

In the mid-1800's a Russian man went on a pilgrimage throughout Russia and the Ukraine for the sake of advancing in the Faith. He was very zealous in prayer and worshipping God, having become somewhat adept in the Jesus Prayer, which is the Lord Jesus's quote of the tax-collector in Luke 18:13, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" This prayer has been modified to say, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," and it has been taught by the ancient monastics for thousands of years as a method of attaining the gift of ceaseless prayer, mentioned by St. Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, where one's whole mind is literally praying to God even while living in the world and conversing with others. Nevertheless, this unknown pilgrim finally encounters a holy priest near Kiev, Ukraine, who completely changes his perspective of prayer and worship. Despite how great the pilgrim was in prayer, the priest reveals to him how much sinfulness remains in his soul. The following excerpt is taken from the second of two books, which are nowadays combined as a single book- "The Way of a Pilgrim" and "The Pilgrim Continues His Way". It is a popular Eastern Orthodox book for the enlightenment of one's prayer life, along with other wise and spiritual teachings. This excerpt deals with the priest's revelation about the sinful state of the vast majority of Christian souls.

The Pilgrim Continues His Way- The Confession

The next day, by God's help, I came to Kiev. The first and chief thing I wanted was to fast a while and to make my confession and communion in that holy town. So I stopped near the saints (a monastery with catacombs containing the uncorrupted bodies of many famous ancient saints), as that would be easier for getting to church. A good, old Cossack took me in, and as he lived alone in his hut, I found peace and quiet there. At the end of a week in which I had been getting ready for my confession, the thought came to me that I would make it as detailed as I could. So I began to recall and go over all my sins from youth onward very fully, and so as not to forget it all I wrote down everything I could remember in the utmost detail. I covered a large sheet of paper with it.

I heard that at Kitaevaya Pustina, about five miles from Kiev, there was a priest of ascetic life who was very wise and understanding. Whoever went to him for confession found an atmosphere of tender compassion and came away with teaching for his salvation and ease of spirit. I was very glad to hear of this, and I went to him at once. After I had asked his advice and we had talked awhile, I gave him my sheet of paper to see. He read it through and then said, "Dear friend, a lot of this that you have written is quite futile. Listen: First, don't bring into confession sins which you have already repented of and had forgiven. Don't go over them again, for that would be to doubt the power of the sacrament of penance. Next, don't call to mind other people who have been connected with your sins; judge yourself only. Thirdly, the holy Fathers forbid us to mention all the circumstances of the sins, and tell us to acknowledge them in general, so as to avoid temptation both for ourselves and for the priest. Fourthly, you have come to repent and you are not repenting of the fact that you can't repent- that is, your penitence is lukewarm and careless. Fifthly, you have gone over all these details, but the most important thing you have overlooked: you have not disclosed the gravest sins of all. You have not acknowledged, nor written down, that you do not love God, that you hate your neighbor, that you do not believe in God's Word, and that you are filled with pride and ambition. A whole mass of evil, and all our spiritual depravity is in these four sins. They are the chief roots out of which spring the shoots of all the sins into which we fall."

I was very much surprised to hear this, and I said, "Forgive me, reverend Father, but how is it possible not to love God our Creator and Preserver? What is there to believe in if not the Word of God, in which everything is true and holy? I wish well to all my neighbors, and why should I hate them? I have nothing to be proud of; besides having numberless sins, I have nothing at all which is fit

to be praised, and what should I with my poverty and ill-health lust after? Of course, if I were an educated man, or rich, then no doubt I should be guilty of the things you spoke of.”

“It’s a pity, dear one, that you so little understood what I said. Look! It will teach you more quickly if I give you these notes. They are what I always use for my own confession. Read them through, and you will see clearly enough an exact proof of what I said to you just now.”

He gave me the notes, and I began to read them, as follows:

A Confession Which Leads The Inward Man To Humility

Turning my eyes carefully upon myself and watching the course of my inward state, I have verified by experience that I do not love God, that I have no love for my neighbors, that I have no religious belief, and that I am filled with pride and sensuality. All this I actually find in myself as a result of detailed examination of my feelings and conduct, thus:

1. *I do not love God.* For if I loved God I should be continually thinking about Him with heartfelt joy. Every thought of God would give me gladness and delight. On the contrary, I much more often and much more eagerly think about earthly things, and thinking about God is labor and dryness. If I loved God, then talking with Him in prayer would be my nourishment and delight and would draw me to unbroken communion with Him. But, on the contrary, I not only find no delight in prayer, but even find it an effort. I struggle with reluctance, I am enfeebled by sloth and am ready to occupy myself eagerly with any unimportant trifle, if only it shortens prayer and keeps me from it. My time slips away unnoticed in futile occupations, but when I am occupied with God, when I put myself into His presence, every hour seems like a year. If one person loves another, he thinks of him throughout the day without ceasing, he pictures him to himself, he cares for him, and in all circumstances his beloved friend is never out of his thoughts. But I, throughout the day, scarcely set aside even a single hour in which to sink deep down into meditation upon God, to inflame my heart with love of Him, while I eagerly give up 23 hours as fervent offerings to the idols of my passions. I am forward in talk about frivolous matters and things which degrade the spirit; that gives me pleasure. But in the consideration of God I am dry, bored, and lazy. Even if I am unwillingly drawn by others into spiritual conversation, I try to shift the subject quickly to one which pleases my desires. I am tirelessly curious about novelties, about civic affairs and political events; I eagerly seek the satisfaction of my love of knowledge in science and art, and ways of getting things I want to possess. But the study of the law of God, the knowledge of God and of religion, make little impression on me, and satisfy no hunger of my soul. I regard these things not only as a non-essential occupation for a Christian, but in a casual way as a sort of side-issue with which I should perhaps occupy my spare time, at odd moments. To put it shortly, if love for God is recognized by the keeping of His commandments (“If ye love Me, keep My commandments,” says our Lord Jesus Christ), and I not only do not keep them, but even make little attempt to do so, then in absolute truth the conclusion follows that I do not love God. That is what Basil the Great says: “The proof that a man does not love God and His Christ lies in the fact that he does not keep His commandments.”

2. *I do not love my neighbor either.* For not only am I unable to make up my mind to lay down my life for his sake (according to the gospel), but I do not even sacrifice my happiness, well-being, and peace for the good of my neighbor. If I did love him as myself, as the gospel bids, his misfortunes would distress me also, his happiness would bring delight to me too. But, on the contrary, I listen to curious, unhappy stories about my neighbor, and I am not distressed; I remain quite undisturbed or, what is still worse, I find a sort of pleasure in them. Bad conduct on the part of my brother I do not cover up with love, but proclaim abroad with censure. His well-being, honor, and happiness do not

delight me as my own, and, as if they were something quite alien to me, give me no feeling of gladness. What is more, they subtly arouse in me feelings of envy or contempt.

3. *I have no religious belief.* Neither in immortality nor in the gospel. If I were firmly persuaded and believed without doubt that beyond the grave lies eternal life and recompense for the deeds of this life, I should be continually thinking of this. The very idea of immortality would terrify me and I should lead this life as a foreigner who gets ready to enter his native land. On the contrary, I do not even think about eternity, and I regard the end of this earthly life as the limit of my existence. The secret thought nestles within me: Who knows what happens at death? If I say I believe in immortality, then I am speaking about my mind only, and my heart is far removed from a firm conviction about it. That is openly witnessed to by my conduct and my constant care to satisfy the life of the senses. Were the holy gospel taken into my heart in faith, as the Word of God, I should be continually occupied with it, I should study it, find delight in it, and with deep devotion fix my attention upon it. Wisdom, mercy, and love are hidden in it; it would lead me to happiness, I should find gladness in the study of the law of God day and night. In it I should find nourishment like my daily bread, and my heart would be drawn to the keeping of its laws. Nothing on earth would be strong enough to turn me away from it. On the contrary, if now and again I read or hear the Word of God, yet even so it is only from necessity or from a general love of knowledge, and approaching it without any very close attention I find it dull and uninteresting. I usually come to the end of the reading without any profit, only too ready to change over to secular reading in which I take more pleasure and find new and interesting subjects.

4. *I am full of pride and sensual self-love.* All my actions confirm this. Seeing something good in myself, I want to bring it into view, or to pride myself upon it before other people or inwardly to admire myself for it. Although I display an outward humility, yet I ascribe it all to my own strength and regard myself as superior to others, or at least no worse than they. If I notice a fault in myself, I try to excuse it; I cover it up by saying, "I am made like that" or "I am not to blame". I get angry with those who do not treat me with respect and consider them unable to appreciate the value of people. I brag about my gifts: my failures in any undertaking I regard as a personal insult. I murmur, and I find pleasure in the unhappiness of my enemies. If I strive after anything good it is for the purpose of winning praise, or spiritual self-indulgence, or earthly consolation. In a word, I continually make an idol of myself and render it uninterrupted service, seeking in all things the pleasures of the senses and nourishment for my sensual passions and lusts.

Going over all this I see myself as proud, adulterous, unbelieving, without love for God and hating my neighbor. What state could be more sinful? The condition of the spirits of darkness is better than mine. They, although they do not love God, hate men, and live upon pride, yet at least believe and tremble. But I? Can there be a doom more terrible than that which faces me, and what sentence of punishment will be more severe than that upon the careless and foolish life that I recognize in myself?

On reading through this form of confession which the priest gave me I was horrified, and I thought to myself, "Good heavens! What frightful sins there are hidden within me, and up to now I've never noticed them!" The desire to be cleansed from them made me beg this great spiritual father to teach me how to know the causes of all these evils and how to cure them. And he began to instruct me.

"You see, dear brother, the cause of not loving God is want of belief, want of belief is caused by lack of conviction, and the cause of that is failure to seek for holy and true knowledge, indifference to the light of the spirit. In a word, if you don't believe, you can't love; if you are not convinced, you can't

believe, and in order to reach conviction you must get a full and exact knowledge of the matter before you. By meditation, by the study of God's Word, and by noting your experience, you must arouse in your soul a thirst and a longing- or, as some call it, 'wonder'- which brings you an insatiable desire to know things more closely and more fully, to go deeper into their nature.

"One spiritual writer speaks of it in this way: 'Love,' he says, 'usually grows with knowledge, and the greater the depth and extent of the knowledge the more love there will be, the more easily the heart will soften and lay itself open to the love of God, as it diligently gazes upon the very fullness and beauty of the divine nature and His unbounded love for men.'

"So now you see that the cause of those sins which you read over is slothfulness in thinking about spiritual things, sloth which stifles the feeling of the need of such thought. If you want to know how to overcome this evil, strive after enlightenment of spirit by every means in your power, attain it by diligent study of the Word of God and of the holy Fathers, by the help of meditation and spiritual counsel, and by the conversation of those who are wise in Christ. Ah, dear brother, how much disaster we meet with just because we are lazy about seeking light for our souls through the word of truth. We do not study God's law day and night, and we do not pray about it diligently and unceasingly. And because of this our inner man is hungry and cold, starved, so that it has no strength to take a bold step forward upon the road of righteousness and salvation! And so, beloved, let us resolve to make use of these methods, and as often as possible fill our minds with thoughts of heavenly things; and love, poured down into our hearts from on high, will burst into flame within us. We will do this together and pray as often as we can, for prayer is the chief and strongest means for our renewal and well-being. We will pray, in the words holy Church teaches us: 'Oh God, make me fit to love Thee now, as I have loved sin in the past'" (from the 8th prayer in the morning prayers of the lay prayer book of the Russian church).

I listened to all this with care. Deeply moved, I asked this holy father to hear my confession and to give me communion. And so next morning after the honor of my communion, I was for going back to Kiev with this blessed viaticum. But this good father of mine, who was going to the Lavra (certain very large monasteries of Russia) for a couple of days, kept me for that time in his hermit's cell, so that in its silence I might give myself up to prayer without hindrance. And, in fact, I did spend both those days as though I were in Heaven. By the prayers of my starets (elder) I, unworthy as I am, rejoiced in perfect peace. Prayer flowed out in my heart so easily and happily that during that time I think I forgot everything, and myself; in my mind was Jesus Christ and He alone.

In the end, the priest came back, and I asked his guidance and advice: Where should I go now on my pilgrim way? He gave me his blessing with these words, "You go to Pochaev, make your reverence there to the wonder-working footprint (An old story from the 13th century says that Our Lady Mary surrounded by saints appeared to a group of shepherds. She left her footprint where she stood on a rock, which since that time has sprung water. This footprint is still in the monastery and the water has always had healing powers) of the most pure Mother of God, and she will guide your feet into the way of peace." And so, taking his advice in faith, three days later I set off for Pochaev.