

Act of Perfect Contrition

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If one is unable to get to Confession: make an Act of Perfect Contrition, which requires: The love of God, the sincere desire for forgiveness and the ardent commitment to receive the sacrament of reconciliation when available.

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. (Catechism, 1452)

Act of Contrition:

“O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of Thy grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin. Amen.”

Saint Thomas in his Summa of theology clearly explains the Church’s teaching on perfect contrition. When a person makes an act of perfect contrition, on the instant, even before he goes to confession, mortal sin is forgiven, sanctifying grace is restored in his soul — and with it is restored the friendship of God. In the act of imperfect contrition fear of hell is the prevailing motive; the sinner is more in love with himself than he is with God. And yet God was willing to accept this imperfect contrition when He instituted the sacrament of penance.

But what interests us here is the fact that the act of imperfect contrition, which suffices in confession, will not remove mortal sins outside of confession, before absolution has been given by the priest. To effect absolution outside the confessional, the contrition must have a higher quality, love for God, as its prevailing motive.

Being sorry out of love for God has often been described as having a desire to be reunited to God because of who He is – because of God's perfect love for us, and because of sorrow for having offended God by sin. It means wanting to live in unity with God, and to put aside the sins that stand in the way.

“Perfect contrition is sorrow for sin arising from perfect love. In perfect contrition the sinner detests sin more than any other evil, because it offends God, who is supremely good and deserving of all human love. Its motive is founded on God’s own goodness and not merely his goodness to the sinner or to humanity. This motive, and not the intensity of the act, less still the feelings experienced, is what essentially constitutes perfect sorrow...” EWTN.

Act of perfect contrition is not a replacement for the sacrament of penance. “Even perfect contrition is never separated from the sacrament, at least in intention...if one makes a perfect act of contrition, it’s not ‘Oh, I don’t have to go to confession anymore.’ Quite the opposite.

The sacrament of penance remains the sole, ordinary means for the forgiveness of mortal sins after baptism. Contrition is about conversion which means turning away from attachment to sin and turning toward the sacraments.

Pope Francis last week encouraged Catholics confined to their homes to ask God for forgiveness and then to go to confession when they are able.

“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...Promise him: ‘Later I will confess, but forgive me now.’ And immediately you will return to the grace of God.”

There are 5 qualities or elements that must be in the act of perfect contrition:

1. Interior,
2. Supernatural,
3. Universal,
4. Supreme, and
5. Intense.

Interior:

What do we mean when we say that the act of perfect contrition must be interior? We mean that it is an interior act of the mind and will. It is something even independent of spoken words. The mind and heart must determine everything that is said in the Act of Contrition.

Supernatural

There are many elements or divisions in this quality. The act of contrition must be supernatural as to the "power" with which it is performed. Actual grace is the supernatural assistance that enlightens the mind to know the will of God and strengthens the will to do the will of God. Hence, before starting the act of contrition, it is good to ask for this special grace. Without it, the act of contrition is useless.

Secondly, the act must be supernatural as to "motive." Here we have 2 motives. The inferior motive (imperfect contrition) has to do with the dread of the loss of heaven and the pains of hell. The superior motive (perfect contrition) has to do with the fact that we have offended God who is all good and desiring of our love.

Together with the sacraments of Baptism and Penance, the inferior motive (fearing the loss of heaven and the pains of hell) is sufficient for forgiveness of all sins. However, outside of those sacraments, only the superior motive (being sorry for having offended God who is all good) will suffice for the forgiveness of all sins. We must answer this question. Just why are you sorry for your sins.

Universal

The act of contrition must include all of the mortal sins. One may never keep even one pet sin. One either leaves all of his sins behind, or he keeps all of them for God's just judgment at the moment of death. Sins when left alone will never pass away.

Supreme

When We say that the act of contrition must be supreme, we are saying that we must determine that we would rather die than commit a mortal sin. We must hate mortal sin (venial sin too, if possible) even more than death itself. Just think how careful we are about our lives. We will avoid the company of those who have a contagious sickness in order to save our life.

Intense

In the above form of contrition, we express this determination with the word "detest." We do not say that we just do not like sin, but we must "detest" sin in the most intense way and our desire to not sin again must be intense.

Purpose of Amendment

If one is sorry for their sins, they should automatically determine not to sin again. For example, a person living in adultery who is really sorry for his sins, should automatically leave their sinful way of life.

An Act of the Will

When we make the act of perfect contrition, we should pay very close attention to every word in the form, and we are to make the acts that are required by the form. Never say, I pray the act of contrition. Do say, I make the act of contrition.

When persons get married, they do not merely say a formula, but they make an act of the will to join themselves in matrimony. When a person makes vows in religion, he does not merely recite a formula, but he makes an act of the will (expressed in words) to embrace the religious life.

In like manner, the act of contrition is an act by which one is sorry for past sins, and that sorrow extends into the future so that it also requires the purpose of amendment never to commit those sins again. Contrition is “sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again” (CCC 1451).

A Simple Method of Making an Act of Perfect Contrition – The Three Visits of St Charles Borromeo

‘Do you wish,’ he used to say, ‘to know an easy way of exciting yourselves to true sorrow for your sins?’

Make three little visits- the first above, the second below, the third in the middle.

THE FIRST VISIT ABOVE

Your visit up above will show you Paradise, which you have renounced for some empty pleasure, for some sinful thought, or word or act. The displeasure that will arise in your heart at the thought of this loss will be good attrition, or imperfect contrition, and in Confession will suffice to wash away your sins.

THE SECOND VISIT BELOW

‘Your visit below will show you that frightful place in which you would be now if God had exercised His justice- that place where you would forever suffer the torment of fire, far from your true home, which is Heaven. The sorrow arising from this consideration is also excellent, and sufficient in Confession.

THE THIRD VISIT IN THE MIDDLE

‘Your third visit will show you Christ crucified and dying for you on Calvary amid pains and insults of every description. The knowledge that the Crucified One is Infinite Goodness Itself, your greatest Benefactor, Whom, instead of loving, you have insulted and crucified, will awaken in your heart sentiments of love and sorrow that will wipe away your sins even before you enter the confessional.’

Additional Resource for **Reflections on How to Make an Act of Perfect Contrition**

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