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# CONFESSION: THE SACRAMENT OF FREEDOM

ST. BENEDICT ORTHODOX CHURCH  
3808 Old Seymour Rd ✕ 940-692-3392  
Rev. Fr. Peter Kavanaugh

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## WEEK 6~ *What Keeps Me from Going?*

### I. Introduction

- Review: Watchfulness
  - The sacrament of confession has just as much to do with thoughts as deeds.
  - “This spiritual attention becomes light and as light, illumines the path...And he is guided by the light of watchfulness to this great mystery [the sacrament of confession] and there he deposits the entire debt, all the uncleanness of sins. He enters into this bath and he comes out entirely clean.” ~ *Elder Ephraim*
- Today: Examining the temptations and obstacles that keep us from the confessional.

### II. Adam’s Legacy: The Temptation to Hide

- After eating the apple, Adam and Eve, “heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Gen. 3:8). God responded: “Where are you?” Adam replies with fear, defensiveness, justification and self-pity.
- There’s nothing new under sun. This too is our story. The Sacrament of Confession gives us the chance to reverse Adam’s behavior. Repentance = stepping out of the bushes and saying, “Yep, here I am.”
- **Learning to Confess = learning to give yourself to God**

### III. “I don’t want to go to *that* priest...”

- Temptation: blaming the priest
  - “He’s too young.” “He’s not holy enough.” “I don’t like what he has to say.” “He’s made me mad”
  - The truth is...these aren’t valid excuses. It pretty much doesn’t matter who’s the confessor. As Fr. Ed used to explain to us, “All you need for a good confession is a monkey with a stole on.” Remember, it’s a sacrament, not the man.
  - “Whoever wants to approach prayer without a guide, and proudly thinks that he can learn from books, and won’t go to an elder, is already halfway into delusion.” ~ *St. Silouan the Athonite*
- **What makes someone a good confessor?**
  - One who listens...

- **STABILITY: The key ingredient to a good spiritual life**
  - “Stick with the priest or confessor who really knows you. Spiritual transformation takes time and changing confessors inhibits growth, since you waste time letting the new priest get to know you. You wouldn’t consider changing medical doctors every few years, not when your doctor knows your health history and is watching out for changes in your body that need attention. How much more the soul needs the guidance of a priest or abbot who really knows us, having established a relationship of trust. We all need the guidance of one who doesn’t allow us to avoid working on that which inhibits growth in our relationship with God. Stability can be for us the vehicle by which we are able to confront the habits, sins and vices that inhibit God from transforming our lives and making us whole. Constant movement allows us to hide from ourselves.” ~ *Abbot Tryphon*

#### IV. “I don’t want him to judge me...”

- A Story from the Desert Fathers
  - “A brother at Scetis committed a fault. A council was called to which Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to say to him, ‘Come, for everyone is waiting for you.’ So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him, ‘What is this, Father?’ The old man said to them, ‘My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another.’ When they heard that they said no more to the brother but forgave him.”
- We’re all there
  - Most priests have heard it all...and besides...a priest knows his own sins.
  - “We’re all on the same ship, and we’re all sea sick.” ~ *G. K. Chesterton*
- Anyway, we’re not here to please men...but to please God.

#### V. “I can’t think of any sins...”

- **Indifference/Forgetfulness – the great sin**
  - Fr. Schmemmann: “When I recently happened to confess about fifty people in a typical Orthodox parish in Pennsylvania, not one admitted to having committed any sin whatsoever!”
  - Fr. Morelli: The greatest sin being committed now among mankind is indifference – the plague of modern man
- **Solution**
  - Just start trying – you learn by getting off your rear end...
  - **Frequent confession is the best cure to indifference**

#### VI. “It’s Embarrassing...”

- “[Regarding confession, some] flee from this work as being an exposure of themselves, or they put it off from day to day. I presume they are more mindful of modesty than of salvation, like those who contract a disease in the more shameful parts of the body and shun making themselves known to the

physicians; and thus they perish along with their own bashfulness. Why do you flee from the partners of your misfortunes as you would from those who deride? The body is not able to take pleasure in the trouble of one of its members. It must necessarily grieve as a whole and join in laboring for a remedy...With one and two individuals, there is the Church [cf. Matt 18:17ff]; and the Church indeed is Christ. Therefore, when you cast yourself at the knees of the brethren, you are dealing with Christ, you are entreating Christ." ~ *Tertullian of Carthage (200 AD)*

- Remember, your priest also goes to confession for his own sins
  - It's pride to think that you're so great a sinner that he won't understand
  - *You're not that special ;)* *We're all in the same boat*
- It's not about the man's opinion, but about God
  - In fact, even if the priest's opinion of you drops...that's a good thing
  - Humility, humility, humility
- Remember your judgment
  - "But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer." ~ *I Peter 4:7*
  - Keep in mind...at the judgment your unforgiven sins will be revealed to all mankind and all the angels in heaven. **It's much nicer to get it over with now**

## VII. "I don't *feel* sorry..."

- **Putting off confession *until* you feel sorry for your sin**
  - BIG MISTAKE
- **Contrition is a by-product of confession**
  - It comes afterwards...
- Bishop John's advice to me
  - Question: "What is a good confession?"
  - Answer: "A good confession is *going* to confession."
- Holy Grief
  - "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." ~ *Matthew 5:4*
  - After St. Arsenios died, his abbot praised him, saying: "Truly you are blessed, Abba Arsenios, for you wept for yourself in this world! He who does not weep for himself here below will weep eternally hereafter; so it is impossible not to weep, either voluntarily or when compelled through suffering." ~ *Apophth. Arsenios*
  - "All must shed tears, all must be purified, all must ascend." ~ *Gregory the Great*

- Yes, but...
  - Having said this, many spiritual fathers have advised *against* us taking our emotions seriously. Fr. Ed actually tries to get people to laugh during confession. He says it keeps them honest. For most of us, 99% of such emotions are mere distractions. They get in the way or stem from pride.
- **The main thing is to *just confess***
  - **Repenting isn't feeling. Repenting is *doing*.**
  - If God gives you tears, alright, that's nice...if he doesn't, that's nice to. The important thing is to get to work.
- **Do not chase emotions – chase God!**

### VIII. “I don't have anything *new* to say...”

- Why is this?
  - Because you're human.
  - Most of the time the only way to change is to keep confessing and keep working on that same old annoying habit. Again, frequent confession is the cure to indifference and forgetfulness.
- **“Lame confessions” lead to humility**
  - The whole point is to walk away saying, “I'm pretty lame, spiritually, but God is huge.” Get up again and again – just keep on going...
- **Our habits are broken by repetition in confession**
  - We are constantly justifying ourselves
  - By confessing repeatedly we can break that pattern of justification.
  - Little by little the reality actually starts sinking in. THIS is the beginning
  - “Justification may be verbal, but mainly it takes the form of repetition: I do again and again the same thing as a way of demonstrating to myself and others that it's not really a sin, but rather something normal or human or necessary or even good. ‘Commit a sin twice and it will not seem a crime,’ notes a Jewish proverb.” ~ *Jim Forest*

### IX. Anything else? What keeps you from going to confession?

#### X. Diving into the Sea

- “Repentance opens the heavens, takes us to Paradise, overcomes the devil. Have you sinned? Do not despair! If you sin every day, then offer repentance every day! When there are rotten parts in old houses, we replace the parts with new ones, and we do not stop caring for the houses. In the same way, you should reason for yourself: If today you have defiled yourself with sin, immediately cleanse yourself with repentance.” ~ *St. John Chrysostom*
- “I stood one moment and gazed into the heaving abyss beneath me; then plunged headlong into the mounting wave below...A blessing, like the kiss of a mother, seemed to alight on my soul; a calm, deeper than that which accompanies a hope deferred, bathed my spirit. I sank far into the waters, and sought not to return.” ~ *George MacDonald, “Phantastes”*