



Nativity Letter from Elder Amvrosy of Optina (†1891)

Wisdom seekers in the Lord! By the mercy and long-suffering of God we are once again reaching the yearly time of the Feast of Christ's Nativity. The Church in her hymns already calls the faithful to contemplate with lofty mind: "The Sovereign's pilgrimage, and with cleansed hearts to mystically delight in an immortal feast within the lowly cave": As the Omnipresent has bowed the heavens and descended to earth without leaving the bosom of the Father; as the Invisible has become visible; as the Co-unoriginate Word and Co-eternal Son of God has become the Son of the Virgin; as the Pre-eternal and Incomprehensible One is now born of the Virgin as a babe; as the One unapproachable to all is now as a babe embraced by maternal, virginal arms; how He Who covers the heavens with the clouds is now as a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes; how He Who has created all things in wisdom, now as a swaddled babe, is laid in a manger of irrational beasts to save men from irrationality; how He Who nourishes all things now as a babe drinks His mother's milk. O awesome Mystery! O things incomprehensible! How God without undergoing change has become a man, and makes man as a god, as the prophet foretold: "*I said: Ye are gods, and all of you the sons of the Most High!*" (Ps. 81:6). But, O our sinfulness! We as humans are dying. O, our vanity and carelessness for divine sonship! We love our slavery to the passions and evil will, willingly and unwillingly bending our necks to the yoke of the enemy. O, our blindness and obscurity! The blessed ears of the shepherds, when they heard the Angels singing in the air: *Glory to God in the highest!* (Luke 2:14), brought the good news of peace on earth and good will to men. Their blessed eyes were in awe when they saw the spotless Lamb which had come from Mary's womb. Blessed are all they who keep God's will and peace, which transcends human minds. The blessed and wise Magi came from distant lands to bow down before the One born of the Virgin, bringing Him worthy gifts: gold for He is King, frankincense for He is God, and myrrh for He is the One that dies and yet is immortal. Blessed are all they that worthily bow down before Him in spirit and in truth, bringing Him gifts according to their strength: as gold, righteous mites of compassion; as frankincense and sweet-smelling incense, praises and pure prayers of repentance and confession; as fragrant myrrh, grateful remembrance of His suffering and reverent worship of the life-creating wounds of Him Who became incarnate and crucified in the flesh for our salvation. But we, the slothful and insensitive, of whom I am the first, are unable to raise our minds above the earth and with purified hearts to delight in the immortal feast in the lowly cave. Humbling and reproaching ourselves, may we fervently and reverently be attentive to the readings and hymns in the Church and, as from the source of life and immortality,

drink in consolation and enlightenment and salvation, through the mercy and unspeakable loving-kindness of the One Who was incarnate for our sakes, the Son of God, to Whom be glory, honor and worship, together with His unoriginate Father and His most holy and good and life-creating Spirit, now and ever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

Thou Who wast unutterably born of the Virgin, have mercy on us who have grown cold, through the prayers of Thy Most Pure Mother and all who have pleased Thee!

Christ is Born!
Glorify Him!

Sunday, January 8

Thirtieth Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday after Nativity

Divine Liturgy 9:30 A.M.

Synaxis of the Mother of God

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Wednesday, January 11

Moleben 5:30 P.M.

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Sunday, January 15

Thirty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Divine Liturgy 9:30 A.M.

Several months ago, a guide to confession was printed out in the form of a booklet and made available to everyone. However, almost no one took an opportunity to prepare his or her confession following the questions in that little book. Some who are accustomed to confessing the way they have been doing for decades might find it difficult to change, but there is little to be said in justification of such indifference to the matter of salvation when speaking about younger generations and those who have recently joined the Holy Church. Let us not continue creating our own Christianity — we have gone dangerously far down that route already.

Do not be side-tracked by the thoughts of ‘why should I confess the things that everybody does anyway?’ First of all, not everybody. Secondly, our post-Christian culture, i.e. the world we live in, is shaped, to the greatest extent, by mass media, mostly by the TV entertainment culture which fluctuates from anti-Christian to satanic. Therefore, ‘everybody else does it’ doesn’t work for a Christian. We have chosen to follow Christ, to enter the Ark of salvation — Christ’s Holy Church, while those “everybody” choose to remain outside, quite content with the world built “*on lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the life of pride*” (1 John 2:16). But “*the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever*” (1 John 2:17).

It is important to confess our sins and to prepare to partake of the Most Holy and Precious Body and Blood of Christ at least four times a year (usually during the four major fasting periods). The much-respected Archpriest Dimitrii Smirnov says that we should confess and commune at least once a month, in order to maintain the necessary tensivity of our spiritual life. Only little children are allowed to receive the Holy Communion without prior confession of sins. For the rest of us confession is a must.

Below is yet another guide to confession. Use it together with the one you received before, for this listing of sins enumerates only some sins which have become especially common in our latter times. Please remember, no listing of sins is all-inclusive. Our task is to point out to our Heavenly Physician Jesus Christ all the sores, all the wounds of our soul.

Here is how we use the present guide to confession: read it when you are preparing to come for confession; underline (make a copy before you do it, so that you could use the list multiple times) or write down the things that pertain to you (do not neglect any of them); when at confession, read what you have underlined or written down sin after sin (be specific, do not generalize, say exactly what you have done or said); if your confession was written down (or you used an underlined copy) you can give it to the priest and he will burn it; keep the original of this guide to confession for the next time; watch over yourselves so that you do not fall into same sins again — if you do, mark them again on the guide or write them down, so when you come to confession in a couple of weeks you will have a new list (do not doubt, you will have one for sure).

GUIDE TO CONFESSION WITH COMMENTARIES (SHORT LIST OF THE MOST COMMON SINS OF OUR TIME)

I sinned before God: by having little faith (doubting existence of God). I have neither true fear of God, nor love for God, hence: I do not know what to confess, I do not see my sins, I don’t even try to find out what is sinful and what is salvific; I do not follow God’s holy commandments, I try not to think about death, I am not getting ready to be brought before the Divine Judgment; in general, I am indifferent when it comes to the matters of faith, to God and to my pitiful lot in eternity.

I sinned: by ingratitude to God for His mercies, by attributing the good things in my life to

my own labors and not to Divine help; by conceit and pride: I placed all hope on myself and on other people, other than on God; by disobedience to the Will of God (I want everything to be as I want it); by not knowing how to be patient in times of troubles and diseases (I am afraid of the suffering that which God allowed to befall me because of my sins, forgetting that they are allowed to happen so that through enduring them my soul could be cleansed from sins and be saved); by murmuring at the difficulties in my life – the cross that God gave me, at people, at God; by thinking that God is cruel; by having no courage, by being despondent, sad, stone-hearted, despairing in salvation, thinking about suicide and trying to commit suicide.

I sinned: by justifying my sins (citing a list of ‘good’ excuses: everyday cares, sickness, weakness of the body, and that nobody has ever taught me the Faith in God); when I was yet an unbeliever, I tried to seduce people away from faith, I visited places of godlessness; by blaspheming God and making fun of saints and matters pertaining to Christianity and the Church; by not wearing a cross on my chest; by using papers with icons on them for household needs; by calling pets saints’ names, even if in diminutive forms (Mary, Mike, etc).

I sinned: by rarely coming to church on Sundays and feast days, (I spent those days working, shopping, being drunk, sleeping-in, indulging in entertainment, ‘having fun’ (which results in darkening of the mind, immodesty, lust of the flesh, quarrelling, bodily injuries, etc.)); by not coming to church (because of rain, mud on the streets, freezing cold..., due to laziness and slothfulness); by being late in coming to church and by leaving it early. During the church services, I sinned by talking, laughing, keeping my hands in my pockets, sitting with my legs crossed, dozing off, inattentiveness to the reading and singing, absentmindedness; by pushing other people, by being rude, by allowing myself to sit down when I have enough strength in me to stand upright. While listening to the sermon I mentally criticized and passed judgment upon the priest and left the nave during the sermon. I rarely think about what I heard sung in church or what was read from the Holy Scripture. I grumble that the Divine Services are too long. During the days of female impurity I partook of the Holy Communion or touched holy things (for men – after defilement in sleep).

I sinned: by infrequently coming to confession. Having committed a sin, I didn’t reproach myself and didn’t repent right away, thus bringing my soul to the state of insensitivity. I dared to come to the Holy Communion without proper preparation (i.e. didn’t read the canons and the prayers and either concealed or minimized the gravity of my sins during confession, came to Holy Communion without fasting (including abstinence from marital relationships) or being in enmity with someone). After partaking of the Holy Communion, I didn’t read or listen to the Prayers of Thanksgiving after the Communion. The days when I received the Holy Communion were spent not piously (i.e. they were far from being spent in prayer, in reading of the Word of God, in pious contemplations), but in gluttony, slothfulness, vain talking, profane entertainment.

I sinned: by not reading the Morning and Evening Prayers (in entirety from the prayer book) or shortening the prayers, by not always praying before meals, before beginning of work and afterwards, by praying absentmindedly, by praying with uncovered head (for women) / with a hat on (for men), bearing grudges against someone; by making a sign of the Cross over myself irreverently, by irreverently venerating/handling holy icons and other holy things; by preferring TV to praying, reading of the Gospel, the Psalter and spiritual literature; by being afraid to speak up when someone spoke blasphemy in my presence; by being afraid or uncomfortable to make a sign of the Cross over myself and acknowledge my faith in Christ in public places (this is one the ways to deny Christ); by talking about God without reverence and without humility; by using

God's Name in vain (saying 'O My God!' when not addressing Him in prayer, using the words like *gosh, heck, holy cow* (and its variations), *by George, by golly, dang, damn, darn, doggone, for Pete's sake, gee, jeez* and so on).

I sinned: by not asking advice of a priest and my seniors in deciding on vital issues (which brought about irreparable consequences); having asked my spiritual father to guide my life, I followed by sinful self-will; I sinned by giving advice to others not knowing whether it were pleasing to God or not; by being passionately attached to people, things, activities; by tempting others by my own sinful acts (my un-Christian behavior subjects to mockery the Lord's Holy Name).

I sinned: by not keeping fasts, as well as not fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays; by eating and drinking beyond measure, by eating in secret, by indulging in sweets, by wasting food.

I sinned: by being interested in and following the teachings of televangelists, buying their books and videos, suggesting their ideas to others; by going to non-Orthodox or schismatic churches, by believing superstitions (dreams, omens, horoscopes); by being involved in occult-practices (fortune-telling, palm-reading, using tarot cards); by subjecting myself to urine therapy; by fearing witches/demons more than God; by being interested in Oriental religions, occult or Satanism; by visiting sectarian, cultic, occult, etc. gatherings; by practicing yoga, meditation, Oriental martial arts; by reading and keeping occult literature (on magick, wicca, palmistry/chiromancy, horoscope, dreams reading, Nostradamus predictions, Oriental spiritual practices, books on theosophy (Blavatsky, Roerich, etc.), anthroposophy; by enticing/suggesting to others to be interested in such practices.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. In the narthex, we have a sign-up sheet for the sponsors for our bulletin covers. The month of January is still available.
2. Annual parish meeting is scheduled to take place on Sunday, January 22, along with a Coffee Hour.
3. Please, continue to look, when grocery shopping, for the ingredients needed for our major fund-raising products. We need margarine, flour, nuts, sugar, sour kraut (newly-added item). No sour cream is needed at this time. Thank you for your continuous support!
4. Our next Soup Sale is in two weeks, on January 21. Please plan to participate.
5. We have received Nativity greetings from our former parish priest His Grace Bishop Matthias — we used to know him as Fr David Moriak and, later on, as Hieromonk Matthias. It is wonderful that His Grace remembers us.

*Love + Prayer,
+ Bishop Matthias*

*Thank you for the
forming of my priesthood*