

PERFECT CONTRITION - Part I

With Mardi Gras and Lent fast approaching, I thought it would be a good time to touch on the subject of contrition for sins. Did you realize there something called "imperfect contrition," and another term called "perfect contrition?" Let's discuss these in order that they might prepare us for a fruitful Lent this year.

Contrition is a sorrow of the soul, a detestation of sin committed, to which is joined the purpose, the sincere determination to lead a better life, and to sin no more.

To be of any fruitfulness, Contrition must be interior, that is, it must be in the soul, and not merely spoken with the lips, without reflection; that would be just sorrow of the lips, or what we call lip service. It isn't necessary that this interior contrition should manifest itself outwardly, for example, by tears; these may be signs of contrition, but they are not the essence of contrition. The essence of contrition is in the soul, in the will, which sincerely turns away from sin, and, to God.

Contrition must be universal as well. It must include all the sins committed, at least all mortal sins. And finally, Contrition, like all good things, must come from God, through God's grace, and with the help of God's grace it must produce its effect in the soul. So don't be uneasy if you do not feel it, for God will certainly give you the necessary grace if you ask Him for it, if you have a good will, if you are contrite from a right, supernatural motive. If the motive for contrition from pure reason, for example, if you are sorry only because you must suffer sickness, disgrace, temporal loss etc. then the contrition is merely natural and worthless, but if the motive for contrition is a doctrine of Faith, for example, if you are sorry because you offended God, deserved hell, purgatory, lost Heaven, etc., then it is true and supernatural contrition.

This true and supernatural contrition maybe twofold, perfect and imperfect.

What is perfect Contrition? Perfect Contrition is sorrow which comes from the love of God; imperfect Contrition, is sorrow which comes from the fear of God. Contrition is perfect if it comes from perfect love of God. Our love of God is perfect when we love God because He is infinitely perfect, beautiful and good in Himself, and because He has shown His love and goodness to us in so effective a manner (or love or gratitude). Our love for God is imperfect if we love Him because we hope for some benefit from Him. When our love is imperfect we are thinking principally of the gift; when it is perfect, on the goodness of the giver. In imperfect love it is rather the gift that we love, in perfect love it is the giver that we love not so much for the sake of his gift, as for the love and goodness which are shown in the gift.

Contrition is measured by love. According to this standard our contrition is perfect, if we are sorry for our sins from perfect love of God, from the love of benevolence or gratitude. Our contrition is imperfect if we are sorry for our sins, because we fear God, because by our sins we lose God's reward, Heaven, and deserve God's punishment, hell or purgatory.

In imperfect contrition, we think principally of ourselves, of how sin makes us unhappy—according to the doctrines of Faith. In perfect contrition we think principally of God, of His greatness, beauty, love and goodness, of how sin is an injury to Him, and that it has caused Him pain and suffering in the work of our salvation. In perfect contrition we desire God's good and not merely our own good. Maybe this example will help to clarify it. Remember when Peter denied Christ three times? Scripture says Peter went off and wept bitterly. Why does Peter weep? Not because he things, "O how ashamed I must feel before my fellow Apostles!" His sorrow in that case would have been merely natural and worthless. Nor because he fears that his divine Master will deprive him as he deserves of the apostleship, and of his office as chief pastor, and will exclude him from His kingdom; for then his contrition would have been true, but imperfect. No, Peter is sorry and weeps for his sin chiefly because he has offended his dear Savior, who is so good, holy and worthy of love, and because he has repaid His exceeding love with ingratitude; and thus he had true, perfect contrition. God has loved us with an everlasting love! (Jeremiah 30:3). Just meditate on all the wonderful things he has given us. He has loved us from eternity! We are all in the mind of God! He cast His eyes on us with infinite wisdom and love, and prepared for us a body and soul, Heaven and earth, as a mother's love prepares everything before her child comes into the world. He has given us life and health and so many other things! When the human race was lost through Original sin He gave His only begotten Son, and He, our Savior, redeemed us by His cruel death on the Cross!

How is an Act of Perfect Contrition made? Perfect contrition is a grace, a great grace of the love and mercy of God. We must earnestly ask for this grace, not only when preparing for confession, no, the sincere prayer—Lord, give me the grace of true repentance, of true contrition for my sins—must be one of the chief aims of the spiritual life. Perfect contrition does not take the place of Confession.



PERFECT CONTRITION - PART TWO

What should our disposition be for contrition?

One way is to place yourself really or in imagination before a crucifix in the church or in your room. Meditate on the wounds of Our Lord, and seriously think for a short time – Who is that hanging there and suffering on the Cross? It is Jesus, my God and Savior. What is He suffering? A bitter Passion and Death, covered with wounds, and in His soul overwhelmed with sorrow and shame. Why is He suffering so? For our sins. He suffers for you and for me and desires to atone for our sins. So with heartfelt love look upon your Crucified Savior; forget Heaven and hell in the thought of your sins; repent of them because they have been the cause of such suffering to your Savior; protest that you will never again crucify Him by new sins – and then with heart and lips, slowly and recollectedly repeat your act of Contrition.

There are several forms of an act of Contrition. I will print one form at the end of this article.

Is it Difficult to Make an Act of Perfect Contrition?

It is true that more is required for perfect, than for imperfect contrition, the latter alone being necessary for confession. And yet with the grace of God perfect contrition is attainable by all who have the good will; for it is in the will, not in the feeling. Everything depends on whether we have proper motive for our sorrow, namely because we love our good God above all things, and detest our sins from love; it depends on this, not on the duration or intensity of our sorrow. Perfect contrition is often confounded with a supposed greatest intensity of sorrow; but perfect contrition has degrees and stages, and it needs not be the highest and the most intense, such as that of St. Peter, St. Mary Magdalen, and many others. Don't get me wrong, such contrition is edifying and good, but it is not necessary; a much lower degree of true and perfect contrition effects the forgiveness of sin. It is possible that some of us have perfect contrition without knowing it; for example, devoutly attending Mass, devoutly making the Stations of the Cross or piously contemplating a crucifix or a picture of the Sacred Heart and so forth. Perfect contrition cannot be beyond our reach, because God has given it the power to produce such excellent effects; therefore He desires us to excite ourselves to it, and He will help us to do so.

What are the effects of Perfect Contrition?

Exceedingly great! It always and immediately produces in the sinner forgiveness of sins before he has confessed them in the Sacrament of Penance (but he must have the intention of confessing them later, for this intention is necessarily included in perfect contrition); and perfect contrition produces this effect not merely in danger of death, but whenever it is excited in the heart. The sinner therefore obtains the remission of the punishment of hell, from being an enemy he becomes a child of God, and an heir of Heaven, and his former merits revive. In the just man, perfect contrition secures and increases the state of grace and remits venial sins of which he repents in the Act of Contrition. It also remits the punishment due to sin, secures and strengthens the soul in the true love of God. (Council of Trent) This is the greatest miracle of the love and mercy of God which He works in the Christian soul through perfect contrition. Always remember that although it is true that perfect contrition effects what the Sacrament of Penance effects, namely the forgiveness of sin; but it does NOT produce this effect independently of the Sacrament of Penance. The sinner MUST have the attention of confessing the sins forgiven by perfect contrition; at least all mortal sins must be confessed; for so it is ordained by Our Blessed Lord, and His ordinance cannot be changed.

Why is Perfect Contrition so important, not to say necessary?

It is important in life. How precious is the state of grace! Sanctifying grace is not only the ornament of the soul, but it penetrates its whole being and makes it a new creature, a child of God and an heir of Heaven. How sad is the condition of the Christian who continues to live in a state of sin. If he dies in a state of unrepentant mortal sin, when he dies, his soul goes to hell. For this reason the state of grace is so very important and necessary for the Christian. The Christian who has had the misfortune of losing sanctifying grace recovers it chiefly in two ways: 1) **through Confession** and 2) through perfect contrition. **Confession** is the proper means of regaining sanctifying grace. **Only before Holy Communion, an act of perfect contrition would not suffice, it is then of obligation first to go to Confession**. Perfect contrition helps us to resist evil. Perfect contrition is important in death, especially sudden death as in an accident when no priest can be had. With God's help it doesn't take much time to make an act of perfect contrition. If we are close to death in any way, the Catechism teaches that we should immediately have a cry of sorrow and a prayer to God for contrition. We are also called to assist those who are near to us who are dying to make this act of perfect contrition, and make their Confession. It is a great act of charity!!

One act of Perfect Contrition: O my God, I am heartily sorry, for having offended Thee. I detest all of my sins because I dread the loss of Heaven, and the pains of hell. But most of all, it is because they have offended Thee my God, Who art all good and worthy of all of my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to confess my sins, to do penance and to amend my life. Amen.