

Talk delivered on
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Pastor as Confessor

I have been asked to speak on the topic The Pastor as Confessor. As I wrote this paper I was mindful that His Grace, Tikhon the Younger would be addressing perhaps much the same material in his reflections on Spiritual Fatherhood. I am also aware that many in this august assembly are well-skilled and well-seasoned pastors and confessors. I do not think that I am likely to add much to what Vladyka has said and what you all know in terms of the content and practice of confession. Perhaps, though, my remarks may generate some sparks for reflection, and anyone who struggles with hearing confessions may find some relief in knowing that they are not alone!

In the Supplement to the Spiritual Regulation of 1721, it is affirmed that above all a priest must know how the following things: if he comes across a cold and emotionless penitent, how to terrify him or her with God's judgment; if he comes across someone skeptical or inclined to despair, how to restore and strengthen him or her with God's mercy and kindness; how to give instruction on breaking sinful habits; how to visit and comfort the sick; how to minister to someone dying; how to support those under a death sentence, reassuring them of God's mercy. All of these essential duties of priests are connected with hearing confessions and the intimacy of spiritual conversation. These are pastoral skills, deeply personal. Although not in opposition to the many other skills useful to the priest in his overall ministry, they are skills distinct from his abilities in parish administration, liturgical celebration, personal prayer, theological reflection, I do not recall being taught how to hear confessions at seminary, but I do recall reading Archbishop John Shahovskoy's wonderful book on being an Orthodox pastor, and Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky's monograph on the Mystery of Repentance.

Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann's lectures and articles in the Quarterly were compelling. [For example, his talk at an Alumni Retreat at St Andrew's Camp in 1961] These writings challenged me - and dismayed me. Challenged because of the profound, serious, committed pastoral spirit that breathes through them. What an extraordinary challenge the pastoral vocation is! Dismayed because such a pastoral attitude seemed impossibly hard. Hard to do – yes – just in terms of the mastery of such patient skills as Archbishop John counselled, and hard too in the sense that confession was represented as often being a very thankless task – Fr Alexander's vision of the spiritual state of our parishes was one of almost invincible ignorance, shading sometimes into actual, malicious, ill will - but especially hard in being a very lonely task. And experience has confirmed this. There are many joys in hearing confessions, in spiritual conversation.

But the pastor as confessor, like a physician, is someone who even while deeply engaged at one level in the encounter with another is at the same time somehow detached. Or is it only a question of personality, of temperament? Perhaps some of us are not really cut out to be confessors as we imagine confessors ought to be? I am not certain how to describe this sense of detachment in the midst of engagement, but I feel the reality of it in myself and many pastors I have met - some here - pastors hungry to overcome the burden of spiritual loneliness arising from, and made poignant in their interaction with the faithful in confession and spiritual conversation. Pastors resigned to fulfilling their responsibility as faithful servants, yes, but often overcome with a spirit of resignation...

Part of this has to do with maintaining boundaries, and a strategic reserve in the face of temptations of - or to - familiarity. Part of it comes from the need of the confessor to point away from the self - my self - as confessor, and towards Christ, Well.... Over the years much more material on confession and related topics has been made available in English. The Holy Synod issued an [Encyclical on Confession and Communion](#) in the early 70s. This is still timely - as are the aforementioned essays of Fr Alexander, in which the actual practice of confession in our Church is painfully dissected. Much of the even newer material deals with confession in terms a theology of repentance and is integrated into discussions of ascetic theology.

Take, for example, the splendid works of Archimandrite Seraphim Aleksiev or of Metropolitan Hierotheos of Napfkos. There are even new manuals for confessors and penitents, for example Fr Paul Harrilchak's interesting and helpful Confession with Examination of Conscience and Common Prayers.

The Diocese of the South published a manual many have found useful in 1992 entitled Confession: The Holy Mystery of Repentance. Our Bishop Tikhon the Elder has even published a rather useful text from Bulgakov's *Nastol'naya Kniga* concerning the confessions of priests and hierarchs. It is well worth printing off the internet for periodic reflection as we prepare ourselves for confession. Igumen John Udics' fine booklet entitled *The Good Confessor* has just been published - hot off the press, and available at the bookstore! I am sure that there have been many other such books and booklets published by dioceses and deaneries over the years. My point is not to provide a bibliography, but only to say that we now have ample material for reflection and to shape our practice as confessors.

Since we are burdened with the responsibility of dealing with the confessions of others, as well as preparing for our own, one would think that we as parish priests would be involved in an ongoing program of reading and reflection. Are we?

I would like to share with you some memorable confessions, in the hopes that these moments might strike a certain resonance with many of you....

[The speaker went on to offer personal reflections based on some memorable confessions. These are omitted here]

.... On the other hand, there are many joys in hearing confession. Or at least some joys, from time to time, when one hears something that reveals that the penitent takes their Christian life seriously, struggles, makes the effort.

And that in itself is a victory. Everyone who truly repents is a winner, has a measure of victory, even is he or she things that they are hopeless or losing the struggle. Sometimes one is given tremendous blessings in hearing confessions. Even small things can bring great joy. In my new parish assignment I heard 462 confessions from the beginning of Lent up until Holy Wednesday. I know because this is a parish where everyone puts his or her name on a little card and gives it to the priest. There were a significant number of wonderful, just wonderful confessions. I was prepared for a lot of rote confessions and instead discovered many of great depth, obviously prepared, sometimes of surprising clarity, contrition, intensity.

It is important to understand that while a confession is what it is, the confessor is often challenged to hear beyond or beneath the words, the surfaced, to the subtext. At one level, the words may deal with particular sins, but at another there may be a serious concern in the entire attitude or disposition of the penitent. It is sometimes - often? - easier to avoid going there, although surely, being attentive to such things is the mark of a good pastor. The sins confessed may be real, but they are often enough symptoms of a more fundamental malaise, or some hidden or unconscious thing. The sins confessed - to be taken seriously, of course - may be incidental to the actual spiritual situation or condition.

I would like to say something about two things that many of us have likely been bothered by. One is a sort of consumerisation of confession. By this I mean people who wander from confessor to confessor, who express dissatisfaction concerning their confessor, have a list of attributes that they want in a confessor, things that they feel they have a right to have.

This is not at all uncommon, and it is entirely possible that sometimes our behaviour can trigger it. A subset of this consumerisation is an unhealthy interest in eldership – unhealthy as opposed to healthy, because of course a healthy interest in the wise counsels of true spiritual fathers and mothers is a key feature of Orthodoxy. This usually involves a rather egotistical sense of the penitents unique spiritual needs.

The other thing I would like to mention is the terrible burden that a certain, I believe misplaced, notion of professionalism places on many pastors. That is, the sense that the Orthodox priest is a clergy professional and justifies his professional status in society and the eyes of the faithful and his colleagues through gimmicks, a preoccupation with certifications and advanced degrees, familiarity with secular methodologies and models, expertise in statistical analysis, comparative studies, critical self-reflection exercises, peer evaluation sessions, extensive reading in professional pastoral literature, and so on. Everybody is different, and God knows the Church can use any real talent and expertise, but the old-fashioned batiushka, the friendly generalist, the celebrant and confessor, who stands together with his flock rather than over against them as if they were objects to be managed, analysed, tabulated - such a batiushka, such a pastor, need not feel inadequate or make any apology for his disinterest in charts and graphs and new ideas...

Flannery O'Connor has a short story in which a young man, having gone north to college, returns to his small southern town and inevitably finds everyone and everything irritating, cramped and ignorant. Falling ill with what he imagines is a serious sort of disease he asks to have a Roman Catholic priest visit him. His college experience suggests to him that perhaps in a Catholic priest he will find a companionable intellectual and aesthetic sensibility. He envisions earnest conversations about spiritual life, philosophy, the arts... a sympathetic and understanding intelligence, a sense of irony. His hopes are firmly dashed when the priest who is summoned turns out to be loud, sports-loving, joke-telling, just one of the guys – and indeed his illness not life-threatening, but something rather banal. And there comes a moment of crisis, a flash of self-knowledge, a breath of humility, an intuition of mutuality and solidarity with those around him, an acceptance of the givenness of life, over against isolating pride.

Anyone who has been a seminarian or worked with seminarians knows how the topic of spiritual direction, and specifically the finding of a spiritual father, the alleged lack of true spiritual fathers, questions of elders and eldership and obedience, the sense that there are, tucked away in remote forests or caves or hidden deep in the anonymity of cities, or in other jurisdictions, somewhere else, somewhere – anywhere - other than here, charismatic elders who can really discern the heart touch the troubled soul and so on – all of this - can stir up a lot of questionable, dreamy enthusiasm and even act as a lightning rod for certain spiritual psychopathologies. We meet this same keen interest from time to time in some of our enquirers and catechumens.

Anyone who cares to scan the Orthodox lists available on the internet will recognize this topic of eldership, the charismatic over against the institutional, as one of the perennial temptations. And this is a temptation – that is, can lead to sin: argument, anger, bitterness, despair - because while it is of course true that such grace-bearing elders exist - I have even met a few – for a significant number of people it is so very often a preoccupation rooted in immaturity, self-centeredness, pride. And not only high-strung young men and women of a certain age. The wandering parishioner, looking for the confessor who will be sensitive to his or her unique needs is not unknown, right?

The other thing that comes to my mind as I think about O'Connor's story is that it is a message of hope. The story is comic after all, not tragic.

It resolves itself in true self-knowledge and the intuition of solidarity, mutuality, love. It is a message of hope, at least for those of us who realize that we are not particularly gifted, sensitive, discerning. The Lord spoke through Balaam's ass and he can speak through us. Grace can work its remarkable leaven even in us, even in unpromising material. Undoubtedly the Lord can speak through an unimaginative, garlic-breathed, rough-speaking, unintelligibly accented pastor - not that we want to encourage any of this! But in the mystery of the pastoral encounter in confession, a priest who is no better than he is, meeting a parishioner who is no better than *he* is, may, according to God's providence and the grace divine, may be be just the person and have just the words or just the presence to make this encounter fruitful, a small epiphany of love divine.

Thinking about the confessions that we hear, we can probably say that some try us, some exasperate us, some depress us, some bring us spiritual joy. But further, and much more importantly, the entire experience of hearing confessions is one that can stretch our imagination,

soften our hearts, enlarge our capacity for understanding... There is no doubt that what we are doing in hearing confessions is as much a part of the Lord's providential care for *us* as it is for the penitent...