

The secrets of the confession

by Monk Leontios Dionysiatis

"I pray, and the first thought that comes to my heart I accept it as God's Word, and that is what I say. It is God who knows your life and the mystery of your heart. I am only a spiritual father." (1,71)

Saint Seraphim of Sarov

Confession is a sacrament. This means that the remission of sins does not depend on the (unknown to the penitent) sinfulness of the priest who does the mystery. But it depends partially on the confessor, since through him forgiveness is given, according to: *"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."* (John 20:23)

When we approach this sacrament, we should want to improve ourselves spiritually. To the question **"what is the essence of the mystery of Repentance and Confession,"** Saint Nektarios of Pentapolis replies:

"a. The consciousness of the repentant as a transgressor of the divine commandments, and

b. The willingness to return to God and keep the divine commandments." (2,186).

However, the repentant usually needs assistance, to be able to discern the beneficial (spiritually) solution to his problems. This implies that he must find a good spiritual guide, and not simply a confessor. Just like someone looks for a good doctor for his body, thus he should look for a good spiritual father for his soul. There is also a [testimony](#) of a live appearance of **elder Iakovos Tsalikis** to a group of young people **after his repose**, during which he emphasized precisely this need.

Elder Paisios of the Holy Mountain (+1994) talked about this topic in the same way: *"Today, the most essential thing is for people to find a spiritual father, to confess, to trust and to consult him. If they have a spiritual father and set up a program with prayer and a little study, go to church, take communion, then they have nothing to fear in this life. The soul must be watched by the spiritual father, so it won't go off course. The spiritual study, for instance, can help in this effort; but if someone doesn't have a spiritual guide, he may come up with his own interpretations on what he reads and be deluded.*

You see, when someone goes somewhere driving his car and he doesn't know the way, he can consult the map, but he also stops and asks so he does not take the wrong way... One will choose the spiritual guide, of course, and won't trust his soul to anyone. Just like for the health of the body he looks to find a good doctor, so for the health of the soul he will also look to find a good spiritual father, and he will be going to him, the doctor of the soul, regularly." (3)

If only few of the confessors are also spiritual guides, it is partly due to the faithful who do not seek this. The hieromonk Raphael Noika, spiritual child of **Elder Sophronios** of the Holy Mountain (+1993), reports an incident: A young man asked **St Silouan** this tragic question: *"Why are there so few good spiritual fathers?"* And St Silouan gave an answer perhaps incomprehensible ...

"There are no good spiritual fathers because there are no good submissives." Another incident is with elder Sophronios. The elder made a reference to prophet Ezekiel, who

says: **"If the prophet of God is found wrong, that is because I, the Lord and God, misled the prophet"** (Ezek. 14.9). That means, I, the Lord and God, misguide my prophet the great, the just, the true, and he will lie. Why? Because My people have a hypocritical heart.

One day, when I began to understand this mystery, I went to elder Sophronios and I said: **"So, Father, in the sacrament of confession concerning the spiritual father and the spiritual child, it is the son that makes the father!"** Elder Sophronios began to laugh and said: **"So it is. The son begets his father!"**... Teach your spiritual children this method: **"Do not come to me unless you pray to God first."** (1,72 - 73)

It is written in the life of St. Seraphim of Sarov (+1833) one incident out of many, which reveals the way in which the saint spoke: "... Father Anthony, who knew and respected for many years the Blessed Seraphim, dared tell him: **"Father, the soul of the person is before you, open like a mirror. In front of my eyes, while you had not even heard of the spiritual needs and tribulations of this pilgrim, you told him everything in advance. Now I see that your mind is so clear, that nothing from the heart of the fellow man remains hidden from it."** Then the Blessed Seraphim put his right palm on the mouth of Fr Anthony, as if he wanted to silence him, and said: **"You don't speak as you should, my dear. The heart of man is open only to the Lord, and God is the only one who knows everyone's heart; the heart of man is deep."** (Ps. 63.7).

Fr Anthony asked again: **"How come you, father, without even asking the (interlocutor) merchant a single word, told him everything it was necessary for him?"** The saint replied humbly: **"He came to me like everyone else, like you too, because he considered me a servant of God. I, the humble Seraphim, also consider myself as sinful servant of God; and what the Lord prescribes this is what I give as beneficial to whoever has need. The first thought that occurs in my soul I feel it as an indication from God, without knowing what's in the soul of my interlocutor, but only by believing that this is the will of God. Like the iron to the blacksmith, so have I delivered my will and my whole self to the Lord. What is pleasing to Him, this is what I do. I do not have my own will, but what is pleasing to God, this is what I transmit."**(4)

St. Seraphim spoke like a perfect Christian, and so he made no mistakes. "In one of his conversations with Father Stratonikos (says Fr Raphael), an ascetic of Caucasus, **St. Silouan made a rhetorical question: "Father, how do the perfect speak"?** Father Stratonikos did not know what to answer, and St. Silouan replied: **"The perfect do not say anything of themselves, they just say what Spirit gives them."** (1,67)

Therefore, in relationship to the above, it is necessary to have unity of spirit in Christ between the confessor and the penitent, and avoid chatty conversation, so that the word of God about the soul becomes perceptible, which is the first thing the spiritual father says.

God knows what talents He has given every soul, and what passions it is prone to; that is why the advice can vary widely from person to person. Therefore, salvation is not a specific recipe. It is, as Father Raphael says, **"mystical word, divine word, for every soul that is born in the world. And for every soul is another word"**. Father Raphael continues:

"Do you remember the incident from Gerontikon: A monk comes to an abbot and asks him for a word of salvation, and the abbot says: "Stay in your cell, eat, drink, sleep, but don't get out of the cell." To someone else with the same quest: "Fast until the ninth hour." He could come out of the cell (making visits), go inside, do whatever he wants, but keep fasting. To someone else he said something about thoughts and something else to someone else.

And as Father Sophronios said, **here we are not talking about theology**. It is not about a doctrine written in a book; **it is about a spiritual strategy**, where the spiritual father, as the Spirit gives birth to word in his heart, understands that the strategy for this person is: **"Strengthen your army in that front."** If at that point you win, the rest will be relatively easy. Your salvation is already assured. But if you strengthen all other points, while where there is a hole in the wall you leave it uncovered, this is from where the enemy troops intrude, and you did not do anything for your salvation. So it is necessary to enter the work of God, **to seek the divine word**, in order to find where this opening is from which the enemies can invade into the city of the soul." (1,68)

In the army, headquarters' messages must arrive to warriors guarded from the enemy, so that it cannot learn of the moves that will be done to neutralize it. So there is military secrecy, kept with great care with the help of special services, implementing encryption and other security systems. And for us to be benefited the most from the sacrament of Confession, we must keep its secrets, as Father Raphael Noika explains:

"Be aware of one more important detail: the **secrecy of confession**. We know that priests must keep the confession secret, but do not think that this is only to protect the soul that comes to us from the pain and shame and to encourage it to open up without fear. Not only that; there is much more. **In the mystery of spiritual paternity, as I think everyone knows, and especially in confession, the devil cannot intrude.** The devil, however, who is not only evil, but also cunning, knows how to mess up things so he can guess. **So, the less information he has, the more time we gain to work on the soul that comes (in confession) to us, to make it strong**".

"I would like to add that in Tsarist Russia, there was a law for the testimony of the priest in court to have no value. Even though back then, there was persecution against the Church, especially from the time of Peter the Great onwards, there was something really wonderful about this fact, because through this law the mystery of confession was protected: the priest would not have the right to be heard as witness either for, or against, because those are not the aim of the priesthood, but our aim is to keep the secrecy of confession".

"And it is not enough that only the priest holds the confession secret, because this is not just a professional ethic such as in medicine - it is the work of the Holy Spirit, but also the person who confesses must keep the confession secret, otherwise the mystery is again almost canceled. Because if he starts to say: **"Oh, the spiritual father told me this and that,"** then it seems that, as a spiritual father you comfort one and you flog the other for the same sin. But according to your wisdom as spiritual father, you know exactly what will save this person and what the other".

"The spiritual father has the right - talking again about the power to be able to give life - to have the freedom to give something sweet to this person, and something bitter i.e. whipping to the other, knowing that one will be saved with the sweet and the other with the whipping. But if the people who confess their sins begin to talk to each other, then they will surely be scandalized".

A similar temptation happened to **Abba Poimen**, but he had much more wisdom and was able to overcome the temptation. The elder told him: **"Let the passions enter and fight against them,"** while he said to someone else: **"Do not let any passions to enter, but stop them right away."**

Hearing this, the young Poimen turned back to the Abbot and asked him: *"Abba, I have entrusted my thoughts to you. And look, you talked to me this way, but differently to the other*

person". The elder responded: **"Poimen, my child, didn't you tell me to talk to you as I would speak to myself? So I spoke as I'd talk to myself. I told you what I do!"**

Father Sophronios commented the above incident as follows: *The other monk was, so to say, a crude or middling monk (there is no middling man, everyone is different, but there is some truth to this), he had no high level of spirituality. If he let the thoughts come into his heart, then his heart will be polluted, and it is unknown who would ultimately win, or certainly he would weaken too much from these thoughts.*

Poimen, however, was so full of grace in his youth, that as Father Sophronios said, his elder saw that the grace would always win in his heart. Therefore being full of grace, if he didn't let the thoughts come into his heart, he would not learn all this data, and here we are talking about human elements, human experience, which then will be very useful for guiding souls. Poimen would now not only know the way of grace, but also the cunning of evil thoughts, because he would have struggled with them in his heart. And he became, indeed, a shepherd (Poimen means shepherd in Greek), as somebody prophesied to him: **"Poimen, your name will become famous throughout Egypt"**. You see, he was not only great spiritually, but the elder equipped him with human weapons, which we need as well.

Now I want to focus on the fact that **to one person he said "black" and to the other "white"**, and that the spiritual father must have this freedom. **If you know that the confessing person keeps his confession secret, you can do with him what you want, and we want salvation, not in the sense of "I do what I want"**. If you know that the person who is confessing publicizes the confession, your hands will be tied on your spiritual work, because the confessing person does not hold high this mystery. But not only that, there is also another greater mystery, a mystery highly spiritual: **When the confessing person touts what he said and what he was advised by the spiritual father at the confession, then the enemy understands faster what is happening to us, what is our weak point, and knows where and how to attack.**

Take, for example, the story about **Adam and Eve**. Allow me to interpret it freely, for the dialogue to be livelier. God told Adam: **"You will eat from every tree, but from this one you will not eat, because the day you eat, you will die"** (Gen. 2, 16-17), and I would say that he wants not just to stop him, but mainly to reveal to him the mysteries of Heaven. So the serpent comes to Eve because it found her weaker (I do not know why, but you see, this is how things happened), and starts telling her: **"Did by any chance God tell you something about the tree, to eat or not to eat?"** It loosened, as we say, her tongue. Excuse the expression, but the snake was wiser and did not speak as I speak now; it spoke very confidently, as if it knew everything. And thus the deceiver continues doing the same till this day, using people and our thoughts (i.e. the visible and invisible enemies) and loosens our tongue!

And the poor Eve, as an innocent child, she told everything. We, of course, say in prayer **"I will not speak of thy mystery to thine enemies"** (*I will not tell your enemies the secret*), but Eve said, **"God told us we may eat from every tree, only from that tree not to eat, because we will die."** **"Oh, good! Now I know where to hit"** thought the devil, and we know how he hit and we know where he hit... That is exactly what we should avoid in the sacrament of confession. Educate your spiritual children in this formula: the mystery should remain a mystery which means a secret.

Of course, as the Bishop mentioned and as it was originally happening in the Church, confession was not personal-secret case, because people confessed publicly, as we see also in the case of "the Ladder" (of John the Sinaite). Originally, confession was done publicly before everyone. But think: What an audience was that! Because those who were listening were in such spiritual height that they could weep for the sorrow of their sinner brother, who is a sinner like me, who like me he does not reach the glory of God, and in tears they could pray and hear the mystery of penitential with prayer.

When this is the case, then the devil cannot enter them, as it cannot penetrate into the spiritual father! Such was the community of Jerusalem. But we all fell. **Now, not only can we not hear confessions made in public, but we are also scandalized.** One story says and I hope it to be just a joke, that a spiritual father was asking through confession a small child: "Did you do this, did you do that?" And at some point the child tells him: **"No, I didn't do that, but ... good idea!"** In other words he gave him a (bad) idea. **It happens to us, let's say, to be polluted when we hear bad incidents or sinful affairs of other people and we are in danger of following them.**

And instead of constructing ourselves with prayer for one another, as if it was about our own soul, as it was the case with the first Christians, we are either affected negatively and polluted, or have thoughts about our fellow, or caricature, or imitate his bad behavior." (1,74 to 79)

The above were said to help in understanding some of the main characteristics of the Sacrament of Confession, which, because it is a Sacrament it is based on our faith in Christ. So we should come to this without hesitation because **"everything is possible for those who believe!"** And we should not seek perfection in others, because not only must we never think ourselves worthy of such a thing, but because we do not know what perfection is: **"It is equally false and deceptive to expect perfection of a team, as it is to expect the perfection of a person. Primarily because we do not have a true and correct idea of what exactly perfection is,"** Elder Sophronios advises. (5,71)

Note:

The references to writings where the above were taken and through which the reader may learn more, are made with two numbers. The first number refers to the origin of the text, and the second refers to the page. **Origin:**

1. **The cultivation of the spirit**, of Hieromonk Raphael Noika (spiritual child of elder Sophronios), publication of "Garden of the Theotokos" 2013.
2. Orthodox Holy Catechism of St Nektarios, 2001.
3. From the book: **"Words of Elder Paisios"**, Tome 3.
4. **"Life of St Seraphim of Sarov"**, of St Justin Popovich.
5. Archmandrite Sophronios Sakharov, Essex 1995.

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Martyr Conon and Mark the ascetic

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