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A Siberian Grandmother on Confession

A few years ago on Moscow's Orthodox Radio Radonezh, a caller asked a priest on the air why only old women went to church. The priest responded that this was not the case, to come and see. His answer encouraged the following wonderful letter from a woman named Valentina from Sergeev Posad, which was read on the following week's program.



“The reason for this letter,” writes our listener, “was the talk where you answered a caller’s question, and among other things said: ‘Not only old women go to church, but many young people. Just come and see.’ I know that your answer was for a specific person, but I want to add that there is nothing wrong even if only old women go to church. It means that the young people who ripen under their care will also come in their own time. I think especially of my Granny who was my chief source of religious instruction.

“My childhood was spent in the Urals, in present-day Ekaterinburg. Like most children during the war years I was in kindergarten much of the time¹ and went to school with a muddled heart and a distracted mind. Sometimes, though rarely, Granny came to see us and took me to church, to Holy Communion. There were always a lot of people in church, so many that it was difficult to make the sign of the cross over yourself, nor were the priests able to hear individual confessions from such large crowds of people. I remember Batiushka entreating us, almost tearfully: “Brothers and sisters, examine your conscience, repent before God, don’t burden my soul. The Lord is merciful and I am only His sinful witness. Don’t come under the stole without inner sorrow for your sins.”

After the general confession Batiushka only had time to cover the confessing people with his stole and read the prayer of forgiveness. I cried together with everyone, praying that the Lord would be merciful to us and forgive us, if only because of our desire to be better than we were. We had neither prayerbooks

1 During World War II, workers were often required to put in twelve and fourteen hour days in factories and the fields to help the war effort. Children stayed in communal nursery schools while their parents worked.

2 A general confession is when the priest publicly enumerates many possible sins to a crowd of parishioners. His listeners examine their conscience as he names the sins and privately repent. Then each one comes under the priest’s stole for the prayer of absolution, without verbally confessing their sins. Although this practice was done in the past for large crowds of people and when individual confessions were forbidden by the Soviet authorities, it is generally frowned upon, and most contemporary Russian priests will stand many hours hearing individual confessions rather than practice general confession.

nor the Gospels, the words I heard in church served as the basis for my prayer-rule. Later, by the fourth class I already knew the main prayers but in the first class I just mumbled something of my own invention, praying fervently for everyone. My prayer changed in spirit depending upon my mood.

I remember how nervous I was when it came time for my first confession. Many of the sins I had heard Batiushka mention I did not understand. And here I turned to Granny for an explanation. “At confession they name the sin of theft. Should I say that I have it, or not?” “You should say you have it” said Granny.” “But I did not take anyone’s things,” I said in amazement. “Every person,” replied Granny, “has all the sins, but in different stages of development. Let’s suppose you haven’t stolen anything, but you could have taken something by chance – an eraser, or a pencil, and then forgotten about it. You used it and then left it unreturned, and this is already theft because you’ve taken something that belongs to someone else. Your conscience may not speak up at once, you did not mean to take it – but try to look closer and you will see that the sin of theft is yours also. Suddenly, I remembered with shame: my friend had allowed me to cut off half of her eraser and I gave the smaller part back to her, keeping the larger for myself. Although my friend did not notice because of her kind heart, my conscience troubled me about it. I confessed this to my Granny and she said, “Well, do you see? That is why you shouldn’t have the slightest doubt, but bring penitence for everything.”

Still, I wasn’t at peace, “But Granny, Batiushka also said ‘hardness of heart.’ Do I have this sin also? I always feel sorry for everyone.” “Granny sipped some tea from her cup as we sat at the table and said, “You, due to your young years do not notice your sins, and it is I who am to blame for this. How shall I answer the Lord if even the Old Testament Prophet Elia was not spared by God for connivance in his attitude towards his spoiled children? If you were attentive and watchful it would not escape you that it is only you who now drink tea with sugar. For a long while now your mother and I have been drinking it just looking at sugar.” Granny spoke mildly but I flushed with shame and pushed the sugar away from me. “Dear granddaughter, I didn’t mean to hurt you, and we are not sorry about the sugar, but you asked for an answer and this a clear example. A kind heart cannot help but offer to another that which one likes oneself. Yesterday you begged mother to buy you a cake and you got it, but she gave her last money for it. Was that not cruel on your part? Could you not do without it? Where is your love for your mother? How do you show it? Where are your deeds of love? If you had obeyed her, not insisting on what you wanted, you would have indeed shown love.”

We cleaned the table, washed the plates, and sat down by the warm stove. Batiushka’s words were churning in my head, still not altogether clear to me. So I asked Granny again: “Granny, Batiushka also named the sin ‘a-dul-tery’.

What is it, and do I have it? Granny pressed my little head to her breast, caressed my hair and sat thinking. “No, for sure I don’t have such a sin,” I thought, and cast a questioning glance at her face. “Everyone has this sin, but you must know how it acts in you. Yesterday you and your mother went to the movies. You made two braids with bows and above them you put another bow. But why? To be beautiful, yes? It means that you want people to admire you so that everyone will say, “Look, what a beautiful girl, what nice bows she has. You only put an extra bow in your hair, but it was done out of vanity. Don’t think that I’m against your nice ribbons, but you must do everything within measure... Again, the other day I noticed that while you were drawing you painted your fingernails with a red pen and waved your hand about, admiring yourself. What was going on in your little head, only God knows, but this also could be a sin.

I looked at Granny in amazement. How can she see everything, know everything? “So it seems that in your mind I am a great sinner,” I cried. “What shall I tell Batiushka at confession? “Just say that, that you are a sinner, and if you have a chance to name the sins, do so.” That evening I begged the Lord for a very long time to forgive my sins, which were so many that I had forgotten some of them altogether. I promised not to offend the Lord any more with my sins, or mother, or Granny, or anyone. Granny told me that my main task was to be obedient and to forgive everyone everything, “the way you want the Lord to forgive you,” – and then God would love me, and so would the angels and Granny.

When I went to confession I remember how my cheeks burned from my numerous sins. But Batiushka was so kind. He forgave me and for the first time I took Holy Communion consciously. I can still remember my soul’s rejoicing in the infinite glory of the Creator. In childish words my soul poured out its delight to its Lord – and in that Holy Communion, much else (as every sincerely repenting soul knows) was revealed to me. You could write on and on about this because every person hides an amazing world inside his heart, where the struggle against inner evil is waged and the new citizen of God’s kingdom is born. Old women, like my Granny, help the priests to make this new man. This is why priests who do not see as many young people as they would like in their churches should not be downcast. Nothing is lost with the Lord. Even the remaining crumbs of the loaves and fishes were gathered up by the apostles and put into baskets. Neither will the Lord abandon a human soul if it loves Him and prays for forgiveness. I thank you for your attention and ask for your prayers for my husband and myself.

Servant of God,
Valentina