



**Self-Ruled
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**

The Diocese of Los Angeles and the West

The Right Reverend Bishop JOSEPH
Bishop of Los Angeles and the West

Pastoral Message on the Holy Sacrament of Confession

TO BE READ FROM THE PULPIT AND PUBLISHED IN THE PARISH BULLETIN.

“And when Jesus heard it, He said to them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.’” (Luke 5:31)

The Right Reverend, Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers, Reverend Deacons and all the Faithful of the Holy Diocese of Los Angeles and the West:

As we approach the Holy Fast of Advent, I would like to encourage all of you to avail yourselves of the healing Sacrament of Confession. As Orthodox Christians, Confession is not an option which we can choose or not choose to do. It is absolutely necessary for our spiritual healing and well-being, and those who think they can go without Confession for long periods of time are setting a trap for themselves that will be evident when they encounter tragedy and loss.

Orthodox Christians benefit greatly from Confession, when we repent of our sins and receive freedom from the bondages of our heavy consciences, which are soiled by the memories of our sins and resentments. In Confession, we can forgive ourselves and others, and release the heavy load that unforgiveness sets on our shoulders.

Why do we confess to another person? If humans could fix themselves, the world would not have psychologists and counselors. Even secular people realize that our human problems are too great for one person to deal with alone. In the process of Confession, we build a loving relationship with someone more advanced in the spiritual life, who guides us through the maze of our thoughts and memories, leading us to Reality. We eliminate the things in our minds that keep us from God. We become free. The person who rejects Confession also rejects true freedom, preferring the slavery of ‘privacy.’ Sadly, the ‘private’ person is usually blissfully unaware that everyone around him knows his sins but him.

Confession is not merely the reading off of a list of sins, but delving deep into the heart to discover the passions and suffering that drive us to sin. Once found, we can take

steps to receive the cure for these passions through spiritual exercises called Penance. A Penance is not a 'punishment,' but an act which helps us gain greater awareness of the passion under treatment, so that we can more fully invite the Holy Spirit into us and receive healing. When someone commits a serious sin, such as marital infidelity or violence against another, he or she should not receive the Sacraments for an extended period, so that the penitent can achieve greater realization of the seriousness of such a sin, so that he or she will not fall into it again. Pences aid us in becoming better persons, freeing us from enslavement to repetitive sins.

The Great Fasts of the Church (Great Lent, Advent and Dormition) are excellent times to prepare one's Confession, and I recommend that all of you use these times to purify your souls and increase the Holiness that God has for you. Confession takes time and repeated efforts. It takes prayer and fasting. We weep over our sins, which the Holy Fathers refer to as a 'second Baptism' of tears. Confession is a lot of work.

For this reason, I am instructing the clergy to refrain from hearing Confessions during services (i.e. quick and fast Confessions) if they are serving alone, especially during Orthros and the Divine Liturgy. This practice was from a time when people also partook of Confession at other times as well, including long discussions with spiritual elders. These days, however, many people *only* come to Confession during services, which is not enough time for serious self-examination. It also disrupts both the Confession process and the services when a priest must both listen to a Confession and conduct a service.

Given the great work necessary to prepare for and given an honest Confession and, thusly, receive God's grace and mercy, it is totally inappropriate for anyone to simply ask the Priest to grant Absolution without confessing one's sins. I ask that the Laity not burden the Priest by asking him to 'pray over my head' without making an honest Confession of your sins.

You may ask, 'Who can I ask to hear my Confession and pray for Absolution from my sins?' Your Pastor or any priest of this Diocese who has the blessing to hear Confessions and offer prayers for your Absolution. First and foremost, you should go to your Pastor, who is your father, for Confession. If your Pastor is unable to help you with your problems, then he can refer you to a canonical priest with talents in the areas in which you need help. Should you go to a Priest other than your Pastor, you must let your Pastor know who it is who heard your Confession.

Some of you may desire to receive spiritual guidance from Clergy or Monastics outside the Antiochian Archdiocese. In such cases, people run the risk of choosing a spiritual guide who is not under appropriate discipline or who may hold to policies that conflict with our Archdiocese's pastoral standards. To prevent such problems, Clergy and Laity who seek out Confessors outside the Archdiocese must first seek permission either from one's Pastor or the local Dean. Once permission is given, Laity are expected to inform their Pastors each time they make Confession, so the Pastors know that the flock is being ministered to.

Clergy who are not licensed marital counselors or psychologists ought not to engage in these fields during Confession. Confession is not psychology, and deep problems in these areas ought to be handled by professionals who are trained in these areas. I expect Pastors to locate mental health professionals in their areas to whom they may refer parishioners. Such professionals, if not Orthodox Christians, should at least be 'friendly' towards our Faith. Those professionals who espouse 'values free' counseling are to be strictly avoided.

I pray that all of you have a fruitful Advent Fast, so that we may all greet the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ with great joy and cleansed hearts. Let us endeavor to make our Confessions in an honest manner, so that we may fully receive the benefits of Absolution. May our Merciful Lord have mercy on us and forgive us!

Your Father in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joseph', with a small cross symbol at the end of the signature.

+ JOSEPH

Bishop of Los Angeles and the West

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