



Pastoral Letter of His Beatitude Sviatoslav to the Priests on Great and Holy Thursday

Dear Brothers in the Priesthood!

This year again, like Christ's disciples at the Mystical Supper, we will sit with our Divine Saviour on this holy day at His mystical banquet. Today once again we will live through the humbling before us of our Teacher and Lord at the washing of the feet and we will rejoice in the gift of His Priesthood. In this way, as we enter into His Passion and await His glorious Resurrection, contemplating His ministry and extreme humility, to heal our wounds, I invite you to reflect upon one of the most important Mysteries of the Christian Church, which was given to us by our Lord, that is, to reflect upon Repentance, Holy Confession, the Mystery of healing and the forgiveness of sins, that we received by the price of His Holy Blood.

The first gift of the resurrected Christ, according to the Gospel of St. John the Theologian, is the authority, handed over to the apostles and their followers, to forgive people's sins in His name: *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained* (Jn 20:23). The holy apostle Paul calls this ministry the Mystery of Reconciliation and sees in it the very essence of priestly ministry: *That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God!* (2 Cor. 5:19-20)

The administering of the Holy Mystery of Reconciliation of a human being to God and neighbor is one of the greatest, and at the same time it can be the heaviest component of priestly ministry. The bishop, granting a priest the right to administer the Mystery of Confession, according to regulations of church law, entrusts to him the most delicate role in the salvation of people's souls, placed under his pastoral care. The access of our faithful to God's mercy, to the sources of grace of the Holy Spirit, is impossible without zealous and trained confessors; impossible is a full spiritual life and the knowledge of the living God.

This is a great grace when the faithful have the opportunity of encountering the living Christ through the person of their priest in the confessional. The Holy Mystery of Repentance transforms a parish. Where they administer it regularly, there are already not that many conflicts there; it points young people on the good path and helps older people to live out their final years on the earth with dignity. The confessional is a barometer of the zeal of a priest. It is sufficient to notice on a regular Sunday or on a weekday, how many people come up to Holy Communion, in order to have an idea of pastoral work in a parish.

The confessor is for the people of God a living icon of our merciful God, an opportunity to know Christ Himself—the Good Shepherd, who looks for the lost sheep and leads it to God's chosen people. The confessor is above all the father, physician and teacher of Christian life. This is why they regard the Holy Mystery of Confession as the most important means of new evangelization, an opportunity to speak God's Word with respect to the state of the penitent's soul and the moment of healing of the sinful wounds through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

This tall task requires from us, the ministers of the Holy Mystery of Reconciliation, a personal, spiritual, human and pastoral maturity, ongoing work on ourselves and a daily readiness to listen to



Holy Confession. This is why I want to remind you about certain aspects of this work on yourself and to give advice regarding the correct and efficient administering of this Mystery.

The leader of people's souls ought to fulfil two conditions: to be in the state of sanctifying divine grace and to lead a pious life of prayer. The fullness of the action of the Holy Spirit during confession does not depend on the holiness of the priest, but if he is a clear mirror, then through his words, behaviour, appearance and his whole person one can easily see the mercy of God Himself. The priest is like the penitent's advocate before God based on the strength of the example of his own life.

Confession is also a liturgical rite. Before the administering of the Mystery one should at least say a brief prayer to ask for the help and light of the Holy Spirit, and after confession, to pray for those who had their confession with us. This is the recognition of our human limitation and the recognition of the confessor's faith in the Lord's omnipotence, manifested in the repentant heart of the person, open to the action of God.

For the proper and competent serving of the Mystery of Repentance the Holy Church requires priest-confessors to obtain appropriate theological knowledge. Here, the idea is not only to learn basic subjects at the seminary, but also about the ongoing acquisition and deepening of knowledge of Sacred Scripture, of the dogmatic teaching of the Church, of moral theology and canon law. It is necessary to closely monitor the new challenges that await Christians in today's world, and to master better practices of pastoral ministry and the development of Church teaching, new instructions, which directly concern the proper formation of the conscience of the faithful entrusted to our care.

An important characteristic of a confessor is the correct pedagogical approach to penitents who are in different stages of spiritual maturity. One should gain appropriate knowledge and the skills of pastoral counselling, and an understanding of a person's psychological state when coming to confession. The confessor's pedagogical talent and approach facilitates the confessing of sins and gives the person who is repenting courage and trust. The faithful will treat the Mystery of Reconciliation with respect if the confessor treats the problems and pain of the penitents seriously, as he deeply delves into and worries about the sins that wound and damage a person. It is clear that at times questions arise, to which one cannot clearly offer answers. So one can ask oneself the question in controversial situations: and what would You, Jesus, have done in my place?

It is advisable for confessors to be particularly cautious in matters related to human love and sexuality. Additional questions should be posed very gently and gradually. Any extra questions can wound a person and can ostracize him or her from confession and the Church. How many people have left the Church because of our reckless behavior, but we do not always see ourselves guilty of this! One cannot reveal one's own surprise at any sin, even if the sin was serious. We have no right to be interested in those areas of the life of a person that are not essential to confession. It is not acceptable in any way to offend a penitent, to raise one's voice at him or her, or to show one's own impatience for a person seeking God's mercy. The Lord has time for us all – and let us have the time to carefully and humbly listen to the one who is making his or her confession! In various official guidelines for confessors, the Church emphasizes the delicate and discrete attitude towards a penitent, not to mention the duty to preserve absolute the seal of secrecy of Confession.

The experience of the Church shows that a good confessor is one who himself properly and often goes to confession. Good confessors are born from good penitents. He will be a good confessor, who regularly and deeply experiences the Mystery of Reconciliation as a way of his own



sanctification. Extremely strong and positive is the personal example of the minister of this Holy Mystery. When people see how their spiritual father goes to confession himself, the more deeply aware of the gift of this Mystery of God's love, and this is the best plea to benefit from it as often as possible.

Dear brothers in the Priesthood of Christ! I congratulate you on the day of the establishment of this great Mystery. I bow my head before you, zealous confessors, advisers, physicians and teachers of our people, who, in Christ's name, forgive us our sins, by the grace of the Holy Spirit you sanctify our souls and give us the strength to fight spiritual diseases and infirmities. May in each of our churches and monasteries always be someone who waits for us in the confessional and opens for us the way to reconciliation with God!

Today our Church around the world, including in Ukraine, which is streaming with blood, is really like a military field hospital, full of the wounded. May we never be lacking confessors – God's physicians, who using the model of Christ Himself – the Good Samaritan, will bend tenderly over our wounds, pour upon them the oil of God's forgiveness and touch our souls with the Body and Blood of our Saviour.

The blessing of the Lord be upon you!

+ SVIATOSLAV

Given in Kyiv
at the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ,
on the day of the Venerable Father and Confessor James, Bishop of Catania,
3 April 2017 A.D.

Source: <http://www.royaldoors.net>