

There are many books by leading Orthodox theologians and scholars on all aspects of the Orthodox Church and this leaflet series provides some basic information in the hope that it might prompt further enquiry.

**LEAFLETS IN THIS INTRODUCTION TO ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY SERIES:**

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All text in these leaflets is mine except where indicated, therefore any errors of fact or in grammar are mine. I should be grateful to have those errors pointed out so that corrections can be made.

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**“The Orthodox Church.....**has preserved unadulterated the first and most ancient ecclesiastical tradition and teaching, has avoided innovations and personal interpretations of the Holy Scriptures and dogmas of the faith, and is administered according to the ancient synodical system under local bishops in collaboration with the faithful and successive groups of both local and broader episcopal synods, of which the highest is the Ecumenical Synod, that of the Orthodox worldwide. The basic administrative canons, the details of which are regulated according to local needs, have been determined by the seven ecumenical synods. The Church is not managed by regional states in which it resides, although it collaborates in good works when asked to do so.

Within the entire Orthodox Church there is absolute cooperation in goodwill and mutual respect. Perchance minor human problems are addressed successfully through the application of the evangelical spirit.”

*Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, from  
“Encountering the Mystery.”  
ISBN 978-0-385-51813-0*

Orthodox Community of Archangel Michael  
and Holy Piran, Cornwall.  
[www.orthodoxincornwall.org.uk](http://www.orthodoxincornwall.org.uk)

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Agia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) Constantinople.

Fr.N.03.15

# Introduction to Orthodox Christianity: Repentance and Confession



Icon of the return of the Lost (Prodigal) Son.  
Saint Luke’s Gospel, chapter 15.

“Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Verse 10

In chapter 15 of Saint Luke’s Gospel Jesus speaks of a lost and found sheep; of a lost silver coin and rejoicing when it is found; of the wayward son who returns after realising his mistakes and is reconciled with his father.

**A Holy Mystery** (sacrament) can never be fully explained yet can be entered into without that full understanding our human reason so often demands. We can experience mystery with all its blessings through the Divine grace by participating in the life of the Church. Intellect alone cannot provide what man needs but through faith and the divinely instituted practices he is aided on the path to salvation.

The following words are those of Father Thomas Hopko, Orthodox theologian and from 1992 to 2002 Dean of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, New York.

"The sacrament of **penance** is our formal act of reconciliation with God in the Church when sin has severed us from the Church's life. Because penance is the way to communion with God when that communion has been broken by sin, it is often referred to in Church Tradition as the renewal of baptism, or as the re-establishment of that condition of life with God which was given in the basic sacraments of inauguration into the Christian life.

Not every sin requires the necessity of formal penance through the sacramental act. This is obvious because Christians are never completely without sin. Certain grave sins or the prolonged separation from holy communion, however, do call for the act of sacramental penance. Also, Christians living in communion with Christ are expected to make use of this sacrament periodically in order to humble themselves consciously before God and to receive guidance in the Christian life from their pastor in the Church. It is the teaching of the Orthodox Church that sacramental penance is necessary for those receiving Holy Communion when they have committed grave sins or when they have been separated from the eucharistic meal for a long time.

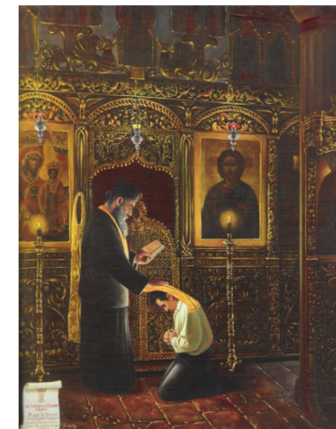
The sacrament of penance exists in the Church to allow for the repentance and reconversion of Christians who have fallen away from the life of faith. There are three main elements to the act of formal penance. The first is sincere **sorrow** for sins and for the breaking of communion with God. The second is an open and heartfelt **confession** of sins. The third element of penance is the formal **prayer of absolution** through which the forgiveness of God through Christ is sacramentally bestowed upon the repentant sinner.

The fulfillment of penance consists in the reception of Holy Communion and the genuine reconciliation of the repentant sinner with God and all men according to the commandments of Christ. From this there obviously follows the necessity of a sincere attempt by the penitent to refrain from sin and to remain in faithful obedience to God and in uprightness of life before him and all the people.

The sacrament of penance, like all sacraments, is an element of the life of the Church which presupposes a firm belief and conviction that Christ himself is present in the Church through his Holy Spirit. A person without the experience of Christ in the Church will not understand the meaning of sacramental penance and the need for the open and public confession of sins. When the Church is experienced as the new life in Christ and as the genuine communion with God in his kingdom already present in sacrament and mystery, then not only will sacramental penance and the confession of sins be understood, but it will be cherished as the great mystery of God which it is: the unique possibility for reunion with God through the forgiveness of Christ who has come to save sinners who confess their sins and who sincerely desire to change their lives according to the ways which he himself has given.

In a word, the Orthodox Church strictly adheres to the teaching of the Bible that only God can forgive sins, that he does so through Christ in the Church, that his conditions are genuine repentance and the promise of change which are witnessed by confession; and that confession, by definition, is the open and public acknowledgement of sin before God and all mankind."

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In Orthodoxy confessions are heard not in a closed confessional but in the open, most usually before the iconostasis. On a stand will be placed the Cross, an icon of the Saviour or Book of the Gospels. The penitent faces the stand and after prayer the priest standing at his/her side invites them to confess their sins. Priest and penitent may sit or stand, the penitent speaking from their heart, seeking forgiveness and reconciliation. The priest may question the penitent and the penitent may seek advice, after which the prayer of absolution is read over the kneeling penitent. Many Orthodox have a special 'spiritual father', not necessarily their parish priest, to whom they go regularly for confession and spiritual advice. Frequency of confession can be discussed with parish priest or spiritual father but unless there are serious issues at least once or twice a year is recommended.