



Perfect Contrition

Recently the Holy Father, in light of the crisis caused by the coronavirus and the inability of many to seek the Sacrament of Confession, has spoken about “perfect contrition.” The Holy Father said on March 20, 2020: “You do what the Catechism says. It is very clear: if you do not find a priest to hear your confession, speak to God, he is your father, and tell him the truth. Enumerate your sins, ask the Lord for forgiveness with all your heart, and make an act of contrition. Promise him: ‘Later I will confess, but forgive me now.’ And immediately you will return to the grace of God.”

While this may sound novel to some, this notion of contrition (known as “perfect contrition”) being a means of returning to God’s grace has always existed in the Church, and the Holy Father was merely expressing a longstanding principle of the Church. To understand perfect contrition and what the Pope meant, especially in these very difficult times, we must begin with the meaning of sin and the purpose of absolution in general. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is helpful here:

1440: Sin is before all else an offense against God, a rupture of communion with him. At the same time it damages communion with the Church. For this reason conversion entails both God’s forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church, which are expressed and accomplished liturgically by the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

Put another way, when we sin, we harm the connection with God and the Church that baptism, which washes away our sins, and the other sacraments have set in place. We mend this rupture through the absolution of the sins that we have committed after our baptisms.

So how do we obtain this absolution of sins? All absolution comes from God. As the Catechism states: “Only God forgives sins. Since he is the Son of God, Jesus says of himself, “The Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins” and exercises this divine power: “Your sins are forgiven.” Further, by virtue of his divine authority he gives this power to men to exercise in his name.”

This final note about his divine authority giving power to men to exercise in his name is very important. As we know, by divine authority, the priesthood was given the power to exercise in Christ’s name in a number of ways, including in the process of absolution through the Sacrament of Confession.

The Sacrament of Confession was not given to the Church merely as a means of absolving sins, but also as a way for God to provide a kind of assurance to us. When we genuinely approach a priest **with contrition**, confess our sins and have the intention of doing penance and sinning no

more, we can be certain that the absolution granted by the priest has placed us in a state of grace and reconciled us with the Church and with Christ. This certainty is a gift from God.

But the Sacrament of Confession does not only do this. It also provides us guidance and a means for how to remedy the harms that flow from our sins, which we call penance. The Catechism explains it this way:

1459: Many sins wrong our neighbor. One must do what is possible in order to repair the harm (e.g., return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, pay compensation for injuries). Simple justice requires as much. But sin also injures and weakens the sinner himself, as well as his relationships with God and neighbor. Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must “make satisfaction for” or “expiate” his sins. This satisfaction is also called “penance.”

Note most importantly that the Sacrament of Confession is not merely a process. If one does not have genuine contrition for his or her sins, the sin is not absolved. Put another way, contrition is the key to absolution. Or, as the Catechism puts it, contrition occupies “first place” for the penitent. Confessing and being willing to do penance simply flow from this underlying contrition.

So what is contrition then? The Catechism continues: Contrition is “sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again.” Contrition is recognition that one has done wrong and is therefore moved to remedy the wrong. Contrition, put another way, is the underlying desire to seek absolution or forgiveness.

The Church, recognizing that this desire can be spurred on in different ways, understands contrition in a two-fold manner: as imperfect contrition and as perfect contrition. The Catechism explains imperfect contrition this way:

1453: The contrition called “imperfect” (or “attrition”) is also a gift of God, a prompting of the Holy Spirit. It is born of the consideration of sin's ugliness or the fear of eternal damnation and the other penalties threatening the sinner (contrition of fear). Such a stirring of conscience can initiate an interior process which, under the prompting of grace, will be brought to completion by sacramental absolution. By itself however, imperfect contrition cannot obtain the forgiveness of grave sins, but it disposes one to obtain forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance.

When we sin and recognize the wrong we have done, we often feel the need to remedy that sin. When that feeling of need is rooted in *fear* of consequences of the wrong, we have imperfect contrition. We are acting primarily out of a desire to avoid the harm that comes from our wrongdoing. There is nothing wrong with imperfect contrition, especially in that it pushes us toward the Sacrament of Confession, but it is not the fullest expression of contrition we can have following sin.

Perfect contrition on the other hand is the fullest expression of contrition. Perfect contrition arises out of love of God, as compared to fear of the consequences of sin. The Catechism states:

1452. When it arises from a love by which God is loved above all else, contrition is called “perfect” (contrition of charity). Such contrition remits venial sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible.

Such contrition is not rooted in a desire to protect ourselves or avoid the consequences of sin. It is rooted in love for God, in genuine recognition that we have harmed our relationship with God, that we have put aside the communion which we should cherish. When we think of the times we have truly wronged a loved one, and we anguish not over the consequences of our actions, but over the love we have offended in our wrongdoing, we have some concept of what perfect contrition looks like.

But love is not merely an emotional exercise. Love consists of real acts and obedience. In particular, this love includes following the path God has laid out for us for the expiation of the harmful effects of sin. That is, seeking out sacramental confession and penance as soon as it is available. For this reason, the Catechism goes on to say that perfect contrition **“also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible.”**

So how do we obtain perfect contrition during these incredibly trying times when we might not be able to seek the Sacrament of Confession? There is no particular method or special process, but as the Holy Father has told us, we must approach God like we would a loving father. If we do not feel we have genuine love for God, we ask him to be filled with that love. God always understands the difficult situations we find ourselves in. Like a good father, he is always willing to provide for us.

To conclude, if you feel you are suffering under grave sin:

- Speak to God, express your love for him and his son
- Pray for genuine, loving contrition for your sins
- Enumerate your sins
- Ask for forgiveness for your sins
- Say an [Act of Contrition](#)
- Promise with true intention to confess your sins to a priest, whom God has placed here for you, as soon as you are able, so that you might be healed and fully reconciled

While we might not have the immediate assurance of the Sacrament at this time, of the priest’s words: “I absolve you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” we do have the assurance of Christ’s words: “Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name.”

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