

On revealing what is heard in Confession

After confession it is forbidden for the priest, under fear of severest punishment, **to reveal sins** of his spiritual children¹ (See Carth. 147), either directly, or by hinting², or by quarreling³ or during other circumstances, e.g., in court⁴ (Spiritual Regulation, Supplement for the Orthodox Church Clergy, quote 9-10; Book on the Duties of the Parish Presbyter, § 109; Ustav ugolovonii sudoproizvodstvo [Ustav of Criminal Law], articles 93 and 704, publ. 1892).

Exceptions to this should consist of the following two kinds of sin:

1) If someone, at confession, declares to his father confessor about a design against the honor and health of the Sovereign, or about an intention to foment a rebellion and change, and, declaring that he will not show sincere repentance and firm determination to abandon his intention, but confesses about this uniquely so that the consent or silence of the father confessor would even more affirm his criminal intention. Then the father confessor should immediately report this, as such a confession is not correct, because the one confessing does not repent of all his lawlessness. Nevertheless it is necessary for the father confessor, in that announcement, not to reveal what was shown in confession, but only to say that such and such, having given his name and calling, has malicious intention against the Sovereign or the state and is not repentant for that intention. Owing to this notice, the suspect should immediately be detained. After his arrest and the beginning of criminal procedures, the father confessor is obligated, without any concealment, to declare in all detail all what he heard about that malicious intention (Spiritual Regulation, Supplement for the Orthodox Church Clergy, 11; Code of Laws vol. XVI, part 2, Zakon o sudoproizvodstvo [Law on Legal Proceedings] on matters of punishment, articles 555-556, publ. 1892).

2) If someone would deliberately lead some kind of temptation in the people, having harmful consequences for Church and society, e.g., has divulged some kind of unknown false miracle and admitted that in confession, would not give consent or intention to public recognition in the deceit made by him to put an end to the temptation and its harmful consequences, which occurred or is able to occur by it for Church and country, then the father confessor should also reveal this to the diocesan authority⁵. (Spiritual Regulation, Supplement for the Orthodox Church Clergy, Book on the Duties of the Parish Presbyter, § 109).

In all **other cases**, as not concerning the above-stated⁶, confession should remain strictly secret, although revealing this or another sin, said in confession, sometimes could also be useful in some kind of relation⁷.

For example, the priest cannot inform the police that the dead person died from beating and poison which he uncovered in confession.

He cannot reveal the criminal, confessed to a crime, even though it might disclose the matter or save the innocent, unfairly incriminated in the same crime.

He cannot demand a civil remedy for something stolen from him, even though he found out in confession, who stole this thing from him and where it may be found.

He cannot reveal to parents the offences of their children; even though he knew that this revelation could be of benefit for those or others and so forth⁸.

In all similar cases, when revealing what was said in confession could be useful in whatever relation, the father confessor cannot do anything more other than through the power of persuasion and measures of spiritual punishment to accuse the guilty in whatever crime so that they have acknowledged their crimes not only in confession but also before the court of humans⁹.

The secret of confession also binds what has been found out by the pattern of other sins, told in a confession¹⁰. For example, it binds the bishop, in the decision requested by the priest presented a known sin of his spiritual son, the translator, who was the intermediary between the father confessor and the penitent, - was at the confession of an ill person, who was impossible to confess without the aid of strangers (for more details refer below, about the confession of the sick), and those, who have unintentionally heard a confession or have noticed from a glance, the movement and turning of the father confessor or the penitent himself (Napominanie sviashcen. [Reminder for Priests] 59 p.; Zabelin, pp. 209-210; for more details see Rukovodstvo dlia Sel'skikh Pastyrei [Guide for Village Pastors], 1860, vol. 1, and 1867, vol. 3).

Under the Spiritual Regulations, the priest, for revealing the sins heard in confession, except for the above-stated cases (see p. 1036), is exposed to deprivation of rank (Supplement for the Orthodox Church Clergy, item 9).

¹ The **Revealing of what is heard** in confession can be **direct and indirect**.

The indirect revealing will be, when the father confessor during the confession of a penitent uses such movements and signs which another can guess what was in the confession, when the father confessor speaks loudly with the one confessing, so that another can hear and etc.

The direct revealing may be when the father confessor in confession offers the penitent questions on those of his sins about which he found out from the confession of another [refer also to note 2 on p. 1029 and note 2 on p. 1035).

There also may be various occasions causing the revealing of what was heard in confession, for example, if someone has clearly seen the sinner, approaching the Holy Mysteries, and has expressed indignation on the father confessor, who has given such sinner Holy Communion, if someone began to say to the priest that he has not absolved him and so forth.

But in all these and similar cases, the priest should in every possible way keep silence rather than reveal what was heard in confession.

Precisely the priest should also avoid in every possible way conversation in society about father confessors and penitents, although the conversations may be known to all, so that this may permit the hearers to think of an occasion that they may endure sneers from their spiritual fathers, but that is why they begin to be careful to frankly confess their sins and, maybe, will cause them to lose respect for the mystery of repentance, which mystery even priests do not respect. If others in society while the priest begin to sneer at father confessors or at confession, then the priest should stop them either with a strong word or silence of both the strict and mortified kind (Reminder for Priests, pp. 59-62; Zabelin, pp. 210-211).

² The general father **confessor in a men's monastery** is obligated to inform the rector, "if any kind of evil usage was inculcated in the brotherhood: moreover, the lower the person by name, the lower the showing and the kellia or other circumstances". The same is also offered to father confessors in women's monasteries (Spiritual Regulation, Privavlenie o nastoiatelei monastiria [Supplement for Rectors of Monasteries], article 57).

³ Following this "all father confessors should be observed **arguing with spiritual children**; because, if he never reproaches then with anger for this or another thing, then hearing this reproach they may think that what was said by the priest in confession is in what the father confessor reproaches his son, and thus the priest will involuntarily undergo suspicion of illegally revealing of another's sins (Spiritual Regulation, Supplement for the Orthodox Church Clergy 10).

⁴ **Priests are allowed for testimony in court** concerning those various cases which are addressed to the priest not as father confessor but as a priest placed there for the fulfillment of its ceremonies when he is the eyewitness of criminal acts, or finds out about them, without demanding (in the name of the great Mystery of Repentance and on the condition of pious fear) acknowledgment of them and without exhorting that. But any recognition in confession, whenever it would be made (whether by the criminal or other person, who was charged as the perpetrator of a crime) and which would concern (e.g., the false accusation of the penitent innocent of a crime), cannot exist, on the basis of article 704 of the Ustav ugolovnoi sudoproizvodstvo [Ustav of Criminal Law], subject of the testimony of the priest in court. Together with this it is necessary to recognize that when the direct dialogue caused by confession among spiritual fathers and those confessing, until the recognition first received by means of the reminder on the performed repentance, about responsibility before God about the hour of death, is received, so to say, because of confession, should be examined as provided by article 704 of the Ustav ugolovnoi sudoproizvodstvo [Ustav of Criminal Law]. So in 1894, the Pravitel'stviushchii Senat [Ruling Senate] cancelled a verdict of guilty of one of the circular courts, based mainly on the indication of the priest, who after the time of the death Confession and Holy Communion after the exhortation made by the priest, sick patient at his withdrawal into eternity, to reveal the true perpetrator of the crime, the latter was revealed by the patient. The senate recognized a similar sentence of the court, based mainly on the specified indication of the priest, is wrong for the above-stated reasons (for more details, see the Permskii Eparkhial'niia Vedomosti [Perm Diocesan News] 1894, 6; Rukovodstvo dlia Sel'skikh Pastyrei [Guide for Village Pastors] 1894, 31).

⁵ In this and other cases, revealing what is heard in confession is not an infringement of the secrecy of confession, because as the Spiritual Regulations says (Supplement on the Orthodox Church Clergy, 11-12), the announcement of lawless intention, which the confessor does not want to omit and does not make in three, cannot be recognized as a confession and should be understood, as a clever shift to the temptation of his conscience. Similarly it is impossible to recognize a correct confession when the confessor does not repent all his transgressions (see Zabelin, p. 210).

⁶ The Priest, who has found out in confession the counterfeiter of money, should not report it to civil authorities but to the Hierarch (Alf. ukaz. k [Primary Ukases for the Sobranie mneniei otziv Filareta, Mitr. Moskov. [Collection of opinions and responses of Metr. Philaret of Moscow], 595 p.). Generally, **in regard to what was heard** in confession, the priest can present his **perplexity** to his Archpastor and to ask him for a decision (Tserkovniia Vedomosti [Church News], 1897, 12), without revealing thus, of course, the name of the confessor.

⁷ The **Priest is obligated to be silent** about all sins mortal or pardonable, internal or external, public or secret and about all their circumstances, about accomplices in sins, about a penance imposed by him on repenting, about all temptations and doubts of the penitent, about virtues, such as disclosing of the way of life and conscience that would be discovered through the confession of sins. He should try to expel from his imagination all images of nasty sinful things heard by him. Keeping secret of repentance is inviolable, he never should say even in general parts of what he heard in confession. But all who confessed to him should prove to be equally lovable, tender and accessible, in order to really justify them of the spiritual father.

St. Demetrius, in a "lecture to priests", by the way, says:

"Let the message of the father confessor also be this:

As, after the confession is fulfilled, there should be no memory of the sins confessed to him, but rather it be turned to oblivion and not only to cover whatever wounds, but lower to converse with his spiritual son later about his sins, heard by him in confession, unless the spiritual son alone remembered to his spiritual father about previously confessed sins, searching for a pleasant lecture or simplification of an imposed penance, if he cannot bear it or in whatever other case, if which an unskillful, ill-natured and mindless priest is intoxicated, either from evil drinking or with pride and vanity, with infuriating exaltation, will dare to disclose the children of his spiritual father and reveal their sins before men, just like the impious one, the destroyer of the mysteries of God and the violent one of the seal of the Holy Spirit, to the dread judgment of God and falls into eternal punishment and waits for his eternal torment with Judas the betrayer of Christ. For revealing the mystery of God, which is confession, and betraying it in leading by man, betrays Christ Himself, who exists in the repenting human being: There is such a father confessor, Judas, the betrayer of Christ, more resolved than the very Satan the slanderer of our brotherhood, dethroned from the heavens,

from him is the grief of humanity. For there will be grief and not salvation from such a father confessor. An intensive grief, in the grief of the father confessor himself, deprivations for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and eternal for the sake of his death, other and confessing his grief, a vanity for the sake of salvation and for the sake of defamation" (Reminder to Priests, 58, 69-70 p.).

⁸ If the priest **tells his own confessor** what the latter has transmitted to him in confession, then he is subject to the rank of deprivation (Spiritual Regulation, Supplement for the Orthodox Church Clergy, item 9; Book on the Duties of the Parish Presbyter, § 109; see Tserkovnyi Viestnik [Church Messenger] 1892, 25).

⁹ **From what is heard in a confession the priest can** make only following use. He may be consulted by skilled father confessors (only having taken all measures for what was impossible even to suspect the person about whom he consults); he can and should pray to God for each spiritual child and ask for the grace of correction in this or that sin for him. He may make use of what was heard in confession in order to compose sermons in compliance with requirements and needs of the flock (but also here the most extreme care is required not to damage or to submit temptation to the infirm).

The priest may and should use what is heard in confession for the correction of his weakness or severity, or whatever other or lack thereof, if he learns from the penitent that he, as confessor, has harmed him in this or other image of his activity. What was heard in confession may and should serve for the priest as a means for his moral improvement. If in confession he meets people, adorned with various virtues and spiritual gifts and having a clear conscience, then he should reproach himself, that he, the priest, having so much means for good from God, has not made any progress in spiritual life, meanwhile others, having there less means, have reached high perfection. If he has learned in confession that those or other temptations have led whomever to sin, then he must use all measures for protecting himself from these temptations.

"In fulfilling confession", teaches St. Tikhon of Zadonsk, (See the Pribavl. sviashch. [Supplement for Priests], vol. 1, p. 133), "you, the priest, examine the conscience of the penitent, and in his conscience, it rather discloses to you whatever you pointed out to the confessor, and in every possible way this results to cleanse it with a broken heart, tears, awe and continual prayer" (Napominanie sviashch. [Reminder for Priests], 62-65 p.).

¹⁰ The law, which would obligate that **the confessor protect his confession**, is present neither in the church nor in the civil codes, and everyone has the full right to reveal his transgressions, although it be nationally (Tserkovnyi Viestnik [Church Messenger] 1897, 30). However, penitents should not reveal anything that can damage the service of a priest, or destroy the importance of the sacrament of repentance. One who nominally sins against this is one who with mockery transmits questions offered him at confession, statements and advice offered him at confession, and the penance imposed on him (Napominanie sviashchen. [Reminder for Priests], p. 59).

*S. V. Bulgakov, "Handbook for Church Servers", 2nd ed., 1274 pp. (Kharkov, 1900) pp. 1034-1037.
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