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Talk #8

*The Sacrament of Penance*



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## 8. The Sacrament of Penance

### *Introduction, Sources, and the Institution of the Sacrament*

#### **The Etymology of Penance**

The sacrament of penance is known by various names. The most common are confession, sacrament of reconciliation, and the sacrament of penance.

The word “penance,” related to “repentance” and “penitence,” comes from the Latin *poena*, which means penalty or pain. The word “penance” in English has three principal meanings: a moral virtue of sorrow for sin, a sacrament of the New Covenant, and a work of satisfaction, which is a part of the first two meanings. The fact that this one word has these three meanings is not accidental, but a consequence of the intimate correspondence between these three meanings of penance. The sacrament of Penance is ordered by its nature to producing the interior act of the virtue of penance, which then manifests itself in outward works of penance.

A concise definition of the sacrament of Penance is given in the *Code of Canon Law*, canon 959:

In the sacrament of penance the faithful who confess their sins to a legitimate minister, are sorry for them, and intend to reform themselves, obtain from God through the absolution imparted by the same minister forgiveness for the sins they have committed after baptism and, at the same time, are reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by sinning.

#### **Key Biblical Texts on Penance**

The heart of Biblical revelation, both of the Old and the New Testament, concerns repentance and conversion. Indeed, the purpose of God’s interventions in salvation history, culminating in the Incarnation and Passion of Christ, is to lead man to sanctity through the path of repentance and conversion. The relevant Biblical texts are too numerous to recount. The readings chosen during the liturgy of Lent are a good selection of the most relevant. Ezekiel 18:20–32 is a crucial text on individual moral responsibility and man’s ability to fall from grace into sin, and to repent from sin so as to reacquire the state of grace. The penitential psalms, especially Psalm 51, are also paradigmatic texts on repentance.

The evangelists summarize Christ’s public ministry with the words: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 3:2; 4:17). Bl. John Paul II begins his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliation and Penance (RP)* by quoting these words: “To speak of reconciliation and penance is for the men and women of our time an invitation

to rediscover, translated into their own way of speaking, the very words with which our savior and teacher Jesus Christ began his preaching: ‘Repent, and believe in the Gospel.’”<sup>1</sup>

Almost the entire teaching of Christ and all His parables are ordered to bring about conversion of heart. The parable of the Prodigal Son is perhaps the most significant text concerning repentance. John Paul II comments on this parable in *RP* 5:

This prodigal son is man—every human being: bewitched by the temptation to separate himself from his Father in order to lead his own independent existence; disappointed by the emptiness of the mirage which had fascinated him; alone, dishonored, exploited when he tries to build a world all for himself[;] sorely tried, even in the depths of his own misery, by the desire to return to communion with his Father. Like the father in the parable, God looks out for the return of his child, embraces him when he arrives and orders the banquet of the new meeting with which the reconciliation is celebrated.

The most striking element of the parable is the father’s festive and loving welcome of the returning son: It is a sign of the mercy of God, who is always willing to forgive. Let us say at once: Reconciliation is principally a gift of the heavenly Father.

Another classic text on penance is 2 Corinthians 5:17–21:

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Through the centuries the Church continues to exhort the world to Baptism and Penance: “We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

#### **Centrality of the Sacrament of Penance for the Mission of the Church**

Since conversion stands at the heart of the Gospel, the sacrament of Penance must also be at the heart of the Church’s mission. It is not by accident that Christ gave

<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliation and Penance* 1 (December 2, 1984).

the Church the sacrament of Penance on Easter Sunday as the first gift to the Apostles after His Resurrection: “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’” (John 20:21–23).

John Paul II writes in *RP* 23: “To evoke conversion and penance in man’s heart and to offer him the gift of reconciliation is the specific mission of the church as she continues the redemptive work of her divine founder.” The *Rite of Penance* §6 summarizes the glorious mission of the sacrament of Penance: “In the sacrament of penance the Father receives the repentant children who come back to him; Christ places the lost sheep on his shoulders and brings them back to the sheepfold, and the Holy Spirit resanctifies those who are the temple of God or dwells more fully in them.”

## Crisis of the Sacrament of Penance

Echoing the views of the participants in the sixth Synod of Bishops on the theme of Penance and Reconciliation in the Mission of the Church in 1983, John Paul II stated that “the sacrament of penance is in crisis.”<sup>2</sup> And since Penance stands at the heart of the mission of the Church, which constantly exhorts mankind to “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20), this crisis is of tremendous gravity for the Church’s mission.

The causes of this crisis are many, but perhaps the most important is the loss of the sense of sin. This reality was first formulated by Pius XII in 1946,<sup>3</sup> and later analyzed by John Paul II in *RP* 18. John Paul II begins by defining the “sense of sin” as a “*fine sensitivity and an acute perception of the seeds of death* contained in sin, as well as a sensitivity and an *acuteness of perception for identifying them in the thousand guises under which sin shows itself*.” He notes that this sense of sin was acquired by Christians from the Gospel over the course of generations, but is also rooted in conscience, and therefore can never be completely eliminated.

## Is Penance a Sacrament?

The sacraments of the New Covenant are sacred signs that have the unique property of realizing or producing what they represent, through the merits of Christ’s Passion. Penance is a sacrament because its “sacramental sign . . . represents and at the same time accomplishes penance and reconciliation.”<sup>4</sup> The Council of Trent solemnly defined

2 John Paul II, *RP* 28.

3 Pope Pius XII, Radio Message to the U.S. National Catechetical Congress in Boston (October 26, 1946): *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi VIII* (1946) 288.

4 John Paul II, *RP* 28.

that Penance is one of the seven sacraments of the New Covenant.<sup>5</sup>

The sacrament of Penance is necessary for salvation for all those who have grave personal sin (mortal sin).<sup>6</sup> The *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* 1446 states:

Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion. It is to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification. The Fathers of the Church present this sacrament as “the second plank [of salvation] after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace.”

## Penance in the Old Covenant and Under Natural Law

Repentance has always been necessary for the forgiveness of grave sins. This is because “mortal sin cannot be forgiven so long as the will is attached to sin . . . because while the cause remains, the effect remains.”<sup>7</sup> Unless a person interiorly annuls and destroys his voluntary consent and attachment to a past mortal sin by repentance, that sin cannot be forgiven.

Interior repentance after grave sin is necessary for salvation with a necessity of means, and not just by virtue of a positive law. Something can be said to be necessary for salvation in two ways: either because it has been made obligatory by a positive law commanded and promulgated by a legitimate authority, or because one simply cannot attain salvation without it, by the very nature of things.

A positive law is binding only after its promulgation and only on those who ought to know about it. An example of this kind of necessity would have been the ceremonial precepts of the Mosaic Law, such as circumcision, the feasts of Israel, the dietary laws, and laws of ritual purification. These laws were obligatory only for the children of Israel, and only after they were promulgated on Mt. Sinai, and only until the promulgation of the Gospel. In a similar way, the sacrament of Penance is necessary after its promulgation by the Apostles and their successors to those who have fallen into grave sin after Baptism. This necessity of precept is binding on those who ought to know about it.

5 Council of Trent, session 14 (1551), canon 1 on Penance, DS 1701, Denz 911: “If anyone says that in the Catholic Church penance is not truly and properly a sacrament instituted by Christ our Lord to reconcile the faithful, as often as they fall into sin after baptism: let him be anathema.” See also session 7 (1547), canon 1, DS 1601, Denz 844.

6 *Ibid.*, chapter 2: “This sacrament of penance is for those who have fallen after baptism necessary for salvation, as baptism is for those who have not yet been regenerated.”

7 St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 87, a. 1.

Another and stronger kind of necessity is referred to by philosophers as necessity of means. The indispensable means to an end are clearly necessary to the attainment of the end. If the only way to get to the moon is in a rocket ship, then the rocket ship is necessary for getting to the moon by a necessity of means. In order to live, I must first be conceived, by a necessity of means. The necessity of means differs from necessity of precept because the former is completely indispensable, while the latter admits dispensation and exceptions, and is only binding on those who ought to know about it.

The integral confession of all mortal sins to a priest in the sacrament of Penance is necessary in the first way (necessity of precept), whereas interior repentance is necessary in the second way (necessity of means).

Under natural law and the Law of Moses, although interior repentance is necessary for the forgiveness of sins, there is no one way to externally practice or manifest repentance. It is enough to afflict one's heart (out of filial fear) for the sin committed against God. In the New Covenant, however, Christ established a particular way of practicing and manifesting repentance, which He elevated into a sacrament.

Why did Christ make penance a sacrament? For He could have left penance as a purely interior act. *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* gives two fundamental reasons for making Penance a sacrament: the sacrament gives a certainty to the penitent that God has forgiven him; and the sacrament makes clear that the source of the grace of forgiveness is the Passion of Christ, which works through the sacrament.<sup>8</sup>

### ***The Sacrament of Penance Is a Supernatural Judicial Action***

The sacrament of Penance is a supernatural judicial action in which repented sin is submitted to the power of the keys, which can loose the guilt of sin, and which can bind the penitent to a penance. This tribunal differs from all human tribunals because it does not merely declare guilt and punishment, but rather has the power to absolve from guilt and the resulting eternal punishment by effecting an interior change in which the penitent turns his final end from self-satisfaction to union with the Blessed Trinity. Thus Penance is a *tribunal of divine mercy*.<sup>9</sup>

The sacrament of Penance differs from human tribunals of justice both in its end and in its means. The purpose of the tribunal of Penance is absolution of sin rather than punishment for sin. Its means rely exclusively on the confession of the penitent rather than the accusation of other witnesses; and the judgment is based not on ascertaining that a crime was committed in the past, but rather on ascertaining the interior presence of repentance for sin.

<sup>8</sup> See *The Roman Catechism*, p. 260.

<sup>9</sup> See *RP* 31.

The sacrament of Penance is similar to human tribunals in that the priest bases his judgment on first-hand testimony according to the merits of the case; acts as judge of the presence of interior contrition; and has the power of judicial “keys” to loose from guilt and punishment, or not.

### ***The Sacrament of Penance Is a Supernatural Healing***

In addition to being a supernatural tribunal of mercy, Penance is also a sacrament of spiritual healing. In *RP* 31, John Paul II explains:

But as it reflects on the function of this sacrament, the church's consciousness discerns in it, over and above the character of judgment in the sense just mentioned, a healing of a medicinal character. And this is linked to the fact that the Gospel frequently presents Christ as healer,<sup>10</sup> while his redemptive work is often called, from Christian antiquity, *medicina salutis*. “I wish to heal, not accuse,” St. Augustine said, referring to the exercise of the pastoral activity regarding penance, and it is thanks to the medicine of confession that the experience of sin does not degenerate into despair.

The priest in the confessional is therefore both judge and doctor, as explained in the *Code of Canon Law* (CIC), canon 978 §1:

In hearing confessions the priest is to remember that he is equally a judge and a physician and has been established by God as a minister of divine justice and mercy, so that he has regard for the divine honor and the salvation of souls.

### ***Matter and Form of the Sacrament of Penance and Its Effects***

The Council of Florence briefly summarizes the matter and form of Penance:

The fourth sacrament is penance, the matter of which is, as it were, the acts of the penitent, which are divided into three parts. The first of these is contrition of heart, to which pertains grief for a sin committed together with a resolution not to sin in the future. The second is oral confession, to which pertains that the sinner confess integrally to his priest all sins of which he has recollection. The third is satisfaction for sins according to the decision of the priest, which is accomplished chiefly by prayer, fasting, and alms. The words of absolution which the priest utters when he says: “I absolve you,” etc.,<sup>11</sup> are the form of this sacrament, and the minister of this sacrament is the priest who has either ordinary

<sup>10</sup> See Luke 5:31–32; 9:2.

<sup>11</sup> The form of absolution in the current Rome rite is as follows: “God, the Father of mercies, through the death and the resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church

authority for absolving or has it by the commission of a superior. The effect of this sacrament is absolution from sins.<sup>12</sup>

## Remote Matter of Confession: Sin

The matter of the sacrament of penance is not an external matter, as in Baptism, Confirmation, or Anointing, but the human acts of the penitent. Theologians sometimes divide the matter of a sacrament into remote and proximate. The remote matter is personal post-baptismal sin. A person who has no personal sin (the Blessed Virgin) cannot receive this sacrament. The proximate matter for the sacrament is comprised of three acts of the penitent: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Contrition and confession presuppose a prior act of the penitent, which is an examination of conscience.<sup>13</sup>

### *All Sins for Which One Has Contrition Can Be Forgiven*

There is no sin that cannot be forgiven in the sacrament of penance, if the penitent has true contrition. John Paul II writes:

It is precisely because sin exists in the world, which “God so loved...that he gave his only Son,” that God, who “is love,” cannot reveal Himself otherwise than as mercy. . . . Mercy in itself, as a perfection of the infinite God, is also infinite. Also infinite therefore and inexhaustible is the Father’s readiness to receive the prodigal children who return to His home. Infinite are the readiness and power of forgiveness which flow continually from the marvelous value of the sacrifice of the Son. No human sin can prevail over this power or even limit it. On the part of man only a lack of good will can limit it, a lack of readiness to be converted and to repent, in other words persistence in obstinacy, opposing grace and truth, especially in the face of the witness of the cross and resurrection of Christ.

### *Examination of Conscience*

Prior to confession, one must make a “diligent” examination of conscience, as mandated by the Council of Trent. This diligence should be comparable to the diligence we use in other matters that we consider important.<sup>14</sup> The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* exhorts priests to teach the faithful how to make a frequent examination of conscience:

It would greatly help the faithful if the pastor were to give them a method whereby they could practice this

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may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

12 Decree for the Armenians, from the Bull “Exultate Deo,” Nov. 22, 1439, Denz 699.

13 See St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 84, a. 2, and *ST III*, q. 90, a. 1, ad 3

14 See John B. Sheerin, *The Sacrament of Freedom: A Book on Confession* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1961), 50.

contrition. The first thing to do is to have them examine their consciences frequently, in order to see whether they are in fact observing the commandments of God and the precepts of the Church. Secondly, when any of the faithful recognizes his guilt for any fault, he should immediately accuse himself and humbly ask pardon of God. Thirdly, he should seek a time to confess his sins and to satisfy for them. Fourthly, let him beg for the aid of divine grace, by which he may be strengthened against falling again into the sins which he now deplores. Finally, the pastor should try to instill in all the faithful a deep hatred for sin, both because of its own intrinsic meanness and ugliness, and because of its horrible consequences for ourselves. Sin turns us away from the love of God.<sup>15</sup>

There are many benefits from a frequent (daily) examination of conscience. Most importantly, it enables one to repent right away and to put oneself back into a state of grace, if—God forbid—it has been lost through grave sin. The first thing one ought to do if one recognizes a grave sin on one’s conscience is to make an act of perfect contrition, motivated by love for God as well as fear of hell. No one should think that they are incapable of perfect contrition. It is true that all men are incapable of it through their own powers, but all are capable of it through the grace of God, which is given sufficiently to all men. It is enough to *desire* to be sorry for sin out of love of God and to ask for God’s aid in making a firm resolve to avoid such sin in the future. Secondly, one must intend to go to confession within a reasonable time, and to abstain from receiving Holy Communion until one has received sacramental absolution. Thirdly, one should ask for abundant grace to avoid such sins in the future.

As to the method of examination, it can be made according to the Ten Commandments, the seven principal virtues, the capital sins, particular vices that a person struggles with, or, in a person of delicate conscience who examines himself daily, according to the hours of the day.

### **Contrition: First Act of the Penitent**

The Council of Trent defines contrition as “heartfelt sorrow and aversion for the sin committed along with the intention of sinning no more.”<sup>16</sup> Contrition implies that one hates what one formerly did and resolves to amend and make satisfaction, and thus regards both the past and the future.

The necessity of contrition is given in the *Code of Canon Law*, canon 987: “To receive the salvific remedy of the sacrament of penance, a member of the Christian faithful must be disposed in such a way that, rejecting sins committed and having a purpose of amendment, the person is turned back to God.”

15 *The Roman Catechism*, p. 274.

16 *Ibid.*, chapter 4, DS 1676.

The word “contrition” comes from a Latin root that means to shatter or pulverize. Contrition thus means the pulverization of sin by hating it, willing to satisfy for it, and resolving to avoid future sins. The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* explains:

It is a word which literally means being broken into small pieces by a rock or some other hard substance. Used metaphorically as it is here, it means that our hearts, hardened by pride, are broken and crushed by penance. No other sorrow—not even that which is felt for the death of parents or children, or for any other calamity—is called “contrition.” It is reserved exclusively for that sorrow which we feel when we forfeit the grace of God and our own innocence.<sup>17</sup>

A synonym of contrition is “compunction,” which literally refers to a “puncture” or “rupture,” as if our heart were ruptured by sorrow over sin.

The sorrow that is central to contrition is not simply a feeling, but a movement of the will<sup>18</sup> that follows from faith in the goodness of God, and the fact that He is offended by sin and punishes it. Therefore it is not necessary to “feel” the sorrow of contrition in a bodily way, but simply to will it. We should not measure the strength of our contrition by how much we *feel* it, but rather by how much we *will* it and *desire* to have it. Simply to desire the sorrow of contrition for the right reason—because sin offends God—is already to have contrition. Nevertheless, the sensible feeling of sorrow is a normal consequence of contrition by way of overflow from the spiritual to the sensible parts of our soul. It can be a good idea to ask in prayer for the sensible experience of sorrow over sin, because the intensity of the feeling can help strengthen our will. However, we must not identify the strength of contrition with the mere feeling.

### ***Biblical Teaching on Contrition***

Contrition is sorrow for sin that has God as its motive. In 2 Corinthians 7:9–11, St. Paul distinguishes two kinds of sorrow for sin:

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting; for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal,

what punishment!<sup>19</sup>

The prophets frequently exhort Israel to contrition, as in Joel 2:12–13:

“Yet even now,” says the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil.

Malachi 3:7–10 states: “From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.”

### ***Essential Elements of Contrition***

In order to be true and salutary, the act of contrition must fulfill several conditions. It must be supreme, complete or universal, humble, and contain the resolve to take measures to avoid the sin in the future.

#### **Supreme Sorrow**

True contrition must be a supreme sorrow because it corresponds to the greatest evil in the world, which is grave sin. Just as God is to be loved above all things, so an offense against God is to be grieved above all things. If grief over grave sin were not supreme, it would mean that something else would be loved more than God.

It is not necessary that the penitent have this sorrow of contrition with the most intense *feeling*. It is enough that he recognize that mortal sin is the gravest of evils and most to be grieved over. It is supreme not as a feeling, but as a movement of the will.<sup>20</sup>

In this supreme sorrow, furthermore, there is also room for a certain joy caused by hope of forgiveness and the restoration of intimacy with God, and by the very act of grief over sin. On the level of sensible passions, sorrow and joy mutually exclude one another. However, the spiritual movements of the will are not mutually exclusive in the same way. One can simultaneously sorrow over one aspect of a thing, and rejoice in another aspect of it.<sup>21</sup>

#### **Impossibility of Proper Contrition for Some Mortal Sins without Others**

True contrition must be complete or universal, in that one must grieve over *all* mortal sins that one recalls. It is

<sup>19</sup> See Robert Eaton, *The Ministry of Reconciliation* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1925), 141: Sorrow for sin which has God as its motive, leads to change of life, to a purpose of amendment, which nothing shall chill or change; but the sorrow of the world, the sorrow of self-love because we have been foolish and must make apology, sorrow because we have been found out and have lost some measure of esteem—such sorrow ‘worketh death,’ and leads to gloom, to moroseness of temper, to a refusal of all consolation.”

<sup>20</sup> See St. Thomas, *Supplement*, q. 3, a. 1.

<sup>21</sup> See St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 84, a. 9.

<sup>17</sup> *The Roman Catechism*, p. 268.

<sup>18</sup> See *The Roman Catechism*, p. 268: “Although contrition is defined as a ‘sorrow,’ the faithful should not therefore conclude that this sorrow consists in some bodily feeling. Contrition is an act of the will. . . . As a result of contrition, sorrow can be felt in that lower part of the soul where concupiscence is also felt.”

impossible to have proper contrition for some mortal sins while excluding repentance for others. This is because the same reason for having contrition for one sin holds for every other, namely, that they gravely offend God and gravely violate His law. Hence James 2:10–11: “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ said also, ‘Do not kill.’ If you do not commit adultery but do kill, you have become a transgressor of the law.”

Therefore a proper act of contrition must be directed to all the mortal sins of which a person is conscious. (If, however, he has forgotten a mortal sin, that is another matter, for it would be presumed that he would repent of it if he were aware of it.)

As a consequence, it follows that it is impossible for some mortal sins to be forgiven in confession while the guilt of other mortal sins remain. Either all are forgiven because there is contrition for all (actually or virtually), or none are forgiven, because contrition is lacking for at least some mortal sins of which the penitent is aware.<sup>22</sup>

### Firm Purpose of Amendment

A true act of contrition must also include the firm resolve to avoid such sins in the future. In practice, the lack of a firm purpose of amendment is a frequent cause of defective contrition. The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* points out that this is simply a requirement of common sense:

That a sorrow for past sin and firm purpose of avoiding future sin are indispensable to contrition can be proved by natural reason alone. If a person wishes to be reconciled to his friend, he must regret the injury he caused, and he must see to it that hereafter their friendship will not be endangered by whatever he does.<sup>23</sup>

The purpose of amendment must be firm, universal, and efficacious. The firmness of the resolve must be such that it would reject a contrary temptation in the here and now. The fact that someone falls again repeatedly into the same sin afterwards does not mean that they did not have a firm resolve at the moment of confession, for it often happens that a person makes a firm resolve that subsequently does not last. Universal means must extend to all mortal sin. A resolve is efficacious when it includes the necessary means, such as avoiding proximate occasions of grave sin. If the proximate occasions of sin cannot be avoided because of one’s state in life, then appropriate means must be taken to overcome the temptation. In other words, the resolve must not be like the prayer mentioned by St. Augustine in his *Confessions*: “Lord, make me chaste, but not yet.”

The act of contrition must include, at least virtually, the intention to confess it and to do fitting satisfaction. In this way the act of contrition includes the aspect of humility.

With regard to venial sins, there must be a firm resolve to avoid sins like the ones confessed, even though the resolve is not universal (for it is impossible to avoid all venial sins altogether).

### Perfect and Imperfect Contrition

Contrition is said to be perfect when it is motivated by love for God above all things. This occurs when one is sorry for having sinned precisely because it offends God who should be loved above all. It is a sorrow for sin for God’s sake. When sorrow for sin is motivated only by fear of punishment in hell, it is said to be imperfect (also called *attrition*). The difference between the two acts lies only in the motive for the sorrow over sin. In imperfect contrition, the motive for sorrow is the punishment that unrepented sin would merit.

Perfect contrition, accompanied by the intention to go to sacramental Confession, immediately gains forgiveness from God. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1452 states: “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.”<sup>24</sup>

Imperfect contrition is a supernatural gift of God, despite its imperfection. It stems from faith and a movement of actual grace. Imperfect contrition is sufficient to receive the sacrament of Penance. By itself, however, it does not anticipate the forgiveness of sins, as does an act of perfect contrition. The *CCC* 1453 describes imperfect contrition:

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.<sup>25</sup>

If a penitent comes into the confessional with imperfect contrition (attrition), and validly confesses his grave sins, the grace of the sacrament will have the effect of perfecting attrition by converting it into perfect contrition through the gift of charity. It is impossible to receive charity without simultaneously having one’s attrition transformed into contrition (at least virtually and habitually), because the difference between attrition and contrition is the absence or presence of charity motivating the sorrow over sin.

<sup>22</sup> See St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 86, a. 3.

<sup>23</sup> *The Roman Catechism*, p. 272.

<sup>24</sup> See Council of Trent, session 14, ch. 4, DS 1677, Denz 898.

<sup>25</sup> See Council of Trent, session 14, ch. 4, DS 1678, Denz 898.

The act of perfect contrition does not exclude that one is also sorry for sin because of God's punishments. It is reasonable to have sorrow for sin for both reasons, but in the right order. Concern for the glory of God should take precedence over one's own final happiness, but both are of supreme importance in their own sphere.

A good act of contrition gives both motives for sorrow over sin. Here is one traditional form: "O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended You, and I detest all my sins, because of Your just punishments, but most of all because they offend You, my God, who are all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin."

The distinction between the two forms of contrition goes back to the Fathers. St. Gregory the Great explains the difference between them and compares them to the two altars in the Temple in Jerusalem: the brass altar of burnt offering in the court of the Temple, and the golden altar of incense in the Holy of Holies:

Truly there is one compunction which is born of fear, and another which springs from love. . . . For there are many, mindful of their sins, who since they fear eternal punishment afflict themselves with daily weeping. They mourn their evil deeds and burn with the fire of compunction the vices to which they still suffer temptations in their hearts. . . . But others, free from worldly vices or already safe through long weeping, take fire with the flame of love in tears of compunction, place the rewards of the Heavenly Kingdom before the eyes of their heart, and yearn already to be among the citizens above.<sup>26</sup>

## Confession of Sins: Second Act of the Penitent

Since the sacrament of Penance involves submitting sins to the power of the keys, and since the priest acts as judge with the power to loose and to bind, it follows necessarily that the sins of the penitent have to be made known to the priest through confession so that he can exercise his judicial power to loose or to bind. Hence the sincere and integral confession of mortal sins is a necessary part of the matter of the sacrament. Venial sins are also matter for confession, of course, and it is good to confess them, but they are not a necessary part of the matter.

### Integrity of Confession

Confession is said to be integral or complete when it includes all the sins that ought to be declared, according to Christ's will in instituting the sacrament. This includes all post-baptismal mortal sins of which the penitent is

aware, that have not yet been confessed and sacramentally absolved.

Theologians distinguish between necessary matter for confession, and that which is free. Necessary matter is all post-baptismal mortal sins not yet sacramentally forgiven through individual confession. Free matter includes venial sins not yet sacramentally forgiven, and also both mortal and venial sins that have been confessed and sacramentally forgiven, for which the penitent makes a renewed act of contrition.<sup>27</sup> Free matter need not be confessed, but can still profitably be confessed, as long as the penitent has contrition for it.

Doubtful matter is when the penitent confesses something as a temptation, but is unsure whether consent was given, and thus whether a sin was in fact committed. If a penitent only confesses doubtful matter, the confessor should ask the penitent to confess some sin from their past life which is not doubtful, and for which they have contrition. This can be done in a generic way, as in the following: I am sorry for the sins of my past life that I have committed against chastity, or fraternal charity, etc.

All mortal sins committed after Baptism that the penitent remembers after a reasonably diligent examination of conscience must be confessed in their *specific kind* and with their *number*, as far as possible. This is necessary for the validity of the confession. *Aggravating circumstances* must also be mentioned, especially when they change the species of the act.

It is insufficient for the penitent simply to say that he committed a certain number of sins against a particular commandment: "seven against the sixth commandment." For such a confession does not specify the proper species or kind of the sin. Under the sixth commandment there is adultery, homosexual acts, rape, incest, fornication, masturbation, etc. Likewise, under the seventh commandment there is extortion, bribery, robbery, cheating on income tax, etc. Similarly, the sin of lying includes different kinds of sins which vary greatly in gravity, such as slander, perjury, detraction, etc.

The confession should be *discrete*. Details should not be mentioned except insofar as they are circumstances that clarify the kind of sin that was committed or significantly increase its gravity. Especially in sexual sins, unnecessary details (that is, details that do not significantly aggravate the guilt or change its kind) must be avoided, and the confessor should not ask about them, or encourage or permit the penitent to recount them.<sup>28</sup>

### Omission of Grave Sins in Confession

An integral confession of all mortal sins of which the penitent is aware is necessary by ecclesiastical law. Therefore, unlike interior contrition, integral confession is not

<sup>27</sup> See F. Cappello, *De poenitentia*, §31, p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> See Cappello, *De poenitentia*, §152, p. 135.

<sup>26</sup> Saint Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* 2.10.20–21, trans. Theodosia Tomkinson (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2008), 455–456.

necessary by a necessity of means, but by a necessity of precept. Thus it does not oblige when it is not practically possible, as when someone is incapacitated, or in the case of general absolution in an emergency (see chapter 4 below), or when the penitent is unaware of a particular mortal sin.

If a penitent forgets about a particular mortal sin while making his confession, and remembers it afterwards, his absolution was valid (and that sin was thus already forgiven), but he still has the obligation of confessing that sin in his next confession. The reason for this is even though the sin was forgiven, canon 988 obliges the penitent to confess all grave sins not “acknowledged in individual confession, of which the person has knowledge.”

Deliberate omission of a grave sin through shame is an additional grave sin of sacrilege. The consequence of this is the *invalidity of the entire confession*. None of the sins mentioned have been forgiven and *all* must be confessed again in the next confession.

It is not strictly necessary, for the integrity of confession, for the penitent to confess doubtful matter. If the penitent is uncertain about whether something is a mortal sin, because of doubt either about whether full consent was given or whether it constitutes grave matter, most moralists hold that he is not bound to confess it. The reason is that only a certain law generates a grave obligation. Reasonable doubt makes the law uncertain, and thus no longer gravely binding.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, confessors should counsel penitents to confess doubtful sins precisely as doubtful. This is especially true if the penitent appears lax or uneducated in the faith. If a penitent is clearly scrupulous, however, other guidelines apply and he should generally be told not to confess doubtful sins at all.<sup>30</sup>

If a person is unable to make a complete confession due to physical impossibility or other very grave cause, absolution can be given even though the confession is incomplete. The penitent is to be told that the grave sins that were not confessed, although forgiven, still need to be individually confessed in the next confession. This can be the case with the gravely ill and moribund who do not have the strength for a full confession. Extreme embarrassment caused by a special relationship with the confessor, on the other hand, does not excuse the penitent from the obligation to confess all grave sins.<sup>31</sup>

As can be seen, it is very important to distinguish between a materially incomplete but valid confession, and an invalid (and sacrilegious) confession, due to the culpable omission of one or more grave sins, or due to the complete and certain lack of contrition (even imperfect). In a valid but materially incomplete confession, all mortal sins are

forgiven,<sup>32</sup> and there remains the obligation only to confess the sins not yet confessed. In an invalid confession, the entire confession must be repeated, for no sins have been sacramentally forgiven.

### Obligation of the Faithful to Confess Grave Sins Yearly

The Fourth Lateran Council imposed the obligation on the faithful to confess their sins at least once a year. This obligation is limited to the confession of mortal sins by the *Code of Canon Law*, canon 989: “After having reached the age of discretion, each member of the faithful is obliged to confess faithfully his or her grave sins at least once a year.” However, holy Mother Church greatly encourages much more frequent reception of the sacrament, in the same way that she encourages more frequent reception of the Eucharist.

### Confession of Venial Sins

It is not necessary for the faithful to confess venial sins. However, the Church recommends the practice, as stated in *CIC*, canon 988, §2. There are many magisterial affirmations of the great value of the frequent confession of venial sins. Pius XII, in his encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* of 1943, writes:

As you well know, Venerable Brethren, it is true that venial sins may be expiated in many ways which are to be highly commended. But to ensure more rapid progress day by day in the path of virtue, We will that the pious practice of frequent confession, which was introduced into the Church by the inspiration of the Holy spirit, should be earnestly advocated. By it genuine self-knowledge is increased, Christian humility grows, bad habits are corrected, spiritual neglect and tepidity are resisted, the conscience is purified, the will strengthened, a salutary self-control is attained, and grace is increased in virtue of the Sacrament itself. Let those, therefore, among the younger clergy who make light of or lessen esteem for frequent confession realize that what they are doing is alien to the Spirit of Christ and disastrous for the Mystical Body of our Savior.<sup>33</sup>

Like his predecessors, Bl. John Paul II continued to emphasize the “great importance” of teaching the faithful to “make use of the sacrament of penance for venial sins alone, as is borne out by a centuries-old doctrinal tradition and practice.”

Though the church knows and teaches that venial sins are forgiven in other ways too—for instance, by acts of sorrow, works of charity, prayer, penitential rites—she does not cease to remind everyone of the special

<sup>32</sup> In a materially incomplete confession, the sins confessed are *directly* forgiven by the sacrament, whereas the other mortal sins not confessed are *indirectly* forgiven through the infusion of sanctifying grace.

<sup>33</sup> Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi* 88.

<sup>29</sup> See Cappello, *De poenitentia*, §162, p. 146.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, §163, p. 147.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, §176, p. 154.

usefulness of the sacramental moment for these sins too. The frequent use of the sacrament—to which some categories of the faithful are in fact held—strengthens the awareness that even minor sins offend God and harm the Church, the body of Christ. Its celebration then becomes for the faithful “the occasion and the incentive to conform themselves more closely to Christ and to make themselves more docile to the voice of the Spirit.” Above all it should be emphasized that the grace proper to the sacramental celebration has a great remedial power and helps to remove the very roots of sin.<sup>34</sup>

### Benefits of Frequent Confession of Venial Sins

Frequent confession is the practice of going to the sacrament of Penance at least once a month. This is done for the twofold purpose of purifying oneself from venial sin and strengthening one’s will in the pursuit of holiness.<sup>35</sup> The principal benefit of frequent sacramental confession of venial sins is the sacramental grace to help the penitent overcome his habitual attachment to those venial sins,<sup>36</sup> and thus to remove the “very roots of sin.” Sacramental grace helps us to overcome temptation in regard to these attachments, to see them more clearly, to detest them more deeply, and to grow in the contrary virtues.

There are also many other benefits. The frequent confession of venial sins presupposes frequent examination of conscience by which self-knowledge and delicacy of conscience is increased. The act of confession, which involves a certain humiliation, increases humility and helps strengthen one against the temptation to make peace with those habits of sin. Exercising oneself in contrition for venial sins helps greatly to strengthen oneself against falling into graver sins. Furthermore, if no one confessed venial sins, confession would be seen as a sure indication of mortal sin, and perhaps would be avoided by many out of human respect.

Often the faithful are discouraged from repeatedly confessing the same venial sins. However, as long as they truly desire to detest these sins, to be liberated from them, and resolve to take measures to do so, they will reap great benefits from persevering in confessing the venial sins that most block their spiritual growth.

Since venial sins are free matter, there is no obligation for the confession of venial sins to be complete. It is not necessary—nor possible—to confess all one’s venial sins. If one seeks to do battle on all fronts at the same time, it is likely that little will be accomplished. Penitents do well to focus on those particular venial sins that are most deliberate; most harmful to others; most ingrained through long

habit or through one’s particular temperament; and most dangerous in inclining one to the danger of mortal sin.

### Satisfaction: Third Act of the Penitent

It is a fundamental principle of justice that to repair an offense committed against another requires some work of satisfaction to compensate for the offense.

Satisfaction can be made in two ways: in strict justice by which equality is reestablished, or in a way that falls short of equality. The former is referred to by theologians as *condign*, and the latter as *congruous*. Perfect (condign) satisfaction is achieved by giving to God something more pleasing than the offense is displeasing. Christ alone can satisfy for mortal sin in this way, according to perfect justice. His sacrifice on Calvary satisfied for all sin by offering His life—the life of a divine Person—to the Father with the maximum love of charity. This sacrifice is more pleasing to God than all human sin is offensive.

Christ’s sacrifice therefore perfectly merited the forgiveness of sins with regard to the eternal punishment. However, after the eternal punishment is remitted, there still remains the need for man to cooperate in doing satisfaction for the remission of the temporal punishment for sin that results from the disordered attachment to created goods and to one’s own will. This doctrine was denied by Luther and the other leaders of the Reformation. In response, the Council of Trent infallibly taught that after the eternal punishment for sin has been remitted, some temporal punishment still remains, for which satisfaction should be done: “If anyone says that . . . it is fiction that, after eternal punishment has been remitted by virtue of the keys, there usually remains a temporal punishment to be discharged: let him be anathema.”<sup>37</sup>

Thus even though our satisfaction will fall infinitely short of equality with the offense, it is still necessary for us to make some sacrifice, moved by contrition, to satisfy for the disorder introduced by sin, in union with Christ’s perfect sacrifice. The value of the sacrifice lies above all in the desire (of charity) to conform to God’s will. In order to be brought back into conformity with the divine will, the sinner wills to suffer something in recompense for the sin.

Works of satisfaction done out of supernatural charity merit the forgiveness of the temporal punishment. By himself man cannot do anything to merit the forgiveness of mortal sin in justice (condign merit). The guilt of mortal sin involves aversion from God, which has an infinite magnitude, and deprives the sinner of sanctifying grace and charity, without which we cannot merit. However, once we are restored to a state of grace through the applications of Christ’s sacrifice in the sacraments of Baptism or Penance, we can do works moved by grace that can satisfy for the temporal punishment due to sin in justice. Thus works of

<sup>34</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance* 32

<sup>35</sup> See Benedict Baur, *Frequent Confession* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter Publishers, 1999) 40

<sup>36</sup> These attachments are the “wounds of sin.”

<sup>37</sup> Council of Trent, session 14, canon 15, Denz 925.

penance moved by contrition can truly satisfy in justice for the temporal punishment due to mortal sin whose guilt has been forgiven, and to venial sin.<sup>38</sup>

The works of satisfaction imposed by the sacrament of Penance do not detract from the sacrifice of Christ (as Luther and his followers thought), but add to its glory. Through the power of grace recovered through the infinite merits of Christ's sacrifice, the penitent is able to join his satisfaction to that of Christ, so as to be conformable to Him also in the offering of satisfaction. In a state of mortal sin, no work of satisfaction can be meritorious, but in the state of grace and charity won back through absolution, the works of penance have a supernatural merit and can contribute (in justice) to the remission of the temporal punishment for sin.<sup>39</sup>

The work of satisfaction has two aims: reestablishing justice, and helping the penitent to overcome the wounds of sin. The former aim is primary. The work of satisfaction can be viewed as present in the intention of the penitent when he receives absolution, and as accomplished in fact afterwards. Only the intention to do the penance is essential to the validity of the sacrament. The actual accomplishment of penance, although not essential, is nevertheless an integral part of the sacrament and contributes to its perfection by remitting part of the temporal punishment for sin. If a penitent intended to do the work of satisfaction, but then forgot to actually accomplish it, the sacrament would be valid and forgiveness of the guilt of eternal punishment would be given, but the entire temporal punishment for sin would remain.

The confessor has a grave obligation to impose a work of satisfaction, for it is an integral part of the sacrament. Nevertheless, its lack does not invalidate the confession. Even for those who are gravely ill, some brief penance should be imposed, such as kissing the crucifix or a brief prayer. A penance is only to be omitted for the dying who are already unconscious.<sup>40</sup> The penitent ought to consider the fulfillment of the sacramental penance imposed by the priest, even if it is a small thing, as an act expressing his interior contrition and desire to atone for his sin. He can unite his penance to the Passion of Christ and the merits of the saints.

## *Effects of the Sacrament of Penance*

The principal effects of the sacrament of Penance is reconciliation of the penitent with God, restoration or increase of sanctifying grace, the reception of actual graces (both at the time of the confession and in the future) to

<sup>38</sup> See the Council of Trent, session 14, ch. 8, DS 1689, Denz 904.

<sup>39</sup> See the Council of Trent, session 14, canon 15, Denz 925.

<sup>40</sup> See Cappello, *De poenitentia*, §238, pp. 200–201; St. Alphonsus, *Guide for Confessors*, 13–17.

avoid the sins confessed and grow in the opposite virtues. Generally this is followed by the personal experience of deep inner peace.

If the penitent had lost sanctifying grace through mortal sin, a valid confession restores sanctifying grace. This effect is simultaneous with and inseparable from the forgiveness of mortal sin and the cancelling of the debt of eternal punishment. Sanctifying grace is the seed of glory and gives the right to the eternal inheritance of heaven if one dies in that state.

If the penitent is already in a state of grace (either because he only has venial sins to confess or because he has done an act of perfect contrition after a mortal sin), then valid reception of the sacrament increases sanctifying grace, as well as the theological virtues and the infused moral virtues.

In addition to sanctifying grace, the sacrament of Penance also gives sacramental grace, which is the series of actual graces necessary to fulfill the purpose of the sacrament. In this case that purpose is to strengthen the penitent against the sins that he has confessed so as to better sanctify those areas of his life and avoid falling again into sin.

The question is often asked whether a person who had fallen into a state of mortal sin and then makes a good confession, rises to the same degree of grace that he had previously. This depends entirely on the intensity of the contrition that a person has for his sins. The greater the charity that stands behind the movement of contrition, the greater will be the reception of grace through the sacrament of Penance.

Another effect of Penance, emphasized by John Paul II, is the rediscovery on the part of the penitent of his true identity, which had been obscured by sin. God has an Idea and plan for each person that is individual and incommunicable. Sin blocks the perfect realization of this plan, which is progressively restored by Penance. Another glorious effect of Penance is the progressive restoration of joy. John Paul II writes:

Contrition and conversion are even more a drawing near to the holiness of God, a rediscovery of one's true identity, which has been upset and disturbed by sin, a liberation in the very depth of self and thus a regaining of lost joy, the joy of being saved,<sup>41</sup> which the majority of people in our time are no longer capable of experiencing.<sup>42</sup>

There is no better way to restore true joy in society than to spread the practice of frequent Confession!

Finally, the sacrament of Penance restores the merits of a person's acts done in supernatural charity that were destroyed by a subsequent mortal

<sup>41</sup> See Ps 51:12.

<sup>42</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance* 31.

sin. Such merits are said to “come back to life” through Penance.

### ***Three Rites for Administering the Sacrament***

The current Roman Rite has three forms for administering the sacrament: (1) individual, (2) communal preparation with individual confessions, and (3) general absolution.<sup>43</sup> However, canon 960 of the *Code of Canon Law* must be born in mind:

Individual and integral confession and absolution constitute the only ordinary means by which a member of the faithful conscious of grave sin is reconciled with God and the Church. Only physical or moral impossibility excuses from confession of this type; in such a case reconciliation can be obtained by other means.

There are two circumstances in which general absolution is called for. The first is imminent danger of death and there is not enough time for a priest to hear individual confessions. This can be the case on the scene of an accident or in wartime. The second circumstance is proper to regions such as mission territory in which priests are rarely able to be present, and penitents would otherwise be deprived of absolution for a long time through no fault of their own.

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43 See *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, 1:534–541.