

Do No Harm

THOUGHTS ON PREPARING
CHILDREN FOR CONFESSION

By Archpriest Alexei Uminsky

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

ARCHPRIEST Alexei Uminsky, born in 1960 in Moscow, was ordained to the priesthood in 1990 after receiving a blessing for this from Archimandrite John Krestyankin.¹ After serving for three years in the Dormition Church in the city of Kashira, he was transferred to Moscow, where he served in the St. Vladimir Church. At the same time, he became the director of the St. Vladimir Orthodox School. He served as director of the school for six years, and now serves as spiritual father to the students. Fr. Alexei is currently also the rector of the Holy Trinity Church on Khokhlovsky Lane in Moscow. He is on the editorial staff of the magazine *Alpha and Omega* and hosts the television show “Orthodox Encyclopedia.” He has written numerous articles on Orthodox pedagogy.

The article presented here was translated from the book (in Russian) *Children’s Confession: How to Help Your Child* (Moscow: Danilovsky Blagovestnik, 2003).

¹ See the article on Fr. John Krestyankin (†2006) in *The Orthodox Word*, no. 249 (2006), pp. 208–24.

THE ORTHODOX WORD

I. WHAT IS SIN?

Sometimes a very young child comes to Confession, and when the priest starts talking with him about sins he looks at the priest and does not understand what he is talking about. Then the priest asks him, "Have you ever been ashamed?" "Yes," the child answers and begins to tell him when he was ashamed: when he did not listen to his mother, when he took something without permission. Then the priest tells him, "Here, this is sin—if your conscience suggests to you that you did something bad." Shame is the very first indicator of sinfulness, for adults as well as children.

But it is not only bad deeds that cloud a child's life. At times bad thoughts disturb children more than bad deeds. Children become horrified that these thoughts get into their heads. They say to their friend or relative, "Someone is making me say bad words, and I don't want to do this." This is a very important moment. Parents must definitely use it for the start of a conversation with the children. Adults must say to them, "You know, you have to talk about this at Confession. This is the evil one wanting to turn your will to his side. If you don't fight against it (if you don't pray or make the sign of the Cross), it can overcome you." If a child talks with parents about bad thoughts, it means he trusts his parents; it means he is not locked up in himself. **You have to help such a child right away to understand that he and sin are different things**, that evil thoughts are not his thoughts and should not be accepted as his own. "This is not mine. I am not afraid of these thoughts. I can conquer them." This is how you have to teach the child to think.

Many children talk with adults about bad thoughts. Dreams and thoughts confuse them at the time of prayer, and if they try to talk about it with their parents, this is the most convenient time to put into their hands the weapons of spiritual battle: the sign of the Cross, prayer, and Confession. When a child starts to pray he sees how

DO NO HARM

through prayer evil thoughts go away. If the thoughts do not go away, he can use force, he can pray longer, and he'll still be victorious. **The very possibility of conquering sin is very important for the child.** To be aware of his victory means to be aware of his power over sin, to feel the help of God. When this happens, a person grows spiritually.

2. ARE CHILDREN WITHOUT SIN?

From the time that a child has not yet learned to tell the difference between good and evil, he has definite inclinations toward evil, because man is not born without sin.² The darkness of our sinful nature burdens us. Ancestral sin is remitted at baptism, but the consequences of sin remain, and we must correct them by our personal will. **From the beginning man by nature is good and blessed because God created him good and aspiring to blessedness; he is in the image and likeness of God.** But the Apostle Paul says, *For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do* (Rom. 7:19). The child is born as the “old man”; he is in no condition to carry on spiritual warfare by himself. Therefore he conducts it together with the parents.

3. ABOUT PARENTAL SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

The first habits of spiritual struggle are placed in a person by his parents. Parents explain to their children what is good and what is bad, how to act and how not to act, how to pray correctly, and how to fast. By their own spiritual experience they lead their children. In other words, they fulfill that spiritual direction which adults seek from a

² St. Gregory Palamas writes: “When Adam fell by turning aside from good to evil, no one remained [among his descendants] who was not inclined to evil” (Homily 16.11, in *Homilies*, vol. 1 [South Canaan, Pa.: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2002], p. 186).

THE ORTHODOX WORD

spiritual guide. The father and mother explain to the child what sin is, teach him to confess, tell him what the conscience is, and what the fear of God is. For example, everything written by Abba Dorotheus for adults can be retold also to children, even to the smallest children. This remarkable book of soul-profiting teaching is necessary for any teaching professional and, of course, for parents. There are chapters of instruction such as: "That One Must Not Lie," "On Not Judging One's Neighbor," "On the Conscience," "On Humble-mindedness." All this is contained in the process of upbringing. These spiritual understandings must be taught to the child by the parents at the earliest age. This is spiritual direction. If the mother and father themselves live a spiritual life and understand well what Abba Dorotheus has left them, then they will be able to pass it along to their children.

Sometimes parents do not know the answer to some complicated question, but after all, such things also happen in pastoral practice. If the priest does not know the answer to the question of his spiritual child, he says, "Let's pray together, and I'll ask a more experienced person how to help you." Parents act in the same way when they cannot answer correctly. There is nothing to be ashamed of here. This is all the more true when a person of higher spiritual life, to whom your family listens, stands over you and your child. Your personal reverent attitude to clergy also fosters in the child a feeling of humility and reverence before holy things, before the priestly rank.

4. TO PARENTS ABOUT PUNISHMENT

Children know well that if they commit a sin, parents punish them. True, there are parents who, out of malice and irritation, punish even infants who scream and keep them from sleeping. We are all acquainted with the state of fatigue and frustration, but we understand that such a state is not normal. One has to punish a child from the moment when he understands what punishment is, when punishment is capable of bringing him to his senses, stopping him and warning him.

DO NO HARM

In the Gospels, we read of the Dread Judgment and the Second Coming and how the greatest punishment for man is separation from God. Unfortunately, we who are now living on the earth fear earthly punishment more than what was solemnly proclaimed to us concerning our separation from God at the Dread Judgment. We are afraid when the Lord visits us with sorrows, although such punishment is for the good; it gives us the opportunity of coming to ourselves and turning to face God. Punishment is not like revenge or the retribution which is brought upon criminals. That which we greatly fear and call punishment is translated from Church Slavonic as “teaching” (order, instruction, edict).

Daily, on television and radio, news is broadcast from which we find out about tragic events happening at different ends of the earth. One day my child asked, “Papa, so many people are perishing. Why does God allow all this?” “Imagine you’re going in a car at a high speed,” I attempted to answer, “and you see a sign that forbids going faster than 25 mph. You know what this means, but without slowing down, you keep going. Further on you see another sign that warns drivers that a slippery road is ahead. Paying no attention, you go further at your former speed. Then you see a sign that says ‘Cliff,’ but you’re going 60 mph, and you fly off the cliff at breakneck speed.

“Can you say that God punished you? God was warning you. You saw the signs that told you how to avoid danger. Such an end is the result of your behavior. You broke the law and this led you to misfortune. Self-will destroys the harmony between man and God. The absence of harmony is suffering (through illness, the loss of close ones), but this is not vengeful reproach. The most terrible punishment is when you—satiated, rich, and healthy—go directly to hell.”

“What do you want,” I asked my son after this conversation, “that God punish you and save you through punishment, or that He not punish you and forget about you? After all, I also punish you when you misbehave. I act this way so that you’ll correct yourself. After punishment a person becomes smarter. Or would you rather that I stop

THE ORTHODOX WORD

paying attention to you? Imagine that one day you took money from me without asking and bought yourself some ice cream. I didn't pay attention and you thought, 'How good. I can always take money without asking.' Then you took something else, then more.... Then you became a thief and they put you in jail. So, would it perhaps have been better if I had punished you when you took money from me the first time for ice cream?"

"Yes, it would have been better," my child agreed.

5. WHY DO WE CONFESS?

The answer to this question is rooted in the personal spiritual experience of the parents. They are obliged to pass on to their child everything they know how to do.

If a person does not have a spirit of repentance, if he does not confess but thinks to himself, "My life is already set, but I want to raise my child right, so that he goes to church, Confession, and Sunday school, but I can somehow live without this," then he will not be able to explain to his child why he needs to confess and what Confession is. What the child does not see in his parents, what he cannot gain from them, he will gain only at a mature age and under the kind of circumstances of life through which the Lord will bring him to Himself. Any other knowledge will be superficial, not deep, and quickly lost.

It is also difficult to explain to a child why we confess when we do not read the Gospel to him. If we have a family tradition of such reading before sleep—if not daily, then at least often—then the question "Why do we need to confess?" will usually not arise. The Gospel begins with the words *Repent ye: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand* (Matt. 3:2). Repentance is the path of spiritual life which leads us to salvation. Life without repentance cannot be called faith in God. Salvation is impossible without repentance.

True, much more often one has to explain to children not why

DO NO HARM

one needs to confess but how to confess. The child does not ask, “Why do you have to eat soup?” He will sooner ask, “How do you make soup?” The mother will try to answer this question and teach the child to make soup. It’s not the question why but the question how which moves a person. “How does one need to confess?” This is a question of inner spiritual life. A person who lives in repentance must without fail find suitable words with which to answer him, the meaning of which will not be superficial. Confession is an inner requirement of every person.

6. HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR CHILD?

If the family has a spiritual guide and its own spiritual tradition, it is not complicated to resolve the problem of children’s preparation for Confession; it is more complicated to avoid harming the child’s soul while helping. Some parents themselves write a confession for their child. Here a seven-year-old child who has only just learned to write comes to the priest and gives him a written note with complex sentences and correctly arranged punctuation marks. **All parents have to know that they must not do this.** For some reason adults are very worried that their child will not remember all his sins at Confession and try without fail to remind him about everything he forgot. But the Lord does not forgive our sins by quantity. You do not have to be afraid if a child does not tell everything. If his confession is sincere but he did not remember everything, this is not so terrible. After all, the Lord puts up with us adults although we do not immediately confess all our sins. More than that, if the Lord were to show us how we really are, we simply would not be able to bear the awareness of our sinfulness. Being merciful to us, the Lord gives us the possibility of gradually struggling with the sins we are aware of. It is not obligatory for an adult or a child to confess what he does not see within himself and is not aware of. A child has the possibility of overcoming in himself only that which he recognizes as sin, and you should not do this

THE ORTHODOX WORD

instead of him. It is our children, rather, who grant us the opportunity to weep over the sins of our own youth. When we see in them what we had conveniently forgotten in ourselves and had blotted out of our memory, then we will understand what forces us again and again to bear the spirit of repentance in ourselves, to weep before God and entreat Him that what had deformed and darkened us will not harm the souls of our children. Maybe this is how the Lord reminds us of our sins.

Of course, you have to speak a little with a child before Confession. You can begin this way: “So, let’s try to remember what we’ve done. Let’s pray to God together and ask His forgiveness for our sins. Even if you’re afraid to say something, the Lord sees your sin and knows about it; but if you talk about it at Confession, He will definitely forgive you of it. Only you two, God and you, will know about this sin. No one else.” When we conceal our sin, it remains in our soul forever and can take root. In the same way that weeds—if they are not uprooted when they are still small—can take over the whole garden, so also unconfessed sin gradually ensnares our whole nature. If the child trusts his parents (for such a conversation it is very important to have the child’s trust), then you can discuss bad actions together. You can tactfully remind the child of his mistakes, but in no case should you confess instead of the child.

Also, you should not tell the priest which sins your child has; he simply does not need that. And, of course, in no case should you approach the priest after Confession and ask, “Did he tell you about this? About that?” After conversations like that all the child’s trust in the spiritual father will be lost. From experience it is evident: **the more a child trusts his parents, the more he will trust a priest, even an unfamiliar one.** You can discuss some kind of family problem together with the priest, but it is not good to inform on your child.

Children quite often are inwardly prepared for Confession, but cannot find the courage in themselves to make the first step. Then the priest, knowing their inner makeup, can carefully and tactfully help

DO NO HARM

them in this. Here extends the domain of the mysterious, Grace-filled action of God in a person's soul, which we do not know and which is inaccessible to our mind.

When parents try to give some kind of advice to the priest before Confession, this means they are laying their own parental responsibility upon the priest. To raise a child in love and patience—this is the task of parents, which the Lord Himself has entrusted to us; the priest has another calling.

The Lord said, *If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead* (Luke 16:31). If children do not listen to their parents, to whom will they listen? We parents have to gather up patience and courage and **carry our cross, raising children for the Heavenly Kingdom, and not to interfere in that domain in which the Lord Himself acts.**

7. FROM WHAT AGE SHOULD CHILDREN CONFESS?

Many parents think that the earlier a child begins to confess, the better. However, the Orthodox Church, knowing the nature of man through its spiritual experience, does not confess very young children. Seven-year-old children come to Confession. However, all children develop differently, and you should not strictly mark seven years of age as the time for their first Confession.

There exists a science called Christian anthropology, according to which a child does not confess until age seven, not because he is sinless—children often, even at a very early age, do nasty things—but because Confession is not only a recognition of one's personal sin, but also a resolute struggle with it. Children in early childhood are not capable of being genuinely conscious of their sins or beginning to struggle with them; therefore, **the correction of the negative qualities of a very young child's soul lies entirely on the parents.** A trusting conversation with his mother or father is the young child's Confession. Parents, in a certain sense, are the spiritual guides of their children. They

THE ORTHODOX WORD

love their child, know him, help him to correct himself, and can have pity on or punish him; but the child, without the help of his parents, can neither be conscious of his sin nor correct it. A very young child cannot even correctly name his sin.

Adults often think that the Mystery of Confession can be used as an instrument of child-raising, but this is incorrect. They probably think that if the child is brought to Confession from four or five years of age, then he will for all time be delivered from the sins which will be forgiven him. Such parents do not understand the very nature of Confession. In a certain sense, Confession actually *is* an instrument of upbringing; however, it belongs to God. The Lord brings up all of us through Confession, both adults and children. We cannot steal God's right in a person's upbringing. This means that **we parents must learn well to sense where that domain begins in which only the Lord acts, and in which we do not have the right to interfere.** Here we must limit our rights on the child; otherwise we violate the freedom which the Lord has given each person, including a child.

Without a doubt there are children who develop early and turn out to be capable of Confession before age seven, but typical children cannot consciously confess even at age seven. Confession for a child is always stressful—a time during which he not only might fail to confide in his spiritual father, but might instead become even more strongly closed up within himself. Thus he falls into a situation before which he is spiritually immature and begins to confess formally, not understanding what is actually happening with him. Here it is—by using some kind of form he easily walks away from responsibility, and has a chance to act without punishment: I commit a sin, I talk about it at Confession, the sin is forgiven me, and I continue to live as I did before. This is the worst mistake of premature Confession. I know of a few parishes where eight-year-olds and even nine-year-olds are allowed to commune without Confession, or to confess once every three months and are allowed to commune every week.

The transition from early childhood to youth is that stage of

DO NO HARM

development in which everything changes in a child's life. At age seven the child goes to school. The teacher gives him assignments and evaluates his work. Here in school, possibly for the first time in his life, he has personal responsibility. His encounter with his teacher is a meeting with a person who directs, teaches, and gives him an example. For a seven-year-old child, this is, if you like, his new birth, a new period of thinking life. The whole world is open to him in a new way. In this new world there is so much unknown, that the question "Why do we confess?" does not as a rule arise for him, because he himself is already different. He likes to be different, grown-up, and likes being conscious of himself as a person who answers for his own actions. Now he knows that his behavior and his knowledge will be evaluated. At times in the first grade children are not yet given grades, but rather success or failure is noted.

The seven-year-old child now enters the Church in his new capacity. The Church is also a school, a genuine school of life in which the Teacher is Christ. Entering here after having grown up a little, the child receives new assignments. To explain to him what Confession is from the point of view of his new, grown-up life is quite uncomplicated. Here it is, the beginning of responsibility and the beginning of spiritual life; the beginning of spiritual struggle. Of course, this struggle is not as serious as for an adult, and the child's sins are different. However, everything that sin does to a grown-up person, it does to a child as well. But, **what is the most terrible thing in sin? Habit, which brings a sin to the state of a passion.** If the child has acquired the habit of childish sins, sin takes root in him and becomes a character trait. On the other hand, if from childhood the child acquires the habit of struggle against sin, it is a useful quality which can also become a character trait.

The first Confession is, of course, a very important event for a child. Let this day become for him a special day and solemnly noted. Let him feel that today he has committed a very important act, worthy of reward. You should not bribe the child to come to Confession and

THE ORTHODOX WORD

promise him gifts. This is not good. But you can reward a small child who confesses, though this is a very, very subtle moment in your relationship, and it is important for it to feel right.

8. HOW DOES ONE CHOOSE A PRIEST?

Such a question arises in families where the father and mother have different confessors. The situation is not entirely normal, but common for our time. There may be conflict laid deeply inside it. There is the commandment, *The husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the Head of the Church* (Eph. 5:23), and the spiritual father of the wife sometimes advises her to do something that goes against the opinion of the husband. It is good when the family has one spiritual father. He directs the parents, and through this the upbringing of the child takes place. **When the parents have different spiritual fathers the question “Which priest to choose for the child?” has to be decided at a family council.** If the child is raised from infancy as an Orthodox Christian, if the spiritual fathers of the father and mother know well his family situation, if both are spiritually worthy, then either one is fully capable of receiving his confession. It is best of all to grant the child a certain freedom in the choice of spiritual father, to listen to his opinion about which priest he would like to go to for Confession.

Some parents consciously choose a priest for their child who is not the spiritual father of their family; for them this is psychologically easier. They do not want to bear the responsibility for the child's upbringing and rationalize it in the following way: “Here is a priest,” they say. “Let him confess and raise him.” Unfortunately, this is quite a widespread attitude toward clergy. Parents often do not understand that the child, until a certain age, does not, and generally must not, have a confessor. The parents themselves are the spiritual guides of the small child, and on them lies all the fullness of the responsibility for the upbringing of the child's soul. The child is not independent. The

DO NO HARM

Lord gave the commandment to all children, *Honor thy father and mother* (Mark 7:10). If a child, in place of his father and mother, honors some priest who is remote from the family and who tells him what his parents will not accept, there will not be peace in the home. But what is even more terrible is that the child will have some kind of space where he can hide from his parents. Citing the words of his spiritual father, he will act as he likes, and his parents will turn out to be powerless only because they have shed the responsibility for his upbringing.

Irresponsibility is a disease of our society and in our Church. Adult, educated people want to shift their whole life onto the shoulders of the priest, and therefore they themselves, as well as their children, often understand Confession, blessing, and obedience incorrectly.

In their adolescent years children sometimes begin to confess in different churches or to different priests. You should not hinder them. Perhaps thanks to having such an opportunity, they will not leave the Church. The state of an adolescent child is very complex. They are afraid to look bad in the eyes of their parents and spiritual father. If a child in principle is prepared at this age for Confession and not closed up in himself, then all else can be endured. When he grows up, he will choose for himself either to remain with his parents' spiritual father or to find another priest to whom he can entrust his life.

9. BEFORE THE FIRST CONFESSION

Before a child's first Confession, his parents have to pray well and have a confidential talk with the child. You can tell him what the Mystery of Confession is, what repentance in the Church is, and how God loves man and is merciful to him.... You do not have to talk to him about his sins and how God punishes people for sins. You should not present God to the child as the Punisher and Terrible Judge. **"The Lord is our loving Father"**—that is how a child should think about God. Of course, you have to tell him about the role of the priest. The

THE ORTHODOX WORD

child must know that clergy exist, that obedience exists, and that the Mystery of Ordination exists. But you have to talk about all this so that it is understandable to the child.

The father and mother have to think well ahead of time about where the child will go to Confession for the first time and who will confess him. The very first Confession must not be a chance occurrence. In large churches, where there is no feeling of a parish community, where there is a huge crowd of people, the priest is exhausted from the multiplicity of spiritual problems of the people, who are often psychologically unwell. It will be difficult for him to devote attention to an incidental child. "Well, what problems could he have?!" thinks the priest, and he lets him go past, leaving him unnoticed. This is a tragedy for the young person confessing.

You have to prepare the child for his first Confession and try to do everything possible so that it becomes the impetus for the birth of something new in his soul. This is the main task of parental upbringing. Even in a large parish, one can ask the priest to find a special time for a child's first Confession, and ask him, if only a little, to get to know the child who is coming to him, so that he might feel an affectionate glance, a warm hand and a warm smile, so that the priest might have enough strength to give this child a word of comfort and encouragement. This is very important.

If the family is church-going, and the father and mother have a spiritual father to whom they go, and who knows the problems of this family, then no difficulties will arise concerning the choice of priest. The priest himself will find an opportunity to have a chat with the child because he understands well how important the first Confession is in the life of a young Christian. As a baby bird knows its mother in the nest, so the child will recognize a spiritual kinship with the priest at the time of his first Confession and will never part from him. The first Confession imprints an image of the clergy and leadership in the child's soul, and therefore the impression on him from it is Grace-filled and strong.

DO NO HARM

10. HOW OFTEN SHOULD YOU TAKE YOUR CHILD
TO CONFESSION?

In answering this question, it is very difficult to give some kind of definite advice. Much depends on the spiritual tradition in which the family lives. Of course, any kind of regularity in spiritual activity is very good. Everything that is a need for the family as a whole will, with time, become a personal need for the child as well. When he reaches adolescence possibly he will not even think about whether or not he needs to confess often. That's just how it was done in his family, and therefore that's what he himself will do. Family traditions are like the air which we breathe each day, and we don't discuss whether we should practice them.

"You have to confess the child once a week." Perhaps adults would like to hear this from the priest, but it is meaningless to demand of your child that which you do not do yourself. "We work, we have no time and many cares, so here, let him do everything needed for salvation," adults reason. But this is incorrect. Of course, there is God's mercy. Even children of unbelieving parents go to church, but this is rather the exception which only confirms the rule, **"You cannot demand more from the child than what you yourself do."**

Reprinted from *The Orthodox Word*, no. 251.

Subscriptions to *The Orthodox Word* are available online at
sainthermanpress.com

or by mail at
St. Herman Press,
P.O. Box 70,
Platina, CA 96076.

One year subscription: \$17.00; two year subscription: \$29.00.