

Perfect Contrition

By Rev. F. Quirijnen, S.J.

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The dealings of God with mankind throughout history are a divine romance of condescending love and infinite mercy. This truth is splendidly borne out by the doctrine of Perfect Contrition, if we consider it in its proper setting, namely, by recalling to mind what sin is, what makes its malice, and how the sinner can be reconciled with God.

I. - SIN AND REDEMPTION.

The Malice of Sin.

— ‘Sin is a willful offence against God, our Creator and Last End.’ On God, we depend entirely and at every instant. To Him we belong: — ‘In Him we live and move and are.’ Therefore, His Commandments must be the rule of all our actions. To submit to His will wholeheartedly and to regulate one’s life according to His laws is a strict duty of justice on the part of the creature to its Creator, the servant to His Master. At the same time, this service is man’s greatest dignity and the only way of realizing the end for which he has been created, that is, God’s glory and his own happiness.

Now when he commits a grievous sin man destroys the moral order established by God and despises His Commandments. He exclaims as a rebel, — ‘I will not serve’; he turns away from his final end, the immutable Good, which is God, and seeks his gratification in creatures that can never satisfy his thirst for happiness.

Even all this does not lay bare the full malice of sin. God is more to us than our Creator and Lord. Through grace poured into our souls in Baptism God has become our Heavenly Father, and we His beloved children, sharers of His divine life, partakers of His very Nature and future heirs to His Heavenly Kingdom. St. John exclaims with joy and enthusiasm, — ‘See what love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are!’ And he concludes: — ‘Now, therefore, my dearest children, abide in Him and do not sin.’ Besides being an offence against God’s infinite Majesty, sin has now the additional malice of being a revolt of the child towards his Father.

The sinner rejects the love of Him — ‘Who has so loved man as to give His only begotten Son, that they should possess eternal life’; he breaks the bonds of personal friendship established by grace between himself and the Divine Persons; he — ‘crucifies by his own act the Son of God afresh and openly disgraces Him’; he expels the Holy Ghost, the sweet Guest of his soul; he destroys in himself the Kingdom of God and cuts himself off from the source of eternal life and happiness. Such free and deliberate acts of sin constitute supreme ingratitude and revolt against a God of infinite Majesty, Holiness and Love. Hence the malice of sin is in a certain sense infinite and the sinner deserves in strict justice an eternal punishment: — ‘Of how much worse punishment,’ says St. Paul, — ‘think you, will be judged worthy, who has trampled upon the Son of God, and regarded the Blood of the Covenant, by which he was sanctified, a profane thing... For we know who it was

that said, — ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay.’ ... It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!’ (Hebrews 10:29-31) St. Paul has here in view the especially grave sin of apostasy from the faith, yet this terrible indictment the sinner will incur for every mortal sin, unless he repents in time.

Reconciliation, the Work of Two.

— ‘Sin is the work of man who freely, of his own accord, has turned away from God. But can he also repair his fault, create again order out of disorder, make up for the offence and obtain pardon?’
— He can, no doubt lament what he has done and do penance for it. Yet, left to himself, all his tears and sighs and sorrow will be of no avail whatever. In no other field does man’s utter helplessness thrust itself so forcibly upon him as when he endeavours to rise from sin. It takes two persons to obtain one pardon. The sinner, says St. Thomas, is like the man who throws himself into a deep pit; he is himself the cause of his fall, but of himself, he cannot get out in the same way as he could throw himself into it. God, the Divine Offended, alone can blot out his sin by tendering His pardon: — ‘Who can forgive sin but God alone?’

Few points of our Faith are so fundamental and more explicit in the teaching of the Church: — ‘If anyone,’ defines the Council of Trent, — ‘maintains that without the previous inspiration of the Holy Ghost and His help, man is able to believe, hope, love or do penance as he ought (as it behooves he should), so that the grace of justification be granted to him, let him be condemned.’

The reconciliation of the sinner with God must, then, of necessity be the work of two: God and the sinner.

God’s Part in forgiving is primary and foremost. The initiative must come from Him. He must make the first step towards our reconciliation, by manifesting His will to restore us in His friendship. Is God ready to forgive our sins? — Yes, He is and we must be deeply convinced of this; else our repentance for sins will not be true contrition, but merely the remorse of Judas that led to despair: — ‘When Judas, who betrayed Him, saw that He was condemned, he repented... saying: “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood!” Then he went off and hanged himself.’

God has manifested His wish and His will to forgive us all our offences by such unmistakable and compelling proofs that still to doubt His mercy would be an offence worse than all our previous sins together. — ‘God is love,’ says the Apostle St. John, and — ‘He has displayed His love in our regard by sending His only begotten Son into the world in order that we might live through Him.’ The same truth is affirmed by St. Paul, in yet stronger terms: — ‘God proves His love towards us, because, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us...’

Our reconciliation, therefore, as far as it depends on God, is assured.

The Part of Christ.

— ‘God calls us to reconciliation with Himself through Christ and in Christ.’ Being true man, Christ could suffer and satisfy. Being all Love, He generously embraced the arduous mission signified by His very name: — ‘You shall call His name Jesus; for He shall save His people from their sins.’ He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. — ‘He gave Himself up for us, an offering and sacrifice to God.’ Being true God, His satisfaction had infinite value:

— ‘One drop of His blood has power to save the whole world,’ says St. Thomas no less truly than beautifully. — ‘Christ’s voluntary suffering was such a good act that, because of its being found in human nature, God was appeased for every offence of the human race.’

Thus, Christ satisfied for our sins and merited our reconciliation. At the same time, He became the supreme model and measure of our reparation and expiation:

— ‘Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example to follow His footsteps.’

And remember that Christ merited and satisfied not only for mankind in general, but for each of us in particular. He is the Saviour of the world; He is as much My Saviour. Each one of us may repeat in all truth the words in which St. Paul delighted:

— ‘He has loved ME, He has delivered Himself up for ME.’

How fitting it would have been for us to have stood under the Cross of our dying Saviour, in order to offer Him personally up to God as a sacrifice for our sins. This was impossible. But, by the Cross His Mother was standing.

Mary’s presence on Calvary at the supreme moment of her Son’s sacrifice was not fortuitous, but willed by God. She represented all of us and co-operated in the Redemption on behalf of mankind by consenting to the sacrifice of Her divine Son, offering herself with Him and accepting for us in advance the fruits of the Redemption.

Man’s Part.

— ‘The application of Christ’s merits to each one of us marks the second phase of our Redemption. And here God wants our co-operation — indeed secondary and subordinate to that of Christ — yet absolutely necessary: — ‘God who created us without us will not save us without us.’ God deigns to stand in need of us. In this, He respects our sense of responsibility and fairness. Since we have been the cause of the offence, it is meet and just we should take our share in the reparation, too. Do we not, deep in our soul, feel prompted to do so? Does our gratitude towards Christ not urge us to the same? As He died for each one of us, so does He now — ‘call His own by name’ to co-operate with Him in their own redemption. Can I bear the thought of merely receiving the benefits of such boundless love without rendering love for love, or without proving my love in some way, like that in which He has manifested His love first, namely, by generously taking my share in the reparation? But in what does our co-operation consist? — In allowing God to do fully His work in us through Christ. We believe in Christ as our Redeemer. We trust that for His sake God will be merciful to us; hence, we begin to love God, to detest our sins and to do penance for them.

The sinner has built within his soul a citadel where he asserts himself and hardens himself against God and His eternal Law. Before he can go and meet God again and surrender, the citadel of evil must be broken down. This is the work of man’s co-operation, his contrition.

II. - WHAT IS CONTRITION?

Contrition is an act of sorrow and detestation of sin committed, with a firm resolve of sinning no more. The sorrow and detestation regard the past, the purpose of amendment is meant for the future. DETESTATION is an act of our reason, a judgment of our mind by which we acknowledge to God that we have done evil in His sight: — ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in Your sight.’ This detestation is followed on the part of the will by a movement of displeasure and grief, which we call SORROW:

— ‘How have I been able to offend God, my Creator and Supreme Good! Had I but never displeased Him!’

Finally, as nobody wants to commit again what he is sorry for having done, detestation and sorrow for sin, if SINCERE, necessarily contain the purpose of AMENDMENT or change of life: — ‘I firmly resolve never to sin again. O my God, I want henceforward to remain Your Child; strengthen me against my malice and my weakness; do not allow me to be ever separated from You again.’

It is advisable to express this purpose clearly. Call to mind the occasions in which you have sinned and beg God for strength to shun them altogether, or, if this is impossible, to overcome the temptations that will arise again. Yet, this purpose of amendment need not be explicit, nor expressed in words. — Every sincere conversion to God contains the will to please Him henceforth by the observance of all His laws and hence already implies the purpose of amendment.

The Qualities of Contrition.

Not every regret for sin is acceptable to God. It must be sincere, universal and supernatural.

1. Sincerity is the first requisite. Suppose a man came and prostrated himself before his king, protesting that he was sorry for having offended him, but all the while was harbouring a murderous plan in his brain. Would such conduct not imply treachery worse even than the previous offence? How much more then ought we to be sincere with God in our protestations of sorrow:

— ‘Be converted to ME WITH ALL YOUR HEART.’

2. Sincere contrition is also UNIVERSAL or complete. It must extend to all the mortal sins — which we are conscious of having committed and which have not yet been forgiven. — We must not except a single one. As long as we cherish even one mortal sin, we cannot be reconciled with God. Every mortal sin destroys the bands and bonds of friendship with God. We cannot be at the same time God’s friends and God’s enemies. We may dupe ourselves with words, saying: — ‘O my God I am sorry for having offended You’; but as long as we cling to so much as one mortal sin, we are but aggravating our guilt, before God; we add this new act of insincerity to the burden of our previous offences. — ‘Cast them from you, ALL your transgressions... do penance for ALL your iniquities.’

Often one is more strongly attached to some particular sinful object. In exciting oneself to contrition, one must be careful not to overlook these besetting sins, as one may easily do, owing to the strong inclinations one feels to them.

On the other hand, God is a Father. He does not expect the impossible. Even when some sins have escaped our memory, they will be forgiven with those for which we make our act of Perfect Contrition.

As for VENIAL sins, although Contrition can exist even if we remain wilfully attached to them, yet it is highly desirable to arouse sorrow for them also, at least for those that are more deliberate. For they obstruct the full inflow of grace, make Perfect Contrition more difficult and easily lead to mortal sin.

3. Thirdly, our contrition must be SUPERNATURAL. It must arise under the Inspiration and impulse of God’s grace, be rooted in divine faith, permeated with trust in the merits of Christ, and offered in union with HIS own sufferings and satisfactions.

Thanks to divine grace, instead of being merely a necessary and hard duty of Justice, our contrition becomes an honour and a privilege. For it consists in co-operating intimately with Christ the Redeemer in the destruction of sin — as intimately as in a body a member co-operates with the head. Contrition consists in — ‘that wondrous divine dispensation whereby those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ are to be filled up by us,’ and which made St. Paul exclaim: — ‘I rejoice in my sufferings.’

Perfect and Imperfect Contrition.

Our repentance can be more or less generous. If we fully co-operate with grace, we shall reach Perfect Contrition. A less generous co-operation will produce only imperfect contrition. Both have certain elements in common: both are a sincere, or interior and universal sorrow for sin, produced by God’s grace. But in other ways, Perfect Contrition surpasses the imperfect.

Imperfect contrition is a certain displeasure of our sins but not so great as it ought to be. Hence, it does not by itself reconcile us with God. Yet it is produced by grace and therefore is good and acceptable to God; it prepared the way to reconciliation with Him, leads us to Perfect Contrition and, IN THE ACTUAL reception of the Sacrament of Penance, becomes a sufficient disposition to obtain forgiveness.

Perfect Contrition, on the other hand, is a thorough displeasure of our sins, a detestation of sin as great as it ought to be. We ought to love our last end, God, the Immutable Good, above all things. Now, sin turns us away from God. It is clear that we ought to detest sin above every evil, — ‘above all things,’ supremely, more even than the punishment of hell or the loss of heaven.

But to detest sin supremely because it is an offence against God is equivalent to loving God for His own sake. From this act of perfect love of God, contrition derives its perfection. Hence, it is best defined as a sorrow and detestation of sin that are animated by the supernatural love of God for His own sake. It is — ‘contrition perfected by charity,’ as the Council of Trent declares.

The following are prayers expressing Perfect Contrition: —

1. ‘O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, because Thou art so very good, and I firmly purpose by the help of Thy grace not to offend Thee again.’

In 1921, the Holy See declared the English text here given to be an accurate version of the original Italian. And in December, 1937, Pius XI (— in the new — ‘Preces’ No. 26) granted an indulgence of three years every time for every act of faith, hope, charity, or contrition in any form of words found in approved catechisms.

[Now a partial indulgence.]

2. The following formula is by St. Leonard: — — ‘O my God, because You are so good, I am very sorry that I have sinned against You, and I will not sin again.’

Other formulas might be cited. They are helps to arouse our souls to Perfect Contrition, but no one is strictly necessary. Contrition resides in our mind and will, not in words. Whenever our sorrow for sin is animated by the pure love of God, our contrition is Perfect. This excellence of Perfect Contrition appears best from a consideration of its effects. But before we begin this study, let us add a few remarks.

3. Perfect Contrition, we said, is a sorrow for our sins, — ‘above all things.’ Yet, it is unnecessary, even imprudent, to test our contrition by making comparisons between the evil of sin and the evil of some terrible torture, and asking whether we would choose the torture rather than the sin.

— ‘The contrite sinner,’ says St. Thomas, — ‘must, IN GENERAL, be prepared to suffer any pain rather than commit sin, but he is not bound to make a comparison between this pain or that pain. On the contrary, it is foolish to question oneself or other persons on the choice that would be made if confronted with any particular suffering.’

4. Perfect Contrition proceeds from the pure love of God. Have then motives other than pure love to be excluded? By no means. The love of gratitude towards God, the hope of heaven and the fear of hell, can very well move me to detest my sins SIMULTANEOUSLY with the love of God for His own sake. In practice, therefore, if we feel moved to sorrow for our sins by these lower motives, we must NOT try to eliminate them, by saying, for example, — ‘O my God, I detest my sins, not because through them I have deserved hell or lost heaven, but purely because they have offended You who are my God and King.’ Far better is it humbly to acknowledge:

— ‘O my God, I detest my sins because I have deserved Your just punishment in this life and in the next, and have lost heaven.’ Only let us not stop here; let us use these motives as steps to ascend to the motive of love: — ‘but grant me the grace, I beseech You, O my God, to detest my sins chiefly because they have offended Your infinite Goodness, Sanctity and Love.’

5. Perfect Contrition is often accompanied by sensible emotion which, if it is strong, may manifest itself outwardly in sighs and tears. This is common with the Saints. The innocent little Aloysius of Gonzaga, when going for the first time to confession, was so overcome with sorrow for his tiny faults that he fell senseless at the feet of his confessor. Then there is the touching Gospel scene of the woman-sinner, who came to Jesus, — ‘and standing behind at His feet weeping, began to bathe His feet with her tears...’ Likewise, we read of the Apostle Peter, who had denied His divine Master, that — ‘the Lord turned and looked at him... , who going out wept bitterly.’

Instances could be multiplied. Must we conclude that without sensible sorrow Perfect Contrition is impossible? No. The saints are intended by God to be our models by their heroic virtues. Their contrition is most perfect. The sensible emotion and outward manifestations of contrition are the outcome of the intensity of their sorrow. They are due to special graces which are, both supernaturally and psychologically, powerful helps in our fight against sin. Nevertheless, no sensible emotion is required for contrition to be perfect.

The reason is simply because we cannot command our emotions as we like; to a large extent, they escape the control of our will. Hence, God does not require any sensible sorrow. The child, at grips with a burning fever, cannot feel just then that it loves its anxiously watching mother. Does it love her the less for it? The mother herself will be the last to believe so. Again, a mother may usually feel far more affection for her child than for God, yet her love of God — perhaps not felt at all — will be perfect if she is ready to give up her darling rather than see him commit a mortal sin. The child’s love for its mother and the mother’s love for God are independent of their feelings.

Similarly, a sinner may feel little sensible sorrow or even none at all, and yet in his mind detest sin as the greatest of evils and be resolved to give up everything rather than to offend God again. If he is thus disposed, his contrition is perfect, as was the case with the good thief and many other penitents, of whom we do not read that they broke into sighs and tears.

Here one might object: — ‘If I feel no sensible sorrow for my sins, how can I know for certain that I have Perfect Contrition?’

Even sensible sorrow and tears are only probable, not infallible, signs that our contrition is perfect. Their absence is no indication that our contrition is but imperfect.

Absolute certainty in this respect no one can reach — except through a revelation from God. In His wisdom and mercy, God always keeps us in sufficient uncertainty that we may continue working out our salvation in all humility. On the other hand, if we do what lies in us to acquire Perfect Contrition, especially by frequently praying for it, we may be confident that God will grant us this grace. If, further, we carry out our purpose of amendment by avoiding the proximate occasions of sin and profiting by the first opportunity to approach the Sacrament of Penance — this will be a sure test that our contrition was perfect.

Is then Perfect Contrition something hard and complicated? — To overcome this false impression look for a moment at Perfect Contrition as it sprang up under the touch of divine grace in a model penitent.

Jesus chose not to be crucified alone: — ‘At the same time two robbers were crucified with Him,’ — ‘two thieves, two criminals.’ How hideous must their degraded souls have looked in God’s eyes!

Jesus was now the object of scoffing and derision on the part of the mob. One of the criminal’s joined in this insolent mockery, but not so the other. Had he heard Jesus praying for His executioners, and at this extraordinary manifestation of goodness and mercy recognized God in Him? Had he, in his agony, caught a glimpse of the superhuman patience and peace of Jesus? Had the Blessed Virgin all the while been offering Her Divine Son for his conversion?

In any case, grace entered into his mind and opened his eyes to the wretched state of his soul. He began to acknowledge his guilt: — ‘Justly indeed are we condemned, for we are receiving the due reward of our misdeeds.’ This humble confession was at once rewarded by further light; he recognized the innocence of Jesus and proclaimed it in the face of his enemies: — ‘This Man has done no evil.’ Finally, the light of grace still increasing, he realized there was a secret connection between his own awful sin and the sufferings of this Innocent Man and that this Just One offered Himself a victim and sacrifice for the guilty. Shame and sorrow now make him address Jesus with a prayer, as bold in confidence, as it is simple and deep in humility: ‘Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom.’

No sooner were the words uttered than Jesus, slightly turning His head towards him, said: — ‘Amen, Amen, I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.’ — “Words full of consolation,” says St. Augustine, — “for it leaves place for hope up till the last breath.”

— “Who could have believed,” exclaims St. Robert Bellarmine, in his turn, — “that the thief would have been transferred on a sudden from a cross to a kingdom?” All this in virtue of one act of Perfect Contrition. For, asserts St. Thomas, — “Christ’s words ‘today you shall be with Me in Paradise’ was said to him (the thief) for one act of penance.” — ‘Such is the liberality of Our Divine Saviour’ and the wonderful power of Perfect Contrition.

III. — THE EFFECTS OF PERFECT CONTRITION.

A tree is known by its fruit, Our Lord has said. A consideration of the fruits of Perfect Contrition will doubtless still more impress on us its importance and excellence. These effects differ according as a person is in the state of grace or in mortal sin. Presently we take the latter case.

(a.) A person in the state of mortal sin is at enmity with God. But God's grace and the Holy Ghost move him to sorrow and repentance. Corresponding to the grace received, he makes an act of Perfect Contrition. What change takes place in him? Outwardly none. Yet in the depth of his soul things have happened at which the very Angels marvel and rejoice, things greater than the creation of the universe greater, too, than the resurrection of Lazarus, or any other visible miracle wrought by Christ during his life on earth.

Contrition Justifies.

— 'The primary and chief effect which Contrition produces is reconciliation with God.' — 'Perfect Contrition,' the Council of Trent teaches, — 'reconciles man with God before the Sacrament (of Penance) is actually received.' Reconciliation with God means foremost that justification which St. Paul and St. John never weary in describing, admiring and praising in enthusiastic terms:

You were in darkness, now you are sons of the light and sons of the day. — You are renewed, a new creature in Christ Jesus. — You have been grafted on Christ; His life flows in you; you are in Him and He is in you together with the Father, whose beloved children you are, and with the Holy Ghost, of whom you have become the living temples. Such are the effects of justification and consequently of contrition.

Perfect Contrition justifies; it restores the supernatural life of grace to the soul.

— 'According to a generally accepted opinion, through perfect contrition the soul receives again all the sanctifying grace it had before and also an increase of grace in recompense for its act of Perfect Contrition.' The words of Holy Scripture seem to imply this: — 'The wickedness to the wicked shall not hurt him in what day soever he shall turn from his wickedness.' (Ezekiel 33:12) Perfect Contrition also restores to life the merits of good works performed in the previous state of grace but destroyed by sin.

Contrition Remits the Guilt of Sin.

— 'Through Perfect Contrition the light and life of sanctifying grace have been restored.' By the very fact, the guilt of all mortal sins — and also of all venial sins on which Contrition has been made to bear — has been forgiven. — 'As a fire which has taken possession of a forest cleanses it out thoroughly, so the fire of love (contained in Perfect Contrition), where it falls, takes away and blots out everything that could injure the divine seed (sanctifying grace).' — 'Such is the efficacy of true contrition,' the Roman Catechism teaches, — 'that by its benefit we at once obtain, from the Lord, the pardon of all our sins.' — Perfect Contrition works in us the spiritual miracle promised by the Holy Ghost through the Prophet: — 'When you shall seek the Lord with all your heart and in the affection of your soul... , if your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white as snow: and if they be red as crimson, they shall be white as wool.' (See Isaiah 1:18.)

Contrition Remits Everlasting Punishment along with the guilt of the offence against God. An instant ago Hell was still yawning under the sinner's feet; now Heaven is thrown open to him. He was under the slavery of the devil; now he is — 'in Jesus Christ,' and, as St. Paul writes to the Romans, (8:1) — 'there is no condemnation to them that are in Jesus Christ.'

Let us keep this in mind, especially when we visit the sick, or assist someone in his last struggle. Perhaps for some reason or other he cannot receive the last Sacraments. Maybe he is a non-Catholic. Whoever he be, he may easily be taught to make an act of Perfect Contrition for all the sins of his life. He will thus save his soul: and we shall have the immense consolation and great merit of having been God's instrument in his salvation. What a grand opportunity of consoling the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who on the cross, thirsted with a burning thirst for the salvation of souls, and feels immense joy "upon one sinner doing penance."

Contrition Remits the Temporal Punishment which remains to be undergone in this life or in Purgatory, after the guilt of sin and the eternal punishment have been forgiven. The more intense the love of God which animates contrition, the greater is the part of temporal punishment which is taken away. — 'It may even happen,' St. Thomas teaches, — 'that contrition which follows from charity merits... the remission of ALL punishment... because contrition although finite in its intensity, derives infinite power from the charity, whereby it is quickened.'

A Preservative Against Faults.

— 'One sin leads to another, but also one grace calls for further grace'. Perfect Contrition reconciles us with God, makes of us again His friends and beloved children. He owes it, then, to Himself to protect us with a special Providence against new falls. In virtue both of this special Providence to which it entitles us and of the charity by which it is animated, Perfect Contrition makes us again firmly adhere to God as to our Supreme Good. It is therefore an excellent preservative against falls.

Finally, note that all this array of wonderful effects is produced AS SOON AS Perfect Contrition arises in the soul, as instantaneously as when — 'God said: Be light made. And light was made.'

God might have limited His mercy and granted the grace of Perfect Contrition in certain circumstances only, for example, when a person is in danger of death. But God's mercy knows no bounds. Since man has the sad power — or rather weakness — of committing sin at any time and in any place, God holds out to him the grace of Perfect Contrition at all times and in all places — a truly marvellous dispensation. Perfect Contrition brings back the resurrection of the soul, its coming back to life, its life in God through Christ Jesus. The raising of the body of Lazarus to life was a great miracle, because by that time he had been in the grave for three days. But through Perfect Contrition Christ daily raises up souls that were dead to God, perhaps for years on end.

(b.) If now a soul already in the state of grace makes an act of Perfect Contrition, it is clear there is no question of remitting guilt and punishment. Yet, the effects in this case are not less great: every act of Perfect Contrition produces in such a soul a growth of supernatural life, an increase of the pure love of God and of hatred of sin; a more intimate union with our divine Lord, more particularly with His Sacred Heart — 'sorrowful unto death' in the Garden of Olives, and a closer resemblance with Him on the Cross. If these acts are repeated throughout the day, they produce the precious sense of compunction, of which we shall say something more below.

Wonderful then is the efficacy of Perfect Contrition! As St. Thomas teaches, it is in a true sense infinite because its power is derived from an infinite power, the Passion and the Death of Christ. Our Lord has first in His own Person grieved, sorrowed and suffered for our sins, that He might now suffer grief and sorrow for the same IN US. When we make an act of Perfect Contrition, it is no doubt our own act, but still more is it His: it is His grace which inspired it and sustains it all

along; and it is He who brings it to fruition by uniting it to His own sorrow and Passion, thereby giving it divine and therefore infinite efficacy.

Some more Remarks:

1. Contrition does not dispense from Confession.

— As contrition ‘cleanses the soul’ even before confession, one may ask: — ‘Why then, go to Confession at all?’ The answer is that the Sacrament of Penance is the ordinary means to obtain forgiveness. Perfect Contrition produces the same effect, but not independently of Confession. It does so, partly at least, — ‘in virtue of the intention of Confession’ which it implies. — ‘The reconciliation (produced by Perfect Contrition) is not to be ascribed to Contrition itself without the desire of the Sacrament (of Penance), which desire is included in contrition,’ says the Council of Trent. Without this intention of Confession Perfect Contrition could not remit a single sin.

Has this intention to be expressly made? No, it is not necessary to think of confession when arousing oneself to Contrition. It suffices that one does not exclude it by the explicit intention not to confess one’s sins. Perfect Contrition, if sincere, includes the will of observing henceforth all God’s Commandments. Now, to confess one’s sins is a divine command. Therefore, the intention to do so is contained in the very act of Perfect Contrition. The Catechism summarizes this doctrine by saying: — ‘Perfect Contrition has this special value that by it our sins are forgiven immediately even before we confess them: nevertheless, if they are mortal sins, we are strictly bound to confess them.’

Must we avail ourselves of the first opportunity to go and confess the mortal sins forgiven by Perfect Contrition? — No, there is no such obligation. But, of course, it is advisable to go to confession soon after. — ‘If we fall into mortal sin,’ says the Catechism, — ‘we should make an act of Perfect Contrition and go to confession as soon as we can.’

2. Contrition Does Not Supersede Confession.

— Nor is it even meant to diminish ‘the frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance’. The relation between Contrition and Confession is illustrated by the following comparison: — ‘When you meet with an accident and injure your hand or foot, what do you do? You immediately apply such remedies as you have at hand and then call the doctor at the first opportunity. Do the same for an injury to your soul: Immediately make an act of Perfect Contrition, which is the home remedy, and then, as soon as possible, have recourse to your spiritual doctor, your confessor.’

When one confesses the sins already forgiven by Contrition, what profit does one derive from the Sacrament of Penance? The profit is manifold. The sacrament increases sanctifying grace and the love of God in us; it diminishes the temporal punishment still remaining to be undergone in this life or in Purgatory. It provides us also with special actual graces which increase our hatred of sin and strengthen us in the fight against temptations. These graces are proper to the Sacrament and cannot be supplied by any other means. The reception of the Sacrament is also the occasion of renewing and deepening our contrition and purpose of amendment.

3. Finally, before receiving Holy Communion, if one has committed a mortal sin since one’s last good Confession, it is not enough to make an act of Perfect Contrition; **ONE IS BOUND** by precept first to **CONFESS** the sin and receive absolution for it: — ‘Let no one burdened with a mortal sin, however much contrite for it he may think himself to be, receive Holy Communion without previous sacramental Confession,’ says Canon Law. This is the meaning of the words of St. Paul: —

‘Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the Bread and drink of the Cup,’ (1 Cor 11:28) as interpreted by the Council of Trent. It is the special reverence, due to the most holy Sacrament of the Eucharist because it contains not only the power of Christ as the other Sacraments, but Christ Himself, which has inspired the Church to lay down this law.

IV. - IS IT EASY TO HAVE PERFECT CONTRITION?

We have already cleared the ground for the answer by insisting on two points: (1) Perfect Contrition must proceed from the pure love of God, but does not exclude other motives. (2) No special degree of intensity or duration, no sensible sorrow, no tears and sighs are required for Perfect Contrition.

Evidently, it is more difficult to make an act of Perfect than of imperfect Contrition. It is also clear that fervent Christians more easily make acts of Perfect Contrition than the lukewarm. But is Perfect Contrition difficult to obtain for one who has begun to be sorry for his sins? Is it beyond the power of the ordinary man of good will who tries to live up to his moral standards, but is too weak always to avoid mortal sin?

The answer is a decided NO. Any one who sincerely wishes it can, with the grace of God, make acts of Perfect Contrition. This can be clearly proved from the revelation God has given us about His dealings with men.

Contrition derives its perfection from the love of God. Hence, to prove that acts of pure love of God are easy is equivalently to prove that Perfect Contrition is easy. From both the Old and the New Testaments it appears that God has imposed on all men a strict command to make acts of the love of God. Jesus, when asked, — ‘Which is the great commandment of the Law?’ answered:

— ‘You shall love the Lord Your God with your whole heart and with your whole soul and your whole mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment.’

Now, God is a Father. There is no Father like Him. His feelings are apparent from the fact that — ‘while we were yet sinners, He sent His only begotten Son into the world and delivered Him up for us.’ — “His proper quality,” says the Church, — “is ever to have mercy and to spare.” — ‘His mercy is from generation unto generation,’ sings the Blessed Virgin in her Magnificat and who knew the Heavenly Father better than Mary, herself the perfect created mirror of God’s mercy? ‘My soul, it magnifies the Lord!’

Does a Father burden his children with hard precepts? Still less does God command impossibilities. ‘When commanding,’ as the Council of Trent says, — ‘God admonishes you to do what you are able and to pray for what you are not able,’ and in proof of this assertion, the Council quotes St John, who says — ‘His commandments are not heavy,’ and Christ’s own words, — ‘My yoke is sweet and my burden light.’ When God commands, at the same time He enlightens.

When He asks something, He gives the strength to do it. Hence, the very fact that our loving Heavenly Father, who knows the ignorance and weakness of the masses of men of all times and places, requires us to make acts of the love of God is sufficient proof that it must be easy to make such acts.

— ‘In order that, the commandment of love may be fulfilled,’ St. Francis of Sales writes, — ‘God leaves no living man without furnishing him abundantly with all the means required. He gives us not a bare sufficiency of means to love Him and in loving Him to save ourselves, but also a rich, ample and magnificent sufficiency — such as ought to be expected from so great a bounty as His.’

We come to the same conclusion by another argument. God wants to have all men. Hence, His Providence furnishes all without exception with the means whereby they can be reconciled with Him. Before Christ, the only means for adults was Perfect Contrition, so it is even now for all those who, for want of knowledge or opportunity, cannot avail themselves of the Christian Sacraments — that is to say, for the vast majority of men. Who then can tolerate the thought that — “this ‘solitary plank’, Perfect Contrition, thus made necessary by God, would be so slippery that only a few can seize and hold it, or that this ‘ark of salvation’ would be so hard to enter into that the vast majority of those for whom it is intended must remain out of it and perish in the deluge?” No, God does not impose on us a sorrow for sins that is beyond the power of even the weakest person of good will.

This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that the Church constantly urges us to make acts of Perfect Contrition. What she officially teaches in her catechisms to all her children, in the world or in religion, illiterate and learned, the tepid and the fervent, sinner and saint, is an Act of Perfect Contrition. Now, the Church, — a tender Mother — “pia mater Ecclesia” — does not require from her children anything that is beyond their power. Hence, beyond a doubt, in her mind Perfect Contrition is easy to all. Only one thing can make it difficult, to us — our want of confidence in God’s mercy and in the infinite merits of Christ. — ‘O my God, I believe, help You my unbelief. Transform it, I beseech You, into that boundless confidence which animated Your dear child,’ the little St. Therese. She writes:

— ‘It is not because I have been preserved from mortal sin that I lift myself up to God by confidence and love. Ah! I feel that even if I had on my conscience all the crimes that can be committed, I would not lose anything of my confidence; I would go, my heart broken with repentances and throw myself into the heart of my Saviour. I know that He cherished the prodigal child, I have listened to His words addressed to St. Magdalen, to the adulterous woman, to the Samaritan... I know that all this multitude of offences would be swallowed up in the abyss in the twinkling of an eye, as a drop of water thrown into a burning furnace.’

V. - HOW TO OBTAIN PERFECT CONTRITION

Perfect Contrition is a gift of God, a great GRACE. Only by God in Christ Our Saviour can we have our sins forgiven. Now, the universal means of obtaining graces is PRAYER: — ‘Ask and you all shall receive.’

To obtain Perfect Contrition we must, therefore, pray for is-as fervently as a mother beside the cot of her dying child prays for its recovery. Here there is question of our own immortal soul to be restored to the life divine. When we beg God for some temporal favour, we may be refused what we ask for. But the prayer for Perfect Contrition will always be heard. — ‘Suppose one of you asks his father for a loaf of bread — will he hand him a stone?... If then you, who are sinful, know how to bestow kind gifts on your children, how much more will your heavenly Father impart the Holy Ghost to those who ask Him?’ Jesus here promises to prayer the highest grace, the Holy Ghost Himself. In it, the lesser grace of Perfect Contrition is certainly included.

Let us then have recourse to God, beg Him to pardon us and count upon divine mercy. Let us imitate the Publican of the Gospel, whom Jesus Himself has proposed to us as a model: — ‘The Publican, standing far off (in the Temple) would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but smote his breast, saying, “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” This man, I tell you,’ Jesus concludes, — ‘went back to his house justified.’

As we have said already, to arouse ourselves to Perfect Contrition we need not set aside all consideration of the punishment of hell and the loss of heaven, or of God's goodness repaid by us with such ingratitude. On the contrary, these considerations will often be very useful to arouse a beginning of sorrow for our sins. However, we should not stop at them, but think of Christ crucified for us and ask God to grant us through Christ's merits the grace of immediate restoration into His friendship through Perfect Contrition.

— 'But, I can pray no more,' some will object. In fact, one who has long indulged in mortal or deliberate venial sin and neglected all prayer will not easily set himself to pray. A sick person finds even the most delicious food tasteless. The fault is not with the food, but with that person's appetite. Similarly, the sinner, estranged from God and clinging to creatures, may have lost all taste for spiritual things. He finds it hard to fix his mind on God's supreme goodness and countless benefits, because his will is hardened in its attachment to creatures. — How to soften and redirect that will?

(a.) With God, nothing is impossible. Following the advice of St. Charles Borromeo:

— 'Pay a visit to Christ, crucified and dying for you on Calvary amidst 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 nailed to the Cross, will awaken in your heart sentiments of love and sorrow that will wipe away your sins even before you enter the confessional.'

(b.) A second means is recourse to the Immaculate Mother of Jesus, our Mother, the Mediatrix of all graces. She has brought forth for us our Redeemer and nourished Him and offered Him a Victim for our sins and on the Cross. Imagine her on Mount Calvary with the dead and mangled body of Jesus on her knees: — 'O Mary, here I am to contemplate the evil which MY SINS have wrought on your Jesus. What havoc they have played with His innocent body — His head crowned with thorns, His hands and feet pierced with cruel nails, not a spot on His body left unhurt, unsullied. Neither have they spared you, but pierced your motherly heart with swords of sorrow.'

'O Blessed Virgin, pray for me... obtain for me the grace never to sin again.'

Often a few words will suffice. Just look at her and at Jesus crucified, and say with her: — 'My Jesus, mercy.' — "My God have mercy on me, a sinner." — "My God, I love You above all things."

(c) A third powerful and attractive means is recourse to the Sacred Wounds of Jesus. Recite, for example, the favourite prayer of St. Ignatius:

'Soul of Christ, sanctify me —
Body of Christ, save me —
Blood of Christ, inebriate me —
Water from the side of Christ, wash me —
Passion of Christ, strengthen me —
O good Jesus, hear me —
Within Your Wounds hide me —
To be separated from You, never permit me —
From the malignant foe defend me —
In the hour of my death call me —
And come to You, please bid me —

That praising You with Your Saints, it may be me —
For ever and ever. Amen.'

VI. — WHEN OUGHT WE TO MAKE AN ACT OF PERFECT CONTRITION?

All Catholics know that in a sudden danger of death, the first thing to do is to make an act of Perfect Contrition: think of Our Lord crucified, repent for having offended so great and good a God and then put all one's trust in His mercy.

But, one may ask, will one have sufficient leisure for his act? With the grace of God, yes, since it requires but a moment, provided, however, that during our life we have made it a practice. In the hour of death, we reap the reward of good habits acquired during life. We must, therefore, try to acquire the habit of making acts of Perfect Contrition. Hence:

1. If at any time we have the misfortune of sinning grievously, instead of remaining in that wretched state till our next Confession, let us rise immediately from it by making an act of Perfect Contrition. By it, we are restored in the friendship of God and all our good works become again meritorious for heaven.

2. A man in mortal sin goes to bed at night an enemy of God. What is his fate should death surprise him in his sleep? If, however, he rises in the morning, he starts his day again as an enemy of God. For days and weeks, perhaps months and years, he continues in this fearful state. Miserable man — in constant danger of being lost eternally. Poor, wasted life! — without any merits for heaven. Yet it is so easy to avoid this: just make a brief examination of conscience, and an Act of Perfect Contrition.

3. But let us aim higher still and try to acquire the habit of studding our whole day with little acts of Contrition. With God's grace, we can multiply these acts throughout the day. Our daily prayers, works and sufferings can easily be transformed into acts of Contrition.

(a.) If we pray in the humble disposition of the publican, — 'Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner,' we shall very often, without even thinking of it have Perfect Contrition, for example when you hear Mass, or make the Stations of the Cross; when you reflect before your crucifix or an image of the Sacred Heart.

(b.) The three first petitions of the 'Our Father': — 'Hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven' — are acts of perfect love of God, and consequently of Perfect Contrition if at the same time we remember our sins.

(c.) Similarly, the Rosary, said with the mind quietly reflecting on the Mysteries of Our Lord, especially the Sorrowful Mysteries, easily becomes a prayer of Perfect Contrition.

(d.) Our trials and sufferings, too, can be made into so many acts of Contrition. This is beautifully shown by a scene in the life of King David. In his youth, David had fallen into the awful sins of adultery and murder. He repented and God let him know that his sins were forgiven. Yet, never in later years did the holy king allow his offences to fade from his memory. In his old age, when his son, Absalom, rose in revolt, David was forced to flee and was met by a man named Semei (Shimei), who began to throw stones at the old king and to curse him, saying, — 'Come out, come out, you man of blood.'.... One of David's servants, indignant at this insult, said to the king, — 'Why should this dead dog curse my lord and king? I will go and cut off his head.' But the king answered, — 'Let him alone that he may curse as the Lord has bidden him. Perhaps the Lord may

look upon my affliction, and render me good for the cursing of this day.’ Remembering his sins, the holy king willingly accepted the worst insults in expiation.

(e.) The fervent Christian goes further still. Not content with accepting the trials and sufferings God’s Providence sends him he freely, of his own accord, daily adds some mortifications and sacrifices so as to make up for the past by a generous reparation for himself and for others also.

Compunction of Heart.

— ‘By the practice of frequent acts of contrition one’s whole spiritual life becomes penetrated with that sweet scent of abiding sorrow for one’s sins’ which spiritual authors call — ‘compunction of heart.’

Compunction consists in HABITUAL CONTRITION, the abiding state of hatred of sin out of love for God’s supreme Goodness. It is a continual participation in the sorrow of Our Lord for our sins, — ‘the Sacred Heart leaving faint stigmata of His one life-long sorrow upon our hearts.’

The Saints never weary in recommending this compunction of heart. — ‘We should,’ says St. Benedict, — ‘daily confess to God, in prayer, with tears and sighs, our past sins.’ — The great St. Teresa, formed to perfection by Our Lord Himself, had placed under her eyes in her oratory, in order to make it the refrain of her prayer, this text of the Psalmist: — ‘Enter not, O Lord, into judgment with Your servant.’ This is no exclamation of love, as we would have expected from this seraphic soul, but a cry of compunction. The souls most forestalled with divine favours, she said, are also the most filled with the sense of compunction.

The English spiritual writer, Fr. Faber, narrates how for a long time he was puzzled by the fact — that ‘so many persons have lofty and sincere aspirations after high perfection, and so few reach it... This must have a common cause. What is it?’

After long years of inquiries, reflection, and hesitations, — he came to the ‘persuasion that the common cause of all failure in perfection is the Want of Abiding Sorrow for Sin.’ He adds, — ‘All holiness has lost its principle of growth if it is separated from abiding sorrow for sin,’ while on the contrary, — ‘No vocation will be frustrated by a soul in which there is this abiding sorrow for sin.’

The Saints are characteristic for their firmness and stability in the spiritual life. Then why that want of firmness in many of those who strive after perfection? — ‘The reason is most often to be found in the lack of compunction... There is no surer means of rendering the spiritual life firm and steadfast than to impregnate it with the spirit of compunction.’

The importance of acquiring this abiding sense of sorrow is strongly impressed on us by the Church. With her uninterrupted offering of the Holy Sacrifice of Calvary, the administration of Sacraments and Sacramentals, the practices of devotion, her Liturgy and all her prayers and exhortations, the Church has but one aim in view: to realize the full ideal to which God calls her, namely, that she might become — ‘a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, but that she should be holy... and unspotted in His sight in charity.’

Now it is striking how her most solemn prayer, holy Mass, nay her whole Liturgy, are pervaded with the abiding sense — of sorrow for ‘innumerable sins, offences and negligences.’

The ‘De Profundis’ (Out of the Depths I have cried to You, O Lord,) and the ‘Miserere’ (Have Mercy on me in Your Kindness), — these perfect and inspired expressions of the spirit of compunction, — are constantly on the lips of her priests and religious. And she never tires of

exhorting us, in season and out of season, to repentance and contrition. Undoubtedly, in her mind — and in this matter she is infallible — the realization of her ideal of sanctity is closely connected with the spirit of compunction or habitual Perfect Contrition. She even allows Masses — with special orations — to be said for the ‘Gift of Tears’ of compunction. We may aptly close this little exposition of her teaching by quoting the first of these orations [from the Liturgy of St Pius V]:

— ‘Almighty and most loving God, who, to quench the thirst of Your people, made a fountain of living water spring out of a rock, draw from our stony hearts tears of compunction, that we may be able to mourn for our sins, and win pardon for them from Your mercy, through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.’
