

# GUIDELINES FOR THE HOLY MYSTERY OF CONFESSION

*Prepared by the Priests of St. Vladimir's Seminary*  
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*For the entire concern of God and of the one entrusted with pastoral authority is to bring back the lost sheep and heal the serpent's bite: neither pushing the sufferer to the precipice of despair, nor giving him rein to lead a dissolute or contemptuous life, but by one or another means, be it more severe and astringent medicines, or milder and more soothing ones, to stay the suffering and strive for the healing of the ulcer, examining the fruits of repentance and wisely guiding the man who is called to the splendor on high.*

Trullo Canon 102

## **I. Introduction and Basic Principles**

The priests of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary have prepared the following guidelines to describe the normal practice of the Holy Mystery of Confession at St. Vladimir's Seminary. The Holy Mystery of Confession is an opportunity for examination, repentance, spiritual guidance, and ultimately the reconciliation that comes with the forgiveness of sins by our Lord. We put forth these guidelines in order to prevent any form of spiritual or physical abuse within the context of confession and to facilitate an appropriate remedy if any irregularities occur. Any exceptions to these guidelines are to be brought to the attention of the rector of the chapel, who has immediate pastoral oversight for St. Vladimir's. In all instances, however, the spiritual father bears the full responsibility for the fulfillment of both the letter and the spirit of these guidelines and for maintaining clear and appropriate boundaries with those who come to him for confession.

This document has been prepared in conformity with the general practice of the Orthodox Church and with the encyclicals and directives of the Holy Synod of Bishops of The Orthodox Church in America.\* Since St. Vladimir's is a stavropegial institution under the direct spiritual authority of the Primate of The Orthodox Church in America, who also serves as the president of the seminary, these encyclicals and directives are in force here at the seminary.

The priests consider this document applicable to everyone who comes to the seminary chapel for confession. This includes not only members of the seminary's residential community (faculty, staff, students, and their families), but also anyone who attends the seminary chapel, no matter how frequently or infrequently. The priests of the seminary further recommend that those members

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\* The Orthodox Church in America, "Encyclical Letter of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America on Confession and Communion," (Syosset, NY, 1972); *ibid*, "Encyclical Letter of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America on Spiritual Life in the Church," (Syosset, NY, 1976); "Confidentiality of Confession" (Syosset, NY, 1988); "The Mystery of Penance," *Guidelines for Clergy* (Syosset, NY, 1998); *Policies, Standards, and Procedures of The Orthodox Church in America on Sexual Misconduct*, (Syosset, NY, 2003).

of the seminary community who go elsewhere for confession keep these guidelines in mind as a model of best and normal practices.

## ***II. Guidelines for the Holy Mystery of Confession***

1. Regular participation in the Mystery of Holy Confession is considered the normal practice for community members of St. Vladimir's Seminary.
2. The members of the community should seek to establish a long-term penitential relationship with a spiritual father. Once established, this relationship must be taken into account in all other aspects of community life. Before entering into such a relationship, both the spiritual father and the penitent must determine its propriety by considering carefully all aspects of their relationship, such as their being: fellow employees, professional colleagues, close friends, etc. Because of this, student priests cannot serve as spiritual fathers. The priests of the seminary chapel do not consider detrimental or a conflict of interest a penitential relationship between a professor/priest and student. Naturally, normal practice precludes the possibility of entering into such a relationship with a family member.
3. A penitent can end a relationship with a spiritual father and establish a new one with another priest at any time. In order to make such a change, the penitent first seeks the blessing of the spiritual father. Before a blessing is given, the spiritual father may request a conference with the other priest and may withhold his blessing for the new relationship. If a spiritual father withholds a blessing and the penitent considers this to be unjust, the rector can be consulted. Additionally, if for special reasons a penitent is uncomfortable seeking a blessing from the father confessor, the person may seek the opinion of the rector first. In either case, the rector can attempt to mediate a solution that either reconciles the spiritual father and the penitent, or blesses the penitent to establish a relationship with another priest. The spiritual father likewise may end the relationship if he deems it necessary. In all instances the rector of the chapel must be informed.
4. Prior to ordination, the candidate for ordination must make a canonical confession to his spiritual father, who is required by the canons to ascertain whether any impediments to ordination exist. If the spiritual father discovers a possible impediment, he should refer the matter to the appropriate episcopal authority, who alone has competence over determining such matters. Under no circumstances shall the candidate attempt to conceal or circumvent the consequences of an impediment by changing spiritual fathers. Likewise, if a priest has previously heard a

candidate's confession and believes an impediment is present but no longer serves as the candidate's spiritual father, he is obliged to refer the matter directly to the appropriate episcopal authority during the candidacy period.

5. According to the practice of the OCA and in accordance with the best advice of the canonical authorities, the secrecy of private confession is absolute. With this expectation of privacy, a penitent can make his or her confession to God in all honesty and openness before the father confessor. And, as stated in the *Guidelines for Clergy*, even in the case of a canonical confession before ordination, the spiritual father cannot reveal the content of the confession, but can only testify that an impediment exists (*Guidelines for Clergy* VII.7).
6. As a holy and sacred mystery of the Church, confession should be celebrated only in the church and only at regularly set times. In the customary practice of the seminary, confessions are heard after Vigils or before Pre-sanctified Liturgies, or at other publicly announced times. Exceptions to this rule should be avoided. If confessions are heard at other times, they should always be done during the day or immediately before or after a service, and never late at night or early in the morning. In any instance where an exception is made to this rule, the father confessor must carefully consider the reasons for the departure from the norm. If there is a sufficiently compelling reason for hearing a confession outside of the normal time, the spiritual father should alert the rector of the chapel of the situation and keep a record of the date, time, and the name of the person confessing. Only under exceptional circumstances (i.e., extended sickness or hospital stays, shut-ins, etc.) should the mystery be celebrated in any place but the church.
7. During confession and in his relationship with his spiritual children, the spiritual father should take great care to refrain from inappropriate gestures, unnecessary physical contact, and comments that are improper or that could be misconstrued.