationship here. Relations are just prohibited, as if I am some kind of automaton or a machine.

Certainly, a priest can also be like this, but if a person is sincere and believes he is in the presence of Christ, he will feel the touch of holy grace, even if the priest is completely estranged from him. Often in Russia, when Orthodox people come from other countries we hear, "Oh, we have brilliant priests in Poland or France, very competent and professional, but still, they are quite different. Here in Russia, it's just another world." Certainly, we know that there are sincere Orthodox priests in many countries, but what I think these Christians notice is this personal approach, when a Russian priest cares about you and about being part of your life.

Priestly Approaches to Confession

RTE: Different priests seem to have very different ways of hearing confession.

FR. ARTEMY: In Moscow, also, I see that priests have quite different approaches towards confessing their parishioners. Some are open and welcoming to all, while others have their own particular group of parishioners, and the borders of this group are sharply defined. I remember a very good priest from my own church – he was kind, smiling, clever, bright, but he had a number of parishioners who were his particular spiritual children. He confessed them very attentively, never urging them to hurry even a little, and paying no attention to the great number of people who also wanted to confess, and who could wait for hours without being fortunate enough to approach this priest.

For me this was very strange, but since then I've learned that in another Moscow parish, a well-known priest never blesses his parishioners to confess or to receive Holy Communion from anyone except him. Perhaps this only concerns an inner circle of his spiritual children, for it is not an external rule, it is not publicly printed, but I gather that this concerns some kind of spiritual union, and that this priest is the essential center of this spiritual family.

I practice the opposite attitude: I do not have my own “spiritual children” who are sheep, while everyone else is not part of my flock. In my understanding, an Orthodox priest is to be open to everyone, like Christ Himself who spreads out his arms from the Cross. Because I am the protopriest in my church, I do not often come out from the altar with the chalice. I leave it to other priests to serve Holy Communion, so that there won't be lines according to personalities.

RTE: This pastor asks, “Some priests tend to equate faithfulness to Orthodoxy with strictness. As western converts we know we fall short of traditional Orthodox practices, but often they seem hard to apply. How do you see this?”

FR. ARTEMY: I know a very pious monk who is overly strict in this way about the preparation for Holy Communion. When people approach the holy chalice, he stops serving to ask them in a hard and penetrating manner how they have prepared. If a person has only read half of the canon to his guardian angel, he will say, “Oh, no! You are to read it to the end.” In my opinion, this formal approach is incorrect.

There are also priests who are lawyers in their hearts and who have some external criteria in confessing people. They don't feel the soul of a person and they are not able to appreciate their desire to repent and to have Holy Communion. They cannot understand that there are many ways leading to God, and different kinds of preparation for this meeting with Our Lord. Some people are not accustomed to taking the prayer book in their hands, but nevertheless they feel the spiritual warmth of their mother, the Church. They are like babies who cannot yet read, yet they sense the aroma of the mother's milk, they cling to her breast, and it is not right to push them away.

The main criteria for a priest is Christ's love, which helps you to discern the inclination of human hearts, even in their most timid attempts to look towards God. It is for you to graft this person onto the ever-living tree of Our Lord Jesus Christ. As St. John of Kronstadt says, "My task is to join the wild branch to the flourishing Vine," so it is an absurd thing when a priest acts like a policeman: "No entry!! Prohibited! No trespassing! Private Property! Go Away!" (*Laughter*). Or as if he is a security officer in the airport. "No! Your visa is wrong! No, no, you are to be deported! It is a law. His Majesty's law! No exceptions, ever!"

RTE: Now we have a note from a young priest who will soon begin hearing confessions. He asks your advice on how to be a good confessor.

FR. ARTEMY: Oh, it's so simple and difficult at the same time. You are not to become impatient, you are not to be like a person sitting on an electric chair. But this can be difficult: "Batiushka, I have three urgent points." "Yes, please." "The first one is the most important, but I can't begin to express it. I don't even know where to start." This is just a torment, especially if this person cannot give you any hints. (*Laughter*). Although if he is a millionaire, it won't be difficult at all to become just one big ear: "Just try to express your thoughts in a little more detail..." "Let us pray, let us go on please...." "No, no you aren't bothering me at all." (*More laughter*).

But if it is just an old granny with her cane and her glasses, like the grandmother of Tom Sawyer: "Just imagine, holy father, I entered his room and cried, "Tom, where are you?" No answer. I repeated, "Tom, where are you?" No answer. I even bent over to look under the bed, but he wasn't there at all. Can you imagine?!" So, it is difficult to find pleasure in such associations, to feel that the image of God is hidden there, to proceed as if they were a precious pearl, and to interact with hospitality, interest, and attention.

I think that perhaps thirty years after your first confession, if you have tried to be attentive and to give a particle of your heart to each person, you will begin to find that every confession will give *you* grace. All of your efforts to help a person will be rewarded immediately, because it is Christ who is present and it is He, not you, who forgives sins. You are the witness of this miraculous revival of an immortal soul, its liberation from demonic energies, and you will feel the impact of this miracle. You will no longer feel exhausted by these confessions but will find unexpected solace.

When I was a young priest at our Church of All Saints at Krasnoselskaya, on the eve of Sundays and feast days I often confessed people from late afternoon until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. At the end, there were just five or six parishioners left, mostly students, and when they finally approach for confession, your head is swollen like a balloon and you wonder: “What is he talking about? Just *what* is he talking about?”

Or this might be a pious woman parishioner who is very accustomed to confession, but perhaps today there are high emotions involved or a strange perception of things. She is sober, she is not drunk, she speaks fluent Russian, you are awake and aware like a good soldier, but you cannot understand what she is saying! Her way of perceiving things – causes and consequences, observations about this or that fact – you simply don’t understand anything. Separately, all of the sentences are clear, but there is no sense in it. When I was a young priest, I would listen to this kind of thing for about a minute and then take my *epitrachelion* and throw it over her head. She would protest, “No, that wasn’t everything that I need to speak to you about. Just listen, I haven’t managed to say the most important things!” “I understand everything.” “No! No!”

Or even worse, when you actually show your irritation: “Shut your mouth! I have no time! Not another word!” (*Laughter*) A good priest does not do this. So, it’s a real exploit to find ways of dealing with people. I think that the final rung in the ladder of a priest’s experience is to be able to feel the various aspects of a human soul and to accommodate yourself to them. Not to give into strange ways of interacting, but to direct the process. In one provincial hotel, I saw a notice posted over the reception desk: “A guest may not be right, but he is to be pleased.” So, it is very important that a person feels satisfied, that his heart is lightened, peaceful, reconciled. You are to help him find ways to bring forth his confession, and to put an end to it.





Preparation for Holy Communion

RTE: This is a question that you began to touch on a few moments ago: “How do you suggest that people prepare for Holy Communion?”

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, Russian people are usually very scrupulous and pious, and some of them are convinced that they need to fast strictly for three days before receiving Holy Communion, but nowadays we have guidelines from the Synod that there is no necessity for a three-day fast – it is enough to have the Eucharistic fast. That is, if you want to have Holy Communion on Wednesday, on Tuesday you are to abstain from meat, and perhaps dairy, beginning from 6:00 PM. In Russia, pious people try to have Holy Communion often, and are not expected to fast the whole previous day. To be honest, even this is not an absolute requirement, because many priests only have time for supper after vigil, and they know that midnight is the absolute deadline. You are not to eat during the night, certainly.

I would say that a priest who confesses people is to give his attention to another aspect of preparation: we are to be very strict in requiring people to be at peace with their relatives and neighbors. Not to be indignant, irritated, cold; they should be mild, and be peacemakers. If a person has such a heart and is not quick to judge, then this is enough. Of course, they are also to know the church discipline for preparation, but for me the most important thing is the state of their heart.

Certainly, to try to keep your heart pure, to oppose the invasion of unclean thoughts, to be in a state of prayer and oppose all the burning arrows of demons, means that you are to walk in the presence of your Heavenly Father and to have some kind of prayer. My motto is very short: “How are we to live so as to have Holy Communion? We are to live with a prayer addressed to God and with love towards people.” Pray to our Father in your mind, in your words, and in your heart, and have sincere mercy on your neighbors.

RTE: It is quite common to see parishioners hurrying to finish their three canons and the pre-Communion prayers before they get into the Communion line.

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, the accomplishment of canons and prayers is a good thing, but it is not an aim in itself. It is not an electronic pass affixed to your car that automatically opens the tollgate. It is naïve to have the idea, “Oh, I

have accomplished all my prayers. I am worthy of citizenship in the heavenly Jerusalem.”

What are these prayers? They are kindling for the fire of your prayer and we are to fill this fireplace with branches so that it will blaze into a warm flame. This doesn't mean that having fulfilled your prayer rope and finished the canons, everything is alright. It means nothing if you read your canons mechanically, while your mind and heart experience nothing.

I remember a very good priest, who, when he came to serve in the evening, prayed these canons and prayers by heart. But the manner of his praying was astonishing.... Rapid fire, like a Kalashnikov. (*Laughter*) We shouldn't forget that our prayer is a plea to our Father, and the canons help us to warm our hearts and inspire us to go on praying. It is interesting that in the priest's service book we have a short 19th-century notation about preparing to receive the Holy Mysteries, where we learn that our ancestors were encouraged to listen to the First, Third, Sixth and Ninth Hours. They were to think about our Lord Jesus Christ, His passion and crucifixion, and to ponder on this theme. They were not to do these things in a mechanical way, and if they could not read, they were to use the Jesus Prayer.

This only means that the preparation for Holy Communion is not automatic, it is not a series of instructions: “Do this, this, and this,” like our car's electronic navigator tells us. (Neither a man's voice nor a woman's, but some minority....) “Your route is ready. Stay to the right side... in three meters turn to the left.” (*Laughter*) So, preparing for these Heavenly Gifts is not a mechanical thing, it is creative. You are to prepare your heart and not be a wooden soldier.

RTE: How often do you recommend that people go to Holy Communion?

FR. ARTEMY: It depends. A single lady, or a student whose life is not filled with family obligations, are like young birches in the spring. They can attend church and, for them, the Holy Liturgy is their life. If they are calm, not egotistical, irritable or excited, if they are grateful and mild and the church has become a real home, let them have Holy Communion if they yearn for it. I don't feel any urge to limit them to certain lengths of time. On the other hand, there could be some restrictions for married people because they have their matrimonial life, and it is not an easy thing for them to attend church during the week. Certainly, those with families try to be there on Sunday and on great feasts.

Confessions Involving Carnal Falls

RTE: This pastor asks, “When do you ask people to confess their sins in detail, and when is a simple indication of the sin enough?”

FR. ARTEMY: A priest shouldn’t be too meticulous, especially when a person confesses for the first time and our confessional conversation concerns sins of the flesh. The most important thing, especially with a newly-converted soul, is to help this person discern between sin and virtue, light and darkness, good and evil; to help them reject past defilement and incline their heart to Christian virtue. In Russia, a priest often finds himself speaking with zealous souls who are not satisfied with a simple confession: “Father, help me please, I am so ashamed of some carnal sins that I can’t say them aloud.” If a priest sees that this person is eager to purify his heart, he is to help enumerate these transgressions in a gentle manner, and to be satisfied with a nod of the penitent’s head, or a blink of their eyelid in assent. Many people also write out confessions that they find difficult to say aloud.

Certainly, we are to be very delicate, especially if this is a lady, and not show a hint of surprise, horror, disgust, or anything else. We are to be like physicians who are accustomed to everything. It is the result that is important, the remission of sins and estrangement from the exploits of one’s previous life, and a skillful and zealous priest can help you to go deeper – to enumerate sins of the tongue, then sins connected with pride, and then other things. It is quite natural for a person to be embarrassed or anxious, and often they don’t feel comfortable if other people are also awaiting their turn. Therefore, a priest is to be very understanding, quick to hear, and quick to help. It is especially important to do this in a light manner, not as if we are an elephant stampeding the heart of the poor penitent or a bull in the china shop of his soul.

RTE: This is a question from a young priest: What do you do about couples who already live together but now want to be married in the Church? Must they abstain from relations until the wedding?

FR. ARTEMY: If they both understand the need to sanctify their love, so to speak, if they realize that their relations are not without sin because they have avoided God’s blessing, if they feel that not everything is clean or whole in their union, they will come to confession and express their willingness to have the marriage sanctified.

For example, yesterday during the vigil for the Annunciation, I had three couples, one after another, come to confession with the intent to have a church marriage. I confessed them and certainly recommended that they prepare for this great event. If I feel that this is a mutual intention and not only that of the pious wife, certainly I recommend that they treat each other as brother and sister until the marriage, but I do not force them: “This is my word! Don’t you dare lay a finger on each other! Don’t touch your neighbor, even with a fingertip! The moment you kiss your groom on the shoulder you will be struck by divine lightning!” This kind of force is always strange.

As the wise saying goes, “You are to give unpleasant information in a pleasant manner, with a smile.” Everything depends on your intonation and your manner of speaking. If circumstances make the prospect of church marriage six months or a year away, and the couple are not as decisive as they could be in this situation, I might say, “You see, if you would like everything to be as it was in the 19th century between Natalia Rostova and Pierre Bezukhov or Masha Mironova and Pyotr Grinyov,¹ if you would like everything to be like a fairy-tale, certainly you should abstain, but you also must send loving text messages, and certainly you should feed and nourish him and brush the lint off of his suit. The more continent you are, the more happiness you will feel and the more God’s grace will visit you.”

But as a priest you shouldn’t press this upon them, especially if the initiative belongs mostly to one of the couple, and the other just follows along. For example, the husband may not be eager, but he is also not a donkey who digs in his hooves to prevent this event. Perhaps he is not so religious, but if he doesn’t reject a church marriage, this is already an achievement.

So, don’t be too intrusive. Just make the point clear, but let them decide what measure this *podvig* will take. We are more interested in the result. Certainly, it is better for them to be “Pioneers,” an image of good children in the Soviet times, but if I give the necessary information and they smile sympathetically, this is enough. As a priest, don’t be stupid like a mule and try to force the answer as if you are a torturer. If you do, you will cause a crisis between them. It will be your fault if you have insisted and he, for example, is not ready to be completely pure. It is also important for her not to force him to leave and find a surrogate. This subject is like very fine tissue, and we are not to tear it. We are to be delicate. Sometimes it is enough to make a hint,

¹ Natalia Rostova and Pierre Bezukhov are an engaged couple in Lev Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. Masha Mironova and Pyotr Grinyov are from *The Captain’s Daughter* by Alexander Pushkin.

to talk about a serious thing with a bit of humor, so that it won't be too hard for them to hear.

RTE: How do you assist women who have had abortions?

FR. ARTEMY: Many women who confess abortions are confessing for the first time, and certainly they deeply repent of their abortions, which usually took place years ago. I suggest that they make three, four, five prostrations, depending on the number of abortions, for forty days along with a prayer, "Oh God, have mercy on me a sinner and let your holy will be with these children." In most cases, these women remember these deeds quite acutely; they have a tormented conscience and already carry an inner penance in their hearts. I don't find it sensible to forbid them to approach the Holy Chalice, because often they've had no experience of the Eucharist. Quite the opposite! Let them have Holy Communion, and let God Almighty enlighten their hearts with the feeling of His charity. As God's grace approaches, they will change their outlook, their behavior, and will repent their whole life long.

On the other hand, if a woman who is a regular parishioner tells you that she has had an abortion, this is quite another case. It is not an everyday sin, and certainly it is a catastrophe, a great fall. It is a betrayal of God's love and his bounty. In this case, certainly we are to be stern, and we are not to be in too much of a hurry to absolve or commune this person.

RTE: Another priest asks, "Pornography is a destructive wave breaking over our society, especially on the internet. How do you help someone who is caught up in pornography?"

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, we are to remind our parishioners that our Orthodox Church is not indifferent to the consumers of pornography or to the people who produce it. I had a student from one of our Orthodox universities, a very intelligent boy from the provinces, and for me it was unexpected to hear that he was so deeply involved in this virtual mud. Certainly, as a priest, when you listen to these revelations, you feel how awful it is. The moment a person begins his dubious travel through the "windows" of the internet, gazing at forbidden images, all of nature trembles at his absurd behavior. The moment you are invaded by these foul images, demons jump to make you do things that are just unheard of – self-abuse in every variant – and if you try to fight them, they retaliate, urging you on to get their revenge. They insult our Lord by harming you, the image of God.

It is very unpleasant for a priest to listen to or read these revelations, so to speak, but you are a witness before God and you are to help a parishioner free himself. You are to instantly forgive him, because to pronounce such things is very hard to do, and as a sinner yourself you understand that this person has had to transgress the limits of natural shame to tell you. It is a great effort for a soul to utter such words, and if this confession is sincere, if he does not make things white when they are black but just cuts the snake off at its head, finishing with the words, “O God, forgive me, please,” as a priest you are to absolve him immediately because he has just estranged himself from the sin.

Certainly, you are to encourage the person: “Be aware, don’t forget that you are a son or daughter of the Saviour. Don’t forget that the Lord and the Holy Virgin are watching over you at every moment, day and night. Try to direct your thoughts and feelings to Our Lord, invoking his name. Don’t let the demons darken your mind or distract your attention from your heart.”

But the following week he just repeats the same confession: “Don’t despair. You understand that it is a demonic insult that you gave into.” So, we are to be like surgeons who operate, suture the wound, and then use some healing ointment. “We will win! Let us make ten prostrations every day, you and me, for this.”

When I offer this, I mean that I make my own ten prostrations along with my prayers morning and night, and I saturate these prostrations with one hundred such treaties with my parishioners. When I tell my parishioners that I will do this with them, they often say, “Oh, Batiushka, how can I dare to expect that you would make these prostrations with me! You are so old, you will be exhausted, you are too compassionate.” (*Laughter*) “No!” I reply, “I will do it, and know in your heart this very evening that your one-hundred-year-old confessor, just sighing and moaning after the effort of the first prostration, will hardly be able to stand up again. (*Laughter*) But I will prolong that single prostration so that you will know that you are not alone in this cruel world and that I am with you. But don’t let your eye penetrate into the depths of the pornography toilet, don’t sink into this mud, because two more prostrations and you will see me in the hospital.”

So, we are to be tolerant, patient, and we are not to be too surprised at these human faults and shortcomings. Certainly, we cannot be too severe in these cases, and we are not to mechanically apply the prescriptions of Byzantine commentaries that declare that “self-abuse is to be punished by forty

days of fasting on bread, with one hundred prostrations every night.” Let us not apply this prescription like sophisticated rabbis interpreting ancient commentary. Instead, let us witness this soul’s repentance. We are interested in the result.

RTE: This pastor asks, “What advice can you offer us about the growing problem of gender confusion? What do you do if someone comes to you with such a conviction – particularly people who believe that such a choice is a basic human right.”

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, the situation is quite different here in Russia, and therefore our recommendations can’t be absolute for priests in western countries, but as far as I understand, an Orthodox priest is to be very discreet. He is to be aware of all of the subtle motives concerning “tolerance,” and “crimes” against tolerance. He is not to be the easy victim of laws that contradict the Holy Gospel, and he is to be careful to avoid those who consciously attempt to trap a priest, or to persecute him as a church leader. We are to be like Jesus Christ, who was frequently provoked by Pharisees and Sadducees attempting to find contradictions between his word and the law of Moses. It was the divine wisdom of our Lord that made these intrigues powerless, for He did not always answer directly but used parables so as not to provide material for accusation. I believe that a modern Orthodox priest in the West should keep this in mind.

Secondly, we cannot distort the teaching of the Holy Gospel that such things as fornication or sodomy are forbidden by eternal moral law. We cannot call a sin white if it is black or declare that it is sweet when it is bitter. We are to be as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves. Certainly, when such people come to confess, it is because they feel some torment in their hearts, and when they reveal these sins, as a priest you feel their struggle with the darkness that has overtaken them.

Here in Russia, I have many times come across people who try to justify themselves, “I am a representative of another orientation. I was not created as usual human beings are.” Certainly, my intention is not to insult him or to crush his personality but to help clear his mind through questions and our meditation on such points as, “God created human beings as male and female, and our destiny in love is not only to have “sexual satisfaction” but to bring forth fruit from this human love; that is, children. So, how do you understand this if you are having this other sort of “relations”? You cannot

have children, and these unnatural contacts are destructive to your soul and body; they darken your heart and have grievous eternal consequences.”

You are not to be too judgmental, and you are to say these things in a way that this person can hear them, that will enlighten his mind and incline his heart and will to repentance. I remember one young man who confessed that from his childhood he had had many such encounters, first with older boys and then adults, but that he wanted to change his life. Of course, he was not ready yet for real Christian matrimonial life. His first step was simply to try to abstain so that in the future he could sanctify his soul and body with the Holy Gifts. A modern priest is to simultaneously be a real father and mother. We are not to despise this person or feel estranged from him. We are to perceive them as a prodigal son or daughter, as our own child. The only thing that can touch this person is if they feel that I have such parental love.

Prayer Rules, Penances, and Receiving Holy Communion

RTE: This priest remarks, “Many people who confess to me have little or no prayer in their daily life. It is hard to convince them that they need a prayer rule because lay people often think that daily prayers are only for priests and monastics. How do you approach this?”

FR. ARTEMY: If you have a prayer rule, it can be like a bolt of lightning that ignites the process of everlasting ceaseless prayer. This is a question of inner discipline, of understanding that in the beginning of our Christian life we have no inner resources of our own to make the engine of our heart move. So, certainly, you may ignite your heart with this prayer rule, but it is only an additional means to aid your inner life, and a priest is not to be too insistent on this. He is not to be harsh to people who are like children in their naïve state and are not used to this kind of prayer. Often, a prayer rule is not yet for them.

A priest should instead remind his parishioners that the strongest desire of the human spirit, the inner need of our heart, is for contact with the Heavenly Father. If you are not dead in your heart, if you still have life in your soul, you will be inspired by God’s grace to pray from morning to night: O Lord, help me! Lord have mercy on me! Bless me, my Lord! O Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me! Glory to Thee! Glory to Thee!





This constant prayer is the teaching of St. Theophan the Recluse, and therefore keeping a prayer rule is not an end in itself, something that you fulfill and then everything is done. (As the Russians would say, “your duty in a hat.”) A prayer rule is only a reminder for you. The Gospel tells us that Jesus Christ says that we are “always to pray, and not to faint,” that is, not to lose heart. If we pray constantly as we go about our daily lives, this is a spiritual incense that rises as repentance, need, and gratitude from your heart: “O Lord have mercy on me!” “Please help me!” “Glory to Thee, O Lord, glory to Thee!” Your heart is to be like a deacon’s censer spreading this aroma, not an empty hearth filled with cold ashes, spider webs, and mouse droppings.

If you want to succeed in explaining this to parishioners, you are not to reprimand them for not having a set prayer rule. It even becomes dangerous when people begin to believe that reading three canons to our Savior, the Mother of God and the Guardian Angel, and then the prayers before Communion are the most necessary and adequate requirements to approach Holy Communion. They confess, “Oh, Father, I am so sorry, I haven’t read the last two verses of the canon, but I will do my best, and I will try to read these now.” Or, “Oh, I have a debt of one and a half prayers left, but I solemnly promise that after Holy Communion I will fulfill my obligation to finish these prayers.”

A prayer rule is a good thing, perhaps, and these prayers are certainly useful, but I’ve also known people who were very conscientious about following a prayer rule and preparing for Holy Communion, but after nine or ten years of this external scrupulousness they became quenched, so to speak, and were no longer delighted by the prospect of Holy Communion. It was as if they had lost too much blood. This prayer had become completely external to them because they had never filled their heart with childish, spontaneous prayers to God Almighty.

They were satisfied with checking off the boxes and with an inner feeling, “I am ready, today I am ready.” But St. Seraphim of Sarov says, “Even if you prepare for hundreds of years, you will never be ready.” Theophan the Recluse adds, “Confess your sins, and you will immediately realize your unreadiness and your indignity, and thus you will be ready.” In other words, “I am not ready, but make me ready, my God, to touch the hem of your garment.”

RTE: The next questions are from young recently-ordained priests who ask, first, “If I have a thought to suggest a prayer, a spiritual practice, or even an article or book to a person who is confessing, how do I discern if this is a

real inspiration or just an idea from my imagination?” And secondly, “When would you prescribe a penance and how long should it last?”

FR. ARTEMY: I think that an Orthodox priest is to rely upon his own pastoral experience and God’s inspiration, which will help you to suggest some pious deed like reading a book or an article, or even visiting a holy place on pilgrimage.

Giving a penance, or as we say in Russian, an *epitimia*, mostly concerns cases when a person confesses sins of the flesh, including adultery, sexual relations outside of marriage, or some self-perversion. In all of these cases, it is important to hear that the person repents, that he promises to fight against these habits, and if I feel there is a need to help this person get rid of the wicked practice, we together, he and I, make a decision to do these daily prostrations, but not many of them – three or five, but not more than ten. As I said, I am used to making ten prostrations in the morning when I arise, and again in the evening before I go to sleep. Therefore, I don’t multiply these but just include this person in the intention of these ten prostrations. So, I propose these prostrations with a prayer, “O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” You can also add the name of the Most Holy Theotokos and St. Nicholas, or a short phrase that reflects the actual circumstances of the situation. It is very important for a Christian to feel that he or she is not alone, that they have not been abandoned by their confessor. Every time I offer this, I see that people are greatly touched by this proposition because it is a symbol of our fraternal tie and our spiritual kinship.

If this is the first time I have heard this person’s confession, I usually don’t give an *epitimia* because I don’t know this person – I just receive him and his repentance as a prodigal son. I give him a chance to change his life, to cling to Our Lord, and to enter the door of repentance without looking back. If his repentance is sincere and it is our first meeting, I am to be very kind, and in some circumstances I may even feel that it is right to allow him to receive Holy Communion.

We modern priests do not usually feel the necessity to give a penance, but if this person is well known to me, well instructed, and has suddenly had a serious fall such as adultery or fornication, or even worse, abortion, we often advise him or her to abstain from Holy Communion for a time. If, all of a sudden, your long-time parishioner reveals this fresh wound that fell on them like a thunderbolt, this is not a case when, after reading the prayer of absolution, you would invite them to have Holy Communion.

This Christian is to repent of this sin, to explain to me and to himself the reason for the fall, and to try to make some effort at amendment. It is not only important to abstain from future sin but to cleanse one's thoughts and feelings, the inner intentions. So, I usually suggest that this person first cut off the dangerous contact, and then make prostrations with me morning and night. He or she might also choose some canons or prayers and repeat them daily, so as to be strengthened by God's grace and protect themselves from another fall.

And certainly, I recommend that for adultery or some other sexual experience outside of marriage, especially from a known parishioner, that he not approach the Holy Chalice for some weeks after our talk. I also ask this person to visit the church and have another confession with me after this period, so that I can observe his inner state, his desire to repent, his will for improvement, and to understand if he is now eager to have Holy Communion.

We are aware that some of the early canons appoint six, seven, or even ten years of repentance, with a series of steps to fully reunite with the Church. The first step in these canons was not to enter the church during services but to stand outside and endure the rains, wind, and tempests. The next was to step into the doorway of the church, and there to beg everyone coming in and going out to pray for you, publicly revealing your fault. The third was to finally enter the church again but to stand with the catechumens. It is a good thing to inform a person of these strict early-Christian rules, so that they realize the grave consequences of sin, because it is not an easy thing to rid oneself of the evil spirit which torments your heart and influences your thoughts. It is a real labor to become a clean son or daughter of the Heavenly Father.

But certainly, a modern priest is not to practice these things mechanically. As I said, for a serious fall the period of abstention could be a month, throughout Great Lent, or even longer for something very serious like an abortion. But we are also to understand the depth of repentance, because I know that in some cases when a person has had a great fall and been dashed to pieces like Humpty Dumpty, his repentance can be so deep and complete, so to speak, that I understand that this sin is not characteristic of this person, that it is something that God has allowed so that we realize our weakness.

This is especially true if the person is newly baptized or has just begun coming to church, and this is part of a sinful legacy. Having been liberated by God's grace from this slavery after Holy Baptism, the moment this new mem-

ber of the Church imagines that he is now out of danger, he can be entangled again. If he immediately understands how terrible it is to be recaptured, like the prodigal son he can turn quickly towards the heavenly kingdom.

Or if this is a person who has come to me for the first time (and perhaps he especially came to me to confess this fresh wound), if I feel that this person is serious, that his intentions are strong, and if I am confident that with our mutual *podvig* of prayer to Our Lord we will succeed, as a humble confessor I may feel the urge to declare the richness of God's charity and allow him to receive, so that he won't look back, and that he will justify this charity by never repeating such things. It will be like Pascha for him, entering the doors of heaven.

RTE: This priest asks, "Many people in the West have a strong sense of entitlement and preparing for Holy Communion is not something that American converts adjust to easily. How do we condescend to weakness without giving in to sloth?"

FR. ARTEMY: This depends on the style of your priesthood and your pedagogical approach as a priest. It depends on the relations between you and your rational sheep. Certainly, if it is someone who comes to me regularly for confession, who is very attentive to my recommendations, and I see that she is in an unusual state (perhaps she is angry with her abbess or not reconciled with her husband, and is filled with righteous indignation), I might say: "If I were you, I wouldn't approach the chalice just at this moment. I would go out of church into the fresh air and look at the flowers in the garden. I am waiting for you to return in five minutes and tell me how you feel."

If this person is unknown to me, and if, for example, they are living with a boyfriend or girlfriend with no hint of marriage, certainly I would say, "It's a good thing that you have revealed and opened your heart. Through God's grace you will now feel lighter and you will be rid of some of your burden, but in my opinion it is still too early for you to approach the Holy Chalice. Do you remember what our Lord said to the Samaritan woman, 'You told me truly, you've had five husbands, and this one is not a husband at all.' Just let yours come to see me."

So, in some cases, I have to be rather definite. "Oh, it is not yet time for you to commune." In others where there are some moral perplexities but no real obstacles to having Holy Communion, I will try to soften their heart.

For example, “I have a grudge, I was offended and I can’t forgive my husband... my mother... my abbess... my chief.” In this case, I use some special approaches.

For example, an older lady tells me that she cannot forgive her late mother, and that she is tortured by this: “I understand everything, but my heart won’t allow me to forgive.” As a priest, sometimes I need to use, not verbal help but action, so to speak. For example, I might say, “Oh, I can help you. Will you allow me to operate right now without any anesthetic or narcotics?” “Do as you will,” she will say, a little curious. “Then just watch me. (I pretend to open her chest and put my hand “in” and pull something invisible out.) Now, take a deep breath. Here, I’ve got it. Here is this grudge. Now I just need to sew you up and give you some ointment.” “Oh, thank you so much.” Or, I might say, “You have forgiven everything, your heart is as light as a flower. You may have Holy Communion; your mother is smiling from heaven.” “Thank you so much!” So, it is a skill, so to speak, to make a person agree with your strange and slightly humorous ideas, but spiritually this person has undergone rather effective “surgery”.

RTE: Although this sounds light-hearted, your parishioners have told me that such things are very effective, especially when done in the context of confession. I also remember that once when a young woman came to you to confess her deep involvement with the occult, you read prayers against demonic activity over her. When you came to the part where she was to symbolically spit on the devil, she said that she could not because she was afraid of demonic retribution, so you asked her if she would let you do it for her. She said yes, and after you did she was at peace. That was a remarkable solution.

FR. ARTEMY: Yes, when a person’s will is paralyzed we should find a way to help them express their decision through our own inner conviction. We do not overwhelm them or violate their personality, but we fill their heart with courage to assert their own will.

In regards to receiving Holy Communion, I was once told about some advice given to a young pastor by Fr. Vsevolod Shpiller, a famous priest in the 1950s who was noted for his sermons and for his talks to Russian intelligentsia: “Be afraid of not permitting someone to partake of Holy Communion!” I do not think this means that Fr. Vsevolod was too liberal and didn’t attend properly to his parishioners, but frequently young and not-so-young priests feel quite the opposite – like the archangel with a burning sword guarding

the entrance to paradise. If one of the descendants of Adam and Eve even dares to approach, he immediately raises his sword to annihilate them.

Or I sometimes see a young priest standing near the cross and gospel like a guard dog: “Who dares to have Holy Communion? Who? Just tell me your sins: Never!” (*Laughter*) So, for him the one aim is not to permit, as if he were a judge in a Dickens novel, or a KGB officer: “If we have called you to come, it means that we know everything, and even if you think you are innocent, don’t be so sure! We shall find some pretext on which to arrest you!” Very often priests behave like this, and in his righteous indignation he believes that he has done his work in the very best manner: thirty people confessed, and only three received.

A more welcoming inclination is: “Here, let me try to find a reason to justify you. Perhaps you had a sip of water, perhaps you didn’t come in time? Ah, that’s so? Well, theoretically, would you like to have Holy Communion?” “You would? Oh, that is a good thing. Well, as you haven’t read anything yet, just read three prayers, and after receiving Communion you will read an akathist to the Theotokos. As John Chrysostom said, ‘Rejoice today, both you who have fasted and you who have disregarded the fast. The table is full-laden, let no one go away hungry. No one is to weep over his sins, for hell has been despoiled. Enjoy ye all the feast of faith... for Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen! O Death, where is thy sting? O Hell, where is thy victory?’”

Confession and Confidentiality

RTE: Here is a priest who is concerned about the secrecy of confession: “In the past few years, both Australia and the state of Louisiana have tried to pass measures to force priests to reveal confessions, especially those involving child abuse. The Roman Catholic Church is much stricter about this than the Orthodox are, and a Catholic priest who reveals a confession is not only immediately defrocked but excommunicated. To his credit, the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne has said he would go to prison before violating the seal of confession. The Orthodox canons are not as strict but are quite clear as well.”

FR. ARTEMY: We have two sources of our faith – scripture and tradition. It goes without saying that a priest is to keep silent and to protect the mystery of Confession. In the city of Prague, there is the famous bridge of King

Charles IV, a ruler of the Middle Ages. In the center of the bridge you can see a statue of a priest of the Catholic tradition, St. John of Nepomuk, who was the confessor of King Charles' daughter-in-law. Her husband, the king's son, demanded that the priest reveal his wife's confession, and when he refused, the prince had him thrown off the bridge. This is one of the favorite saints of Catholic Europe.

But if there is a secular law like this, why would a person who has committed such crimes as child abuse even confess if he is not sure that his confession will be preserved? We know of something like this from the history of Russia, when Peter the Great enacted a law by which priests were to disclose confessions involving plots against the government to the state authorities. Certainly, this law had nothing in common with the church canons.

In Russia, there is now a federal law that a priest has the right *not* to witness in court if he has information *from a confession*, and I have used this law to refuse to testify several times. Once, it was the very notorious trial of a modern young woman who had taken her husband, a famous surgeon from South America, to court. He had become Orthodox in Russia and confessed to me after the trial began. His confession was deeply sincere, and when court officials visited me, I told them that I would not say anything for or against the accusation. This was respected.

RTE: Some clergy seem to agree that this law is needed to protect children.

FR. ARTEMY: If it is a serious case, I think that a priest is to somehow inform the parents. I remember such a moment when a teenage girl confessed that she had used drugs. This was in the 1990s when drug use was rare and I was able to persuade her not to do this again. She promised that she wouldn't, but after about a year her mother came to me, asking how I had dared not tell her. I felt that she was right, and I think that a priest is somehow to hint to the parents of the child, not indicating anything specific but urging them to be aware of their child's dangerous contacts.

RTE: A young pastor writes: "I have a priest friend who told me that he unthinkingly used something in a sermon that had been told to him confidentially, without mentioning names or places. Is it alright to do this if you change the details?"

FR. ARTEMY: It is alright, because the contents of our sermons are certainly made up of earthly facts and stories, but we are to be extremely careful not to give a hint of the person or of the location.

I also must note that almost all Orthodox people have one common psychological feature. The moment they read something concerning sin or repentance, or they listen to a sermon in which the priest tries to inspire his parishioners to contrition, they immediately apply the material to themselves and imagine that it is they who are being spoken of. This is almost universal, and therefore a good sermon may be followed by surprised approval: “Dear Batiushka, how can you know so much about me? You’ve answered a pressing question that I haven’t had time to ask.” Or, another variant: “How have you dared reveal the circumstances of my life! You have betrayed your pastoral conscience. This is an outrage! I shall write a letter to Metropolitan Hilarion and to the synod in New York. You have crushed my personality and transgressed the sovereignty of my personhood. If you weren’t a priest, I would challenge you to a duel!”

Then I answer, “I am so sorry, I beg your pardon. To be honest, I was speaking of myself. These were my own examples, the material of my rotten heart.” But they respond, “I don’t need your explanation. Like Lermontov, I refuse to acknowledge this ‘sorrowful murmuring of self-justification.’”
(Laughter)

I must confess that any priest can make an involuntary mistake, but let us also keep in mind that there are parishioners, especially ladies with complex souls, who are suspicious of your every word and who will evaluate you based on their own inner state. When such a situation occurs, we are to use mild humor to avoid these sharp angles and soften the situation.

Saint Theophan the Recluse says to priests, “When you associate with your parishioners, lay a mental sword at your feet.” This sword is the obligation of the secrecy of confession. From time to time you are to look at this sword, understanding that if you carelessly reveal anything, the sword will rise up and cut off your head.





Church Logistics: Attendance and Timing

RTE: “Many priests I know are discouraged at the lack of attendance on church holy days. Some parishes even have to transfer holy days to the nearest Sunday because they don’t have a choir, readers or servers.”

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, modern American Orthodox priests are to remember that they are the spiritual sons of St. Anthony the Great, St. Paul of Thebes, and St. Pachomios, who prayed in total isolation for thirty or forty years until the Holy Spirit gathered hundreds of disciples in the pitiless desert where there was no shade, grass, or water but only a realm of burning sand, sun, and vultures. (*Smiling*)

I would also like to remind you of a situation in Moscow not long before the Revolution when every avenue and lane had dozens of churches, all left open to passersby as if they were on an island in Greece, but the churches were mostly empty. One of these churches in the center of Moscow, St. Nicholas on Maroseika Street, had a young married priest, Fr. Alexis Menchev, who had very few people coming there.

After the death of his wife Anna, Fr. Alexis visited St. John of Kronstadt. Laying his hand on the young priest’s shoulder, St. John said, “Fr. Alexis, don’t be depressed. Now it is better to help other people bear their burdens and sorrows. You have no time to be immersed in your private grief.” Inspired by St. John’s manner of serving liturgy, Fr. Alexis also began to serve every day, usually with no parishioners at all, just a single reader. There was no heat in the church, and in the middle of the Moscow winter his fingers froze to the chalice during the Great Entrance. The wine in the chalice had frozen as well. For six years he served the holy liturgy, praying and partaking of Holy Communion.

Many of his colleagues thought he was foolish for serving every day in the middle of winter. No one required this service, and he could have fulfilled his duties with a single liturgy on Sundays and feast days. But here we have one of the laws of dialectical philosophy: “In physics ... every change is a passing of quantity into quality.” That is, when you multiply quantity, it evolves into quality, as for example, an increasing number of prayers results in increased quality.

So, this went on until just before the Revolution, and eventually Fr. Alexis’ church was as full of people as if each day was the *prestolny prasdnyk*, the

church's feast day. Certainly, his service was the gift of his heart. He had warmth of soul and such compassion that he sometimes cried together with his parishioners while hearing their confessions.

At this time, Nicholas Berdyaev, one of Russia's most well-known progressive religious philosophers, had in his genius head an eclectic mixture of ideas. He was known to speak against "the cadaverous aroma of patristics," meaning that he had no use for the Holy Fathers, but Fr. Alexis happened to be that one confessor who was able to bring about a change in Berdyaev and, just before the philosopher was banished to Europe, he brought his confession to Fr. Alexis and gave it on his knees. Later in Paris, Berdyaev became a parishioner of the little Church of the Three Holy Hierarchs, and he always said that it was the impulse he had received from Fr. Alexis that made him a son of the Russian Orthodox Church.

So, Fr. Alexis' life is proof that a priest will never be forgotten by the living God. If he celebrates the Holy Liturgy together with his matushka and two or three parishioners, he will be accompanied by a host of angels. Heaven will open and beams of grace will pour down to enlighten the church.

Holy Father John of Kronstadt said, "The holy liturgy is the main event in the historical process of the world. It is the means by which our Lord rules all of the nations of the earth, and the instrument of God Almighty to direct the historical process to its end." We are to be aware of the significance of serving Holy Liturgy, to believe that heaven and earth are united and that our little parish is the first step to paradise. When you partake of Holy Communion, you as a priest become one of the many-eyed cherubim and six-winged seraphim praising God. You become a lamp shining and warming the darkness of the world, so that even the wild beasts and birds, trees, mountains, and oceans tremble with awe when you pronounce the words, "Holy things are for the holy." You are to believe that at this moment your little church has become the absolute center of the universe – not only of the earth but of innumerable galaxies above you, and that the Milky Way rejoices when you take the Holy Gifts in your hands. This is one of the main reasons why our Lord postpones his Second Coming. He visits this land in His sacraments.

Once you feel the significance of God's presence in your church, you will be rid of these sorrowful ideas that you are a failure as a priest, that no one is interested or needs you, that you are like a bastard abandoned by his friends, his family, and his bishop. (*Laughter*) Instead, you will become like the wise virgin invited to enter the Bridegroom's palace, another Simeon the New

Theologian speaking with your Lord. You will converse with the Holy Trinity, and in the realm of your heart, all of the mysteries of this and the future life will be opened to you.

RTE: I hope that your words will console many sincere priests. Here is another dilemma, “The secularization of society is creeping into some of our most pious families, and many parishioners are not going to church as often. Those attending less are usually not hostile to faith, just indifferent.”

FR. ARTEMY: I think that it is not enough to only have a few minutes during a confession to influence your parishioners. It is important to help them penetrate into the realm of spiritual life, not just in services but also in your church’s public gatherings. Father Seraphim Rose used to gather pilgrims together in the summer at his monastery to explain the elements of spiritual life and to acquaint them with patristic works.

In our church, we also have public gatherings every week, where after a class on Holy Scripture, the second part of the evening is devoted to questions about church life, or about the Christian life in general. These questions are submitted in writing by those who are present, so that even timid parishioners can ask anything they like on any subject. I then organize and answer the questions, most of which are of benefit and interest to everyone.

The most important thing is to explain to your parishioners, especially newcomers, that church services will teach you to walk in the presence of God. If you leave the church and have no memory of God, if you turn your face away and the only part of you that the Lord sees is your backside, wouldn’t it be better for you to root for acorns at the base of an oak tree? (*Laughter*) If you don’t feel an inner need to associate with God, if your heart is devoid of prayer, this means that you have only a semblance of life and, in fact, are darkened by this world. It’s an abnormal thing. Your heart has become a trash bin filled with fast food, detective novels, and a remote control. You are not a human being but a robot.

Therefore, your main task, my dear priest, is encourage this constant appeal to the heavenly Father – to confess to him, to praise him, to rejoice, to be grateful, to beg for his help. You will say to these Christians, “This is your homework, and next week I will be waiting for your short report. Did you remember God when you walked in the park, or when you were fishing or sleeping? Did you pronounce his name?” This is the beginning of spiritual life for people unaccustomed to it, and certainly we can also give them books

like *The Way of a Pilgrim* or other writings so that people can grasp the idea of what spiritual life is.

RTE: Most of your confessions are done in the context of church services, especially if you have another priest serving. Is this because confessing in church provides an extra measure of grace and perhaps helps the penitent to focus?

FR. ARTEMY: There is a Russian proverb: “Walls help.” The church is the gracious realm of God’s presence and in church a person is like a flower that turns its face to the sun. But certainly, our life has many sides and it is not a bad thing to have a pastoral talk on a bench in the park or in my office.

RTE: This pastor asks, “Because I am the only priest in my church, I have to prepare *proskomedia* and then also take time for parishioners who come right before liturgy hoping to confess. How can I deal with this pressure to make confession a legitimate meeting with God for every person, while remembering that when they are still confessing at twenty minutes past the hour, a church full of people are being tempted to apostasy or murder?” Of course, this is more of a problem for priests of the Slavic tradition, where confession is required before receiving Holy Communion.

FR. ARTEMY: We do know that this problem exists, and *batiushka* is to start *proskomedia* a little earlier so that when parishioners appear, he will be ready with his confessional skills near the analogion. He is to meet parishioners like our holy forefather Abraham under the Oak of Mamre, “Oh, my little chickens, approach me!” He is to smile like the loving father who ran forth to embrace the prodigal son, whose remorseful words just caused his father to hold him closer and have the best clothes brought out: “Take your ring of sonship; the lamb is prepared.” Your hospitality is to be evident, and you are to be glad that they have come.

Certainly, they were not present the night before during vespers, and they haven’t come to church an hour before liturgy. Even so, your face is not to be set in the grim expression of a transformer robot, or a Tarzan of the Jungle, but you are to be permeated with inner spiritual joy. As St. John Chrysostom says in his famous sermon on Pascha night: “You who have just appeared at the eleventh hour, welcome! Take part in the supper of faith... No one is to weep over his sins! Hell is empty! Demons have fled! Christ is Risen!”

They will see that here is a grace-filled spring with living water streaming from its depths, and they will respond to their priest in a different way. Also, if you know this person rather well, one or two minutes is sufficient to touch on the deepest points, to detect some hidden sins. For instance, as he approaches and you catch the scent of tobacco, you might say, "What about our main battle? Have you been successful in extinguishing the roots of that passion? How are things with your smoking?" "Oh, my father, how did you know?" "It's my profession." (*Laughter*)

When I serve alone on a weekday, I often have fifty or seventy-five people waiting for confession before and during the liturgy. My advice to regular parishioners is to note their daily faults, and at the end of the week to make a list. Many of them just hand me their lists as they wait in the crowd for confession, and others send it into the altar with the *altarnik*. For me this is just the best way to look through all of these hearts. My parishioners are accustomed to this, and after thirty years, I know the handwriting of every person in my church, even if they have not signed it. I just read it quickly, like an x-ray technician. I scan them in an instant, and can absolve them with some quick advice: "Mmm, just pay attention to this item... Yes, this is good." If they aren't regular parishioners or need a longer talk, I take them to the analogion, and if their situation requires more time than is possible now, I speak to them after liturgy and commune them then.

Certainly, this practice is not mechanical. These parishioners are to watch their heart during the week and write down their sins. Some may have a list of sins and two or three questions; others might be asking for a blessing for travel or to start a new endeavor. For me, it is very easy to take care of this regular parish crowd surrounding the analogion in a half hour by just going from person to person, reading their lists, and absolving them.

Even at the early liturgy on Sunday or a feast day, when one of our other priests serves the first liturgy, I have more than a hundred parishioners waiting for me for confession, and latecomers keep coming. Caring for these people is not a miracle, it is just experience and the piety of those parishioners who try to explore their hearts. If you suspect this is an innovation, some kind of previously unknown practice, look through *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by St. John Climacus. In the middle of the book he describes a very ascetic monastery where all of the brothers had small notebooks on their belts and wrote down their troublesome thoughts. So, this is an ascetic practice of almost 2000 years.

RTE: Even so, when you hear as many as 250 confessions on weekends alone, you obviously can only spend a few moments with those who don't have serious problems. What about people who require more time?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, it depends on a person's inner state. If this person really needs more than a short talk, I am to set aside a time after liturgy or in the evening when we are not so pressed. In some cases, it is evident that a person simply needs to pour out his thoughts and pain, and it is the priest that he has sought out for this. This is because the priesthood provides the possibility to stand in the presence of Christ himself, Who is not far off in the heavens, in the desert, or in some clandestine palace, but here, in this very life. Our personality as a priest is connected with Our Lord Jesus Christ and therefore, we are to make this small sacrifice. We have only one aim: to help this person stand as a child before his Heavenly Father.

Spiritual Health of the Confessor

RTE: Another Orthodox pastor asks, "What can you say about the spiritual health of the priest who hears confessions?"

FR. ARTEMY: Once Saint Silouan was in a church where a hieromonk was confessing people, and all of a sudden, the elder saw God's grace shining above the monk like the sun. He was frightened and understood that everything that is done during confession is perfected by God's grace, not through human effort. It is a real mystery. It is God Himself Who is present and who forgives sins, heals hearts and reconciles sinners. Nevertheless, there is also a human side to the mystery: my psychology as a human being, my perception of the human heart, my outlook, my habits, my method of confessing people.

So, in speaking about the spiritual health of the confessor, I am to be very attentive, so as not to be hurt or damaged by someone's confession – for example, when sexual sins are retold and I have to understand the details of what has happened, I am to constantly pray and invoke the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ to be protected from these passion-filled images. It is just a state of military readiness that is required, and I am to oppose any demonic arrow or passion that tries to influence my heart when people reveal such things. This is the first point.

The second is that I am never to be arrogant, judgmental, or superior. I am never to contemplate a person as a sinner but to perceive him as if I were a physician curing a patient. It is a very important thing not to separate yourself from the person who repents but rather to join with him as if these are my faults and my shortcomings. It is not correct to address a sinner with the question, “What are your sins?! Tell me everything about your sins!” No, if you are a good confessor, you are to be like a father and a mother in one person: “What about our sins?”

This is because I am to take the part of the sinner. I am not a judge, I am not a celestial court, but as a priest I am to repent and pray with this person, and this psychological position is very important. This is why our parishioners feel estranged from us – they don’t sense some inner warmth from our priestly heart. If they are not inclined to discuss things with you, it may be because you are alien to them, you are like a Pharisee whose superiority separates you from mortal human beings. So, compassion is not a notion but the state of your heart. You are to work hard to understand and practice this virtue, to be a real neighbor to the person who wants to repent. It is not so often that a priest has the ability to feel your heart, but when he does, human souls immediately sense this aroma of humility and brotherhood and open their petals like a flower in the sun.

Another thing, when you try to help the person confessing to touch the sinful strings of his heart, you are to be very delicate. Your questions are not to be formal, or just an enumeration of sins, as if you are a surgeon and your patient is lying unconscious on the operating table with his chest cut open. One careless moment with your scalpel and the consequences will be dreadful, even fatal. It is a very easy thing to do harm – one ironic smile, a hint of superiority, a word of judgmental commentary, one, “Hmm, awful....” No, you are to warm and console their hearts. You are to be like Christ Himself, Who doesn’t break the bruised reed or quench the burning flax.

RTE: Next we have a series of questions from two young priests. The first is: “If we are called to mourn with those who mourn, how do you avoid being crushed by the sorrows that people bring to you in confession?”

FR. ARTEMY: We are not only to mourn with our neighbor but to rejoice: to be everything to everyone, and as our Russian philosopher-poet Fyodor Tutchew said so brilliantly, “We are endowed with compassion as we are presented with grace.” Compassion is a gift of God Almighty, and priests are

to develop this capacity so that their hearts are warm with understanding. When we mourn with people who are upset or in grief, we don't feel ourselves exhausted. Not at all. Startetz Paisios of Mount Athos says that love for your neighbor makes your heart ache, but that this is a sweet suffering. As our exploit of pastoral love is dedicated to Christ Himself, He immediately rewards your compassionate soul, and fulfills his promise to send the Comforter. Certainly, this activity of the priesthood is something supernatural, because it is not by my own desires and forces that I absolve sin, give blessings, or intercede for a person before God, but it is God's intent and energy, the grace of the Holy Spirit that secretly acts in our heart.

I very much agree with the holy Optina elder who said, "While confessing people, I try not to be indifferent to their revelations. I both laugh and cry with them, but after a few hours I feel the effect on my own heart, and my head bends lower and lower as if I am being crushed by this burden of human sin. But the moment I remember that I am not the one who forgives sins, that I am only a channel for this, then suddenly God's heavenly grace descends and the unbearable burden vanishes like a heap of faded autumn leaves. I feel refreshed and joyful, as if I have wings, and I am ready to go on confessing our peasants, the simple parishioners and villagers of Optina Pustyn, all through the night." As priests we don't take these sins upon ourselves, but we lay them at the feet of our omnipotent Lord Jesus Christ. The entire mass of human sin is no more than a particle of dust in his hand that disappears in the ocean of his divine love.

RTE: "Many times people come to confession asking for advice about complex interpersonal problems. How do you advise them when you are not sure they are telling you the whole story, or suspect they are leaving out unflattering details?"

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, we priests are to understand our limitations. As we Russians say, "We are not to be a cork for every bottle." We are not to poke our long nose into every problem. We are not to be enchanted with ourselves, to imagine that we are such phenomenal psychologists or "wonder-workers" that we can solve every problem our parishioners bring to us. Human communication is so infused with emotion, so covered with the obscuring mist of detail, and each of us is so filled with egotism that we inevitably see situations in accordance with our ego.





It often occurs that the same situation is understood quite differently by two people. One claims it is black, another white; one that it is round, the other square. We also have useful advice about this from St. Ambrosius of Optina: "Accept only about forty percent of someone's negative witness about his neighbor as the truth; of the other sixty percent, you know nothing for sure." The priest is to be like a diplomat at a United Nations conference, to be aware of dubious information but still smiling, comforting, and blessing. He accepts the verbal witness, but he is not to begin investigating these situations like a detective, or he will soon find himself a guest in a psychiatric hospital.

Another difficulty is if someone asks for a questionable blessing: "I am sick and tired of this situation. Bless me to raise the banner of justice and crush the enemy. Arm me with the sword of sacred hatred!" (*Laughter*) Batiushka, however, understands that this moral soil is not quite firm, that it looks more like quicksand. In this case, he can just say, "Let God bless you for all good things," or, "Act according to your conscience so that everything has a good and peaceful outcome." Just use such general words and be at peace. Certainly, a priest is not responsible for someone's stupidity, egotism, or self-righteousness.

RTE: Here is another question: "How do I not become impatient or angry with the lack of progress of the parishioners who confess to me?"

FR. ARTEMY: (*Laughter*) Who are you? Perhaps the Holy Prophet Elijah, who was so unable to reconcile himself to human weakness that we read in his service: "Oh Heavenly Father, as your prophet Elijah was so overcome with the fire of zeal that he could not tolerate human sin, You took him up to the heavens and, instead, sent your divine Son, who came not to crush human souls but to save them." I do not believe that you are the great-great-great grandson of Prophet Elijah, and therefore we are to understand how God's grace acts with sinful souls like our own, and how we are to help our parishioners open their hearts to absorb God's divine patience and love that are beyond understanding.

The most precious fruit of contrition is the understanding that we can do nothing without God's help. We are not angry over this, just as we are not angry with ourselves because we have to brush our teeth every morning. Although I brushed them just before I went to bed, I am not irritated, nor does fire flash from my eyes, reducing the bathroom to ashes because I must repeat this procedure every morning.

Certainly, our soul is much more delicate and vulnerable than our body, and it is very useful to note our daily sins and confess our lacks and shortcomings. We are to be patient, rather than indignant, when we see the frequent need to confess. Even if we don't see immediate fruit from these confessions, we understand that the moment someone humbles himself before the face of the Celestial Judge, demons flee and passions are chopped down like weeds. We priests are to be satisfied, pleased and grateful if we have even a dozen zealous parishioners who are accustomed to this frequent renewal.

RTE: "Do you ever feel betrayed by the mistakes or falls of your parishioners?"

FR. ARTEMY: Saint John Climacus insists that the first gift of God's grace is the capacity to see that your sins are as innumerable as the grains of sand on a beach. A priest is not excluded from this and if you mourn over your voluntary and involuntary sins, if you see that your own nature is wounded by passions, you won't be surprised by the falls or mistakes of your neighbors, because you feel that you are the least and the last in this queue of sinners who await their turn to confess. You are the servant of these masters.

When my parishioners reveal their sins, I understand that these are my faults, my mistakes, and that everything they are saying is also within me. I am not a being from another planet; I have not fallen from the moon. I am made of this same earthly clay and I am akin to them. We have a famous story by Anton Chekov, "Ward No. 6," which takes place in a provincial mental asylum. We are all invalids from Ward No. 6, we are all damaged with sin, and therefore the moment that my righteous parishioner tells me he did something evil, I think, "Is it me, my Lord, who is guilty? Have I betrayed you? Am I the cause of his transgression?" Certainly, we are tied to one another and if I, as a priest, am in a state of sloth and despondency, I know for sure that my parishioners will fall like wooden soldiers, because they are devoid of my inner support and prayer. So, feelings of betrayal are impossible.

RTE: I understand that many people come to you in confession for help with family problems, difficulties with jobs and finances, or for advice, consolation and prayers about these things. It seems that Russian priests are appealed to in many circumstances of life, so how far do you recommend that a priest help, and what do you do if people genuinely need assistance or large sums of money?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, we do what we can as far as our experience and inspiration allows. We may have advice about family difficulties or know how this person can find help with specific needs, but Russian priests are not bankers and we can't solve our parishioners' troubles as if we are wizards from Wonderland. I can't give \$20,000, but I may give something – a small amount based on my inspiration and means that is symbolic of my readiness to help. And this symbolic gift is not a little thing at all.

Our own capacity is small, but it is God's grace that leads every person, so when someone tells me that they need a large sum, I always indicate the icon of St. Nicholas, "Oh, this is the exact address to fill your need. Please retell him everything you have explained to me over the last hour. Be sure that he knows how to help you."

Some young priests (and I was one of them) think that they are to help in all respects, as if they are not just priests but Archangel Michael himself. It is a mistake to try to live our neighbor's life for him or to liberate him from the responsibility of his own decisions, but you can give him a token sum as a blessing from your kind soul or offer a dinner at the parish trapeza. Often, people think that every batiushka is like Julius Caesar, sophisticated in dealing with every aspect of life, or that we are professional astronomers who have investigated every corner of the universe. But we are to be realistic about our own capabilities. You are not to be a dreamer.

RTE: How do you keep up such an intense schedule without becoming exhausted? What do you recommend for clergy so that they don't burn out?

FR. ARTEMY: We Russians have a proverb: "Sunshine, fresh air, and water are your best friends." We are to use such everyday remedies as sweet sleep (six or seven hours a night), nourishing food, walks in the open air, and to rejoice in life.

Lay Concerns About Confession

RTE: This is from a layperson who asks, “We understand that we can confess to any priest and that we are really confessing to Christ, but what do we do if the only Orthodox confessor in our town is someone we don’t feel comfortable with and don’t want to open our heart to? What if we disagree with his opinions or doubt his character?”

FR. ARTEMY: In regards to doubtful opinions, all of the statements and ideas of modern priests are to be verified in the light of revelation as it appears in the Holy Scriptures and Tradition, which form the cornerstone on which we stand.

As for feeling that we cannot confess to a certain priest, in the late 1930s there was a lone nun who served every day in the Church of St. Spyridon on Spyridonka Street in central Moscow. This was a famous church that had a miracle-working icon containing relics of St. Spyridon. When she served there, this nun knew that the rector of the church was connected with the Cheka and other state organizations. This was a most difficult period for the Russian Orthodox Church, and because many churches had been closed and she had to serve morning and evening, she could not go to another confessor.

So, although she was eager to have Holy Communion on the Feast of the Nativity, she could not open her heart to this priest. After the evening service she went back to her tiny room which was in a communal flat with many neighbors, where she sat in the corner with an icon of the Mother of God, thinking and praying about the next day.

Then she fell asleep and had a vivid dream that St. Spyridon had come to her. She felt his presence and his hierarchical grace, so she ran to him, knelt down and confessed everything that burdened her heart. He listened to her with his head bowed, and when she finished, he laid his *epitrachelion* over her head, read the prayer of absolution, blessed her with the priest’s cross, and gave her a white rose. Then he disappeared. It was an unbelievable relief. In the morning when she opened her eyes, she understood that it had been a dream, but her heart was burning with joy.

As she entered the church for the early liturgy, she once again smelled the scent of that rose, although there were no flowers in sight. Her heart was quiet and peaceful, and she felt that she could now approach the priest who was confessing on the solea and say a few words concerning her sins, such

as judgment, sloth and pride, but she did not go into detail about whom she had been judging. (*Laughter*). His glance was sharp and piercing, “Isn’t there anything else?” She said, “No, I’ve sinned with my thoughts, words and feelings.” He said, “Let God forgive you!” and he absolved her. As she turned to go down the steps, an unknown lady came up to her out of the feast-day crowd and silently handed her a white rose. A white rose in Moscow, in January! The woman gave no explanation, but the moment the nun took hold of the rose she understood that it was a gift from St. Spyridon, and that it was St. Spyridon himself who had confessed her.

So, we shouldn’t identify a priest’s faults and shortcomings, his degree of enlightenment, or his inner psychological state with the charisma of the priesthood, which certainly rests on his shoulders as the invisible presence of the living Christ. And we should remind ourselves that he is a living man. We shouldn’t hurt him, we shouldn’t embarrass him with ill-considered words. We should understand that we might have problems if we discuss certain themes that are not for him, but we should never have any doubt that the Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Theotokos will meet us there, at the Cross and the Gospel.

We are to be intelligent about confessing our sins and rebuking ourselves, and we are not to upset this priest. We can keep a distance. He is a man with all of the characteristics intrinsic to a human person, and we are to feel the organization of his soul, his individual approach. Maybe he doesn’t smile much, perhaps he is a little irritable or indifferent. Maybe he is too penetrating, too inquisitive, or even a bit envious. We are to be smart. As we say in Russian, “We are to measure seven times and cut once.” That is, we are to be rational sheep but not goats. We are to approach a priest reasonably and have pity on him; we are not to be too critical, because we revere the sacred priesthood and we believe in the presence of Christ.

This is a story from my university years when I had my first confession with the now-reposed Fr. Peter. He had graduated from the theological academy at Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra, and his wife Nadezhda was the private secretary of Patriarch Pimin. She was very influential in the Moscow Patriarchate because of her position and some priests even jokingly called her “Nadezhda of All Russia.” But it was a fact that her influence was quite extensive, and she held many strings in her feminine hands.

Her husband, Fr. Peter, was a modest village-like priest from the countryside, who served at the Prophet Elijah Church on Kropotkinskaya Street,

where we have the miracle-working icon of Unexpected Joy. When I think of him and my first confession, I always pray that God grant him the eternal kingdom because he was very patient. As I revealed all of the sins that I remembered from my earliest years, he just shook his head from side to side with pity for me. When I told him that when I was six years old I had smoked a cigarette in kindergarten, he replied, “Horror! Let God forgive you!” (*Laughter*) So, I am very grateful to him because that confession marked my spiritual birth. It was not only a relief, it was the most vivid certainty that God’s life was within me – in my soul, in my bones, in my flesh, in my eyes, in my head, in the tips of my fingers. It was a living certainty, not a philosophical belief.

Many times after that, I approached Fr. Peter and tortured him with more recent sins. He understood that he couldn’t get rid of me, so the only thing to do was to listen to my outpouring of revelation. (*Laughter*) He understood that it was impossible to stop me, but he was a kind person, and certainly, he was aware of my naivete, my nervous constitution, my newly-converted state. But some three years later, when I had become a highly experienced parishioner, I also become a little critical. He didn’t preach, and it was laborious for him to pronounce the hundreds of names for commemoration. He was slow and meticulous, and it took some twenty-five minutes during each liturgy. This was his way of serving for all of the old ladies, who waited to distinctly hear each of the names they had written down. “Ah,” they would say, “A very good batiushka!”

So, one day I took my position in front of the analogian and confessed my sins. I was not consistent in my prayer, I had had some judgmental thoughts, and I thought that perhaps I was in love with a girl who wasn’t baptized. Fr. Peter just listened and commented without any irony: “Oh, Artemy, you are a very spiritual, enlightened person. Be very careful. Don’t be hasty with this. Don’t lose everything by marrying the wrong person.” The moment he made this comment, “You are so spiritual, so enlightened,” I was inwardly mortified. How could a priest tell a parishioner that he was enlightened, that he was something special! What was this? Why on earth should he pronounce things like that! They are not useful! They could be poisonous, harmful. They could hurt my soul, which is not a simple soul. (*Laughter*)

So, a thought visited my heart, “He is not an experienced priest!” When I finished enumerating my sins, I knew that the last sinful thought was this one: that he was inexperienced. I knew that this was a seductive demonic

intrusion, and that I should confess it, but I didn't dare to confess it, because he had already put the *epitrachelion* over my head and was reading the prayer. But this thought was like a thorn in my heart. I felt it was not a pure confession, and I was accustomed to pure confessions where everything was to be poured out. So now, I was hiding something.

Very attentively, with love and patience he continued reading the prayer. Nowadays, I realize that it is a real labor to listen to fools who begin but can't finish their confession. As the Gospel says: "You strain at the gnat but swallow the camel," and while I had been straining at those gnats for a good ten minutes, he had endured the ordeal. I should have been grateful to him, because he didn't let some of the old ladies confess like that but just said, "Enough, my dear, enough. God bless you!" But he really worked with me. So, the moment I got up from my knees, I said, "Batiushka, I have one more sinful thought." "Yes, what sinful thought." "I thought that you are not an experienced priest."

What happened then? Certainly, he was not so skillful in discerning my own convictions from sinful thoughts. When I confess a sinful thought, I am eager to be delivered from something that is not mine. It is an alien thing, and not my product. It is some demonic litter that has flown into my mind. Batiushka was not prepared to discern this mental litter from my own thoughts, so the moment I opened my mouth and said, "I had the thought that you are not an experienced priest," he turned red, and then even redder. "How do you dare?! You ungrateful thing! I graduated from the theological academy, and who are you to say such things! Go away! Out of my sight! I don't want to see you anymore!"

Certainly, he was not prepared for this surprise gift. (*Laughter*) But I was also a very nervous young man, a convert, and so the moment I crawled out from confession, an old nun who worked in the church and was my spiritual benefactress, said, "Tioma, be clever, be smart, never say things like that to modern priests. Modern priests are not ancient priests. He could say 'Anathema' to you. He could excommunicate you!" Why on earth she had decided that he would pronounce an excommunication on my head, I never knew, but the moment she revealed to me that I was in danger of being anathematized like Lev Tolstoy, the light disappeared and darkness enveloped me. The earth opened up at my feet. It was terrible.

"After an hour, Father will have composed himself, and when he becomes quiet I will give you a sign. Then you approach, make a prostration in front

of him, and say, “Don’t order my execution, but grant me pardon!” I did everything just as she advised: “Batiushka, have mercy on me, a sinner,” and then I just laid there on the floor. I heard, “Artemy, calm down, I have pity on you. You are pardoned.” So, after that catastrophe, I know that we are to be very discreet and careful with our priests. *(Smiling)*

RTE: Thankfully, your church life did not end there. Here is another dilemma from a layperson: “There are priests in our city who are going for guidance to rather strict monks, and now we see these formerly kind pastors becoming stern themselves. A couple I know were recently told they could not marry, although there was no canonical impediment.”

FR. ARTEMY: Let them read the words and letters of Staretz Paisios of Mount Athos. There are about six volumes now, and the spirit of his word is so mild and discerning that it is a golden mean of Orthodox spirituality. There is also St. Porphyrios the New of Greece, whose writings are devoid of sternness but are permeated with love and sympathy for the hurt souls of modern men, woolly victims in the muzzles of sheep-stealing wolves. *(Laughter)* The aim of a priest is to liberate the soul, not to lead it into depression, or worse, to desperation. We are to help this person reunite himself with the world’s true colors of hope, joy, gratitude, humility, and dependence on God’s Providence.

It is a strange thing, certainly, for a priest to fulfill the role of an executioner who cuts off heads. We are not ISIS terrorists, assassins who blow themselves up together with their victims. This harshness to human souls is a victory to demons. The main intention of the priest is to spread warmth to a person’s cold heart, to make them feel that there is mercy in this world, and that the source of this mercy is Our Lord Jesus Christ, Who opens his arms to you. He does not point a gun, but spreads streams of grace. He isn’t a hunter in the bushes with an optical sight on his rifle, waiting to ambush you. Just imagine a cartoon in the newspaper: “The Fruit of Modern Confession.” In the first picture a person approaches the analogion with the Gospel and the Cross. In the next scene, the priest is gone, but you see the parishioner, like St. Sebastian, just streaming blood from a dozen arrows protruding from his body. He is in agony, his head droops, and the caption reads: “It was a good confession.” *(Laughter)*





RTE: On that note, can you say something now about the place of humor in confession. I notice that you often completely change a person's mood with just a few light words.

FR. ARTEMY: We are to feel human hearts, and now in Russia it is a common thing for adults to approach a priest for the first time in their life. Their hearts are racing, their hands trembling, they don't know at all what they should say. They certainly feel that their hearts are filled with sin, but they don't know how to begin or what the aim of confession is. They are confused, they are embarrassed by the crowd of people waiting behind them, and they are not sure that they will have enough time to reveal their entire life.

Often such a person addresses you with a crowd of seventy people pressing behind him, "Oh, Batiushka, I need so much time. Do you have a free hour or two for my first confession?" "Certainly, I have. Let us begin." (*Laughter*) But I know that if I help, five minutes may be enough to open the sphere of illness, the dangerous zone. Subjectively, it seems to a person that he won't be able to manage to speak about everything in five hours, because it is his entire life, but the word of a priest is like a beam of light to detect what is to be confessed. A priest is to help a person be calm, he is to comfort him, to free him from his tension and anxiety. If he is embarrassed and ashamed, you are to help him understand that he can be quite frank, like a patient in the hospital. Certainly, it is a good thing to make a person laugh a little when it concerns some of his mistakes. Some people are quite sure that their sins are so terrible that the Heavenly Judge won't ever find a way to forgive them. I remember vividly the experience of my first confession. Approaching the priest, I just waited for him to rise up horrified with a club in his hand to beat me.

The 14th-century Byzantine hierarch St. Symeon of Thessalonica, who wrote authoritatively on the symbolic meanings of church services, said that in his time priests sat near the cross and gospel, waiting with a smile for those who came to confess, in imitation of the charity of the Heavenly Father who waits for his prodigal son.

RTE: What a wonderful picture.

FR. ARTEMY: Yes, the priest is to be radiant with joy, an image of the Father who is ready to run forward and embrace his ruined child. He is to be so full of spiritual warmth that you can just open your heart.

For example, when a person cannot forgive a relative, such as his living – or even reposed – parents, how can you help him? In some cases, you have to be serious but in others you can use warmth and humor to heal the situation. Or for instance, parents may drag their glowering teenager to you to confess. His face is set in stone, and you feel he is on the verge of bursting into wild cries if he feels himself pushed any further. I can hear his parents whispering, “You go! It’s your turn,” and I feel that lightning is just flashing from his brain. For this young person, “Your sins, please!” in a sepulchral tone, is not a proper greeting. Instead, I might say, “Oh, what beautiful eyes I see. You were so kind to visit an old priest. Can we shake hands? I would like to confess to you: Are your parents too hard on you? I thought so. I do understand you. Why on earth have they brought you to confession!?” (*Laughter*) So, we are to be friendly and real, to become a friend first, so that he will feel inclined to say a few words.

RTE: Another question from a layman: “I went on pilgrimage to a monastery, and the Orthodox pilgrim I shared a room with had come hoping to experience real monastic spirituality. Unfortunately, he confessed to a priest-monk who told him that he could not receive Holy Communion for a year, and that no one else could lift this penance. This was several months ago, and this man is now very depressed. Can this be right?”

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, an Orthodox Christian should be very careful, and it is good to explain that the spiritual power of a priest is not a verdict, it is just counsel, a private opinion, and that you shouldn’t be too impressed by this or that decision of a priest. You shouldn’t reckon yourself bound with eternal ties when a priest you have never seen before requires you to fulfill a certain rule or penance. He is not your spiritual father, and he has no moral or spiritual right to trespass on your soul.

He could say something in a spirit of advice, such as: “Oh, you should discuss this with your confessor, and we shouldn’t underestimate this fall, because in the ancient Christian church, they would not have permitted you to have Holy Communion for a year or more. The practice now is not this strict, but we are to test our conscience, as St. Paul says. My advice to you is to think, to pray, and to exercise all of your forces so that you can approach the Holy Chalice with a pure heart. I will absolve you. May God bless you. May God help you! Be of good cheer!”

A priest is not a court judge who is obliged to imprison you. I imagine that in America where most people are estranged from Orthodox culture, entering the Orthodox Church is like terra incognita, an unknown territory. They might only have experience of this or that Protestant tradition, and not yet know the freedom that Orthodoxy gives.

Even here in Russia such captivity is easy to fall into. Today a lady came who wanted to have a talk. She was a simple person, about thirty-five years old, and told me that although she was baptized Orthodox in childhood, her family were not church-goers. About ten years ago, she became interested in Christ and was invited to a Christian “assembly.” She had no idea that it was not an Orthodox Church and was “rebaptized” there by a Protestant congregation that had a “communion” service, so to speak, but only as a symbol. Then she began reading the Holy Fathers and St. Ignaty Brianchaninov, and a few weeks ago she finally understood that this was not an Orthodox Church. It was a thunderbolt for her, and today she gave a life confession and felt with her heart that our Church of All Saints is something quite different and authentic. I chrismated her, and for the first time she had Holy Communion. For her it was another world, another planet. Her name is Anna, and I felt that Anna was a *zlotaya ribka*, a golden fish, who found herself in an Orthodox pool.

RTE: Here is another question: “Many Americans try to compassionately listen to other people’s sorrows and struggles but it is almost always through the “psychological lens” that pervades our society and the media. Although we understand that people sometimes need psychological help, such explanations often don’t touch the soul and, although we gain a certain limited self-understanding, we may end up feeling further from God. What do you see about this?”

FR. ARTEMY: I think that every human being needs to share their pain, and it’s a relief to open our oppressed hearts, to feel ourselves soothed and our burdens lifted. In our Orthodox culture, compassionate love is the environment in which holy grace invisibly acts; therefore, a priest, a psychiatrist, or a friend who wants to help are all to make the mental effort to listen with such compassion. In the case of the priesthood, however, it is God himself who is present in his omnipotence and with his radiating grace. Priests are to be aware of this mystery and to cooperate with God. We do not think of ourselves as miracle-workers, and when we diminish our self-regard and our

confidence in our own abilities, God Almighty will step in to do everything He desires to enrich the human heart.

As for psychology and its various therapies, everything depends on the outlook of the counselor. If this person is overwhelmed with Freud's ideas and thinks that all of our problems are caused by sexuality, or that we are completely ruled by some outward circumstance in our past, such limited views can have a ruinous effect.

Entertainment, Media, and Society

RTE: This priest asks, "Sports are almost a religion for people, and many stay at home on Sunday because their children are on teams with Sunday games, or they just want to watch sports on television. What do you say to people about this?"

FR. ARTEMY: Surely, sports have a right to exist in our hearts, for we are to care for our body as well as our soul. As St. Macarios the Great says, "Live as if your body is to live for one hundred years, and your soul for one day." We are to support our body and to use it reasonably so that it will serve us, so both sports and physical exercise are very helpful, as long as they don't become idols. As the Holy Fathers say, "Everything is good up to a point, but beyond this point it can become a playing field for demons." We also have a Russian proverb: "If you are too fond of something, you can be seduced by it." That is, it will enslave you.

Certainly, if your teenager takes part in competitions with coaches who are not aware of our religious traditions, and he is asked to take part, say, in an important swimming, skiing, or gymnastics competition on one of the days in Holy Week, we do make exceptions – especially if he is a member of a team and has been invited to participate in defending the team's honor. It's impossible to predict everything, and these events are important for a dedicated and disciplined Orthodox sportsman or sportswoman.

Let me confess a little. When I was a teenager I was very fond of soccer and I even dreamt of becoming a Russian Pelé. Certainly, I was also very fond of English literature, but my second hobby was soccer. And it is owing to soccer that I was not enslaved by smoking, drinking, or some sexual entertainment.

When I began attending church as a student at Moscow State University, I passionately waited to watch the World Cup between Germany and Brazil.

I clung to the television, and nothing existed but to appreciate the masterful genius of this skillful game. But when I began to attend church, I suddenly felt that my heart was not calm, as if some strings were attached that forced me to abandon church if an important game was taking place.

I realized that this had become an inner hindrance for me, and that I was to resist this compulsion. This was not easy, but I loved church so much that by the end of a year or two of effort I had rid myself of this habit. I even made an inner vow, a promise to God, not to watch such games on television, and this helped me to be free. Nevertheless, for years after when I walked down the street and heard the sound of a soccer ball being kicked, my muscles involuntarily tensed, and it is so even now when I allow myself to watch some fine soccer for a few moments. So, it was a real invisible battle. Now, of course, I can watch for a longer period, but I am not ill. Therefore, we can even confess examples like this from our own life to encourage our parishioners, to make them understand that everything is important that concerns the freedom of our heart.

RTE: This priest also asks, “The internet seems to affect our ability to be quiet and concentrate on prayer. What are your suggestions for this?”

FR. ARTEMY: A few years ago, when I had only heard of Facebook, I visited a monastery in America where a beloved bishop with a charming smile and a beard out of a fairy tale, received us. While waiting for dinner the bishop held his phone open in his hand and kept flipping at it and laughing. I was finally shown what it was – an endless chain of posts that come and go, come and go, come and go... until you feel mesmerized. At the time it was strange to me, as I had never seen a bishop concentrate on this process.

Now I have my own page on Facebook, but certainly, Glory to God, we representatives of the Muscovite priesthood are so busy with our duties and the hundreds of people waiting for confession and counsel, that some of our parishioners are even angry with me: “Why on earth,” dear Batiushka, “did you not answer my text message? You are deaf and dumb. It was sent two hours ago and there is still no answer!” As it happens, it is only late at night right before I go to sleep that I have time to pick up my telephone. On Pascha it was 387 text messages and 112 on WhatsApp. Today, at ten in the morning, there were only 35 messages.

Certainly, we are not to be involved too deeply in the internet, but we are to take care of the process. It helps us to be attentive, because most of these text

messages are cries for help and they represent real need: “Oh, Fr. Artemy, my wife is giving birth to our sixth child. Pray with us!” Or, “My uncle is being transported right now to the hospital.” So, it is useful to be aware of everything.

This is not so different from St. Seraphim of Sarov, who had no cell phone, but used to light candles in his *kellia* and prayed like an angel in front of his icon of the Mother of God. When this or that candle fell over he understood that one of his spiritual children had fallen into sin, so these candles represented invisible ties. Certainly, I am a bit angry that cell phones deprive us priests of this supernatural perception, for the real computer is a human heart. When that screen is clear and your conscience is vigilant, a priest can feel what is happening, just as a mother feels troubled over a child. This is not something that can be taught; it is learned step by step. It is your perception, your sensitivity, your inspiration. An invisible thread of love.

We also read about something like this in the writings of our *podvizhniki*, our righteous men. For example, the last monk of Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra after the monastery was closed in the early 1930s, was Staretz Zosima, who came to live in Moscow. He not only had a great mind, but was filled with love, prayer and humility. He was truly a vessel of the Holy Spirit. Now Fr. Zosima also had a close friend, Metropolitan Tryphon Turkestanov, a prince of the Georgian aristocracy who had been tonsured a monk and was very beloved by pious Muscovites.

Years passed, and in his last days, though weak with labored breathing and close to death, Staretz Zosima remained light and inspired. People attending to him that last night related that he took his prayer rope and pressed it to his ear as if it were a telephone. In the 1930s, the only telephones were owned and used by the government, but he touched his ear with his prayer rope and said, “Vladika Tryphon, Vladika Tryphon, I am on the line. Vladika Tryphon, hello, please visit me immediately. I’m close to death, don’t wait. You may lose me. Good! Welcome, welcome!” In fifteen minutes, Metropolitan Tryphon knocked at the door. Did he hear or not? No one knows, but when I remember this, I’m a little sad that we spend so much time and energy on gathering electronic information.

If we have pure hearts, we can still send heart-felt messages. When I help a bride and groom have their church marriage, we first do the betrothal, where there is a special prayer, “Hearken Lord, and send to this couple your Guardian Angel, who will lead them on their earthly path.” On reading this prayer,

I often inform them, “My dear couple, in a moment I will read this prayer and a special guardian angel from the heavenly realm will be sent to accompany you from this time forward. Just imagine, if you visit St. Petersburg and walk down Nevsky Prospect after your wedding, this angel with shining wings will clear the path before you, so that all of the cars and buses will stop as you stroll the avenue. Would you like to hear this prayer?” “Yes, please,” “And after this prayer you won’t need any cell phones because this angel has very long wings. Wherever you are in Siberia or Cincinnati or Kaliningrad, this angel just spreads his wings and touches your hearts simultaneously, and you won’t need telephones or a GPS to track your beloved when you are a little jealous of not being with her.” (*Laughter*)

It is useful to look at the internet to discover what is taking place in our parish and diocese, but the main thing for any media is to be vigilant. We are to be in the presence of God, and afraid of the oblivion of a darkened mind. When we investigate the realms of internet or cell phones, we are to be sober and to invoke God’s name. For example, when I answer these text messages, I am to feel these breaking hearts, I am to feel that these are living people. When I try to explain something or inspire someone through a text message, I try to pray in my heart. Certainly, it’s not a good thing to imitate teenagers who are just sunk in this sewer, especially not for a priest.

RTE: The second part of this question is whether priests should discourage parishioners from watching movies and television.

FR. ARTEMY: As for television and movies, the most important thing is the quality of the entertainment. If I come into contact with a teenager who is crazy about animal films, or adventures, or military blockbusters that are not vicious in nature, I just give a mild hint to not become too involved in these plots. As St. Paul says, “Everything is permitted to me, but nothing is to overwhelm me.”

Too much concentration on anything, whether theatre, films, sports, or shopping is not authentic nourishment for your heart. All of these things may be permissible as a relaxation to rid yourself of worldly tension after your work or studies, but it is not to become a lifestyle. Try to pray because inner prayer is the best indicator of your spiritual health or illness.

As a rule, a human Christian soul can make its own diagnostic assessment. For example, in my parish I have a very sympathetic mother and daughter who both work for a bank. They are very intelligent, the daughter is not mar-

ried, her mother is still rather young, and they are both fond of attending Moscow theatres. Owing to this, I have already visited three performances of classical Russian authors, like the 19th-century playwright Ostrovsky who specialized in portraying Russian church life. This is interesting and instructive, and while some of the performances are more serious, others are quite clever and witty, but it is all done in a classical style.

For me, this is very instructive because when the plots describe passions such as greed or guile, I realize that the roots of all of these things are present in my own heart. The beautiful Russian language and atmosphere is enjoyable and entertaining, and I've come to realize that this mother and daughter have visited some of these performances four or five times. They know the actors and very much enjoy the story, the style of expression, and I understand that this is a way of relaxation for them, but they are not in a state of distraction. They are positive, they are smiling, they discuss the plot intelligently. So, we are not to judge this or that way of spending free time too severely, but we are to feel the state of the person's mind or heart. The priest is not a policeman who climbs the guard tower to check all possible avenues of escape.

RTE: What would you say is the greatest single passion for people today, the spirit of the age?

FR. ARTEMY: This is in the verse repeated by Solomon in Ecclesiastes: "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity." Modern 21st-century life is vanity itself. It is something that has no ontology, and no essence. It is like a ghost, like fog. And you are like a lost frog in this fog. (*Laughter*)

Certainly, the most difficult thing today is to find the golden thread that binds you to the heavenly Jerusalem. This world is a great deceiver that tries to darken our mind with earthly interests and distract us from our Lord. The main exploit of a Christian is to oppose these enticing images. He is to acquire this golden thread of inner prayer, to invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to rely upon him. By liberating the attic of your soul from old dusty things you will never be able to use in eternity, you will convert it into a church. We are the limbs of Christ's body, and each limb is to cultivate love and sacrifice so that the entire Church experiences new growth.

Confessing Children and Gift-Giving

RTE: To bring this wonderful and illuminating interview to a close, can you tell us how, and at what age, you confess children?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, there was a 19th-century synodal instruction that recommends confessing children at seven years old. This is just a formal recommendation, but parents here know this and often bring children around this age, saying, "Father, please, this is his first confession."

But I also see families with several children waiting together for confession, from teenagers down to babies of three or four. These little ones hang on the sleeves of their older brothers and sisters, wanting to imitate what they do, and even insist on coming to confession themselves. In Moscow, our schoolchildren may write out their sins – something like: "I haven't obeyed my father, my mother, my grandfather, my cat, my dog, or my parrot. I haven't obeyed anyone." And then this child of two or three also scribbles something on a bit of paper and gives it to me saying, "This is my confession." I look at the abstract revelation, "Oh, who could believe that you are such a little sinner. Let God forgive you, my dear lamb." Certainly, even a three- or four-year-old is ready to confess, especially if you approach them in a tender, humorous manner. You are to be like Jesus Christ, who didn't forbid these small chickens from approaching him, and you are to ask questions in a very light manner: "Good morning, my sweet. You haven't been obedient, is this true? You didn't go to bed at the right time? Have you had some fights with your kitten? You've lost your toothbrush and haven't found it yet?" Maybe this is a bit of a joke, but if the questions of a priest are to the point, certainly it is a good spiritual school for a child.

However, very often the child already knows what they want to reveal. I never correct children but let them say whatever they like. "Hello, Batiushka." "Hello, and what would you like to say to me?" I ask. "I would like the sun to shine on Pascha morning." "Let it be, let it be – and what else?" "Please pray for my babushka. She's ill." "Let God help her." Or perhaps a schoolboy in the first grade: "Batiushka, my teacher doesn't like me, she yells at me." "Oh, don't make a mistake. She can't possibly be yelling at you; she just pronounces her sentences in an expressive manner. Let us pray for her that she becomes calm." I think this is very useful for our children because they feel that the priest is their understanding friend, and they will want to

come to him. They feel a need for these revelations and are eager to give him little presents of pictures or sweets, and I also have such small presents on hand to give to them. This is a very delicate relationship, a fine and precious thread that connects us. We are to develop this friendship because, as the child grows older, he will receive more and more from confession.

RTE: Father Artemy, when you confess in your own church, it is well-known that you always have a box of small icons, pamphlets, inspirational quotes, candies (all replenished by your parishioners), or even a flower you take from a vase under a church icon, to give out as gifts to those who confess to you, both to adults and especially to children. What is the reason behind this gift-giving?

FR. ARTEMY: Gift-giving is very important. As we Russians say, “It’s a tiny thing, but quite pleasant.” We know that holy grace acts through the material world, and even a little icon, a flower, or a sweet can carry this. It is not important what it is, but Christians always receive this tiny thing with gratitude. It could even be an apple or an orange, but it is also a witness of God’s love and therefore we should not underestimate this method of associating with people. Intentionally or not, we are creating a special Christian atmosphere that is devoid of formalism and officiousness. Let it be something that pleases and soothes our hearts.

Last Words

RTE: And finally, what is the most common piece of advice that you find yourself giving?

FR. ARTEMY: “Be sunny.” People ask, “What am I to do? My life is a chaos of passions and I cannot find a key to the deeds or thoughts of my relatives. I feel myself a poisonous snake because I just want to mow them down with a gun. I am tired of my job, because my chief is a guileful man who decreases my salary every month. (*Laughter*) What am I to do?” My answer is, “Cheer up, be like a candle spreading light and warmth, and don’t worry so much about yourself.” Our parishioners’ lives are often filled with tension and we priests are to help free them from a state of habitual gloom. But this cannot be a superficial cheerfulness. The priest himself has to have real joy in

the knowledge that Christ is risen and hell has been despoiled. Through our Lord, all of these trials are overcome and even amidst difficulties we can experience the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

RTE: Do you have any final words for our readers?

FR. ARTEMY: Dear English-speaking friends, I am so grateful that you have undertaken the labor of reading my “revelations.” I will be very glad if they have caused you to laugh and cry with me, and to feel the essence of pastoral care that is so needed now by both the sophisticated and the simple. ✦