

Vatican II and the Year of Faith
Sinners Anonymous:
Contrition is Step One to a Transformed Life

Management gurus, psychologists, and twelve-step programs all recognize that desire for change and personal accountability are powerful instruments for human transformation. Catholic faith also embraces these principles (since grace builds on nature), but our methods and goals are far more sublime. The secular approach contents itself with natural ends - management efficiency, addiction recovery, and so forth. Catholic faith promises holiness, a sharing in God's own nature, and its reward - eternal life.

Catholic faith differs also in how it understands the conditions for change. Like the management gurus and recovery experts, we believe that we must desire change. God does not save us against our wills. But this desire is itself first, and foremost, a gift of God's grace. This is why the Psalmist prays, "Create in me a clean heart, O Lord!" (Ps. 51:10) It is why Peter calls baptism "an appeal to God for a good conscience." (1 Peter 3:21)

The nature of this desire is also frequently misunderstood by the secular and non-Catholic world. Catholics call this desire for change *contrition*, but many non-Catholics do not know what this means. The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther famously rejected the Catholic doctrine of contrition, because he confused it with a guilty conscience. His own life was tormented by guilt and fear, and he sought desperately to find peace. Eventually, he rejected the Catholic faith, thinking that contrition led only to sorrow and anxiety. (Unfortunately, Luther never escaped the cycle of fear, anxiety, and guilt. He continued to suffer from obsessions and paranoia throughout his life.)

Luther's misunderstanding is not uncommon, but it is very mistaken. The Catholic doctrine of contrition has nothing to do with what Luther experienced as a guilty conscience. It is possible to have great discomfort in sins (real or imagined), to have a gnawing anxiety and fear, and yet be utterly unwilling to change, unwilling to embrace the call to holiness. True Contrition, by contrast, need not be highly emotional or dramatic. It consists simply in a rejection of past sins, and a firm desire to change, to conform ourselves to Christ. The Catechism defines contrition as "sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again." (CCC 1451)

True contrition brings not guilt and fear, but deep peace and abiding joy, especially when we bring our contrition to the sacrament of reconciliation. We see this clearly in this week's Gospel, the story of the Prodigal son. When the son, in true repentance, seeks out his Father's forgiveness, he receives not only reconciliation but a festive reception. "We must celebrate and rejoice," the Father insists, "because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. (Luke 15:32)

The one touched by Christ with contrition recognizes the ugliness of sin and the beauty of holiness. He comes to "delight in the Lord." (Ps. 37:4) He sees that holiness consists essentially in love of God and neighbor. This is why true contrition imparts a real beauty to the soul who

practices it. Dietrich Von Hildebrand, in his book *Transformation in Christ*, describes this beauty:

It is in contrition that the new fundamental attitude of a humble and reverent charity becomes dominant and manifest, that man abandons the fortress of pride and self-sovereignty, and leaves the dreamland of levity and complacency, repairing to the place where he faces God in reality. (*Transformation in Christ: On the Christian Attitude*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990)

Compare contrition to three other attitudes towards sin. First, there is the guilty conscience. The one who practices this is morose and unhappy, self-absorbed, and uncharitable. Second, there is the man who admits the need for change, but treats his past faults without seriousness, refusing truly to repent. Third, there is the one who sees no need for change, either because of a hardened conscience or because of arrogant presumption. We have all met these types, probably in ourselves, at one time or another. And they are ugly. But now consider the contrite soul: the one who knows he's done wrong, truly rejects it, desires to change, and trusts in God's mercy. He is not morose, or self-loathing. Neither is he arrogant or presumptuous. He is a humble soul, disposed to Love. He is beautiful.

The universal call to holiness was a major theme of the Second Vatican Council. (See *Lumen Gentium* 5). The call was repeated constantly by Bl. John Paul II, Pope Benedict, and by the Catechism. In this, they were following the teaching of Christ: "Be ye perfect, as your Father in Heaven." (Matthew 5:48) and of St. Paul: "put on the new man, who according to God is created in justice and holiness of truth ." (Ephesians 4:24)

In Lent, we renew this pursuit of holiness, without which no one can see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14) This Lent, in your pursuit of holiness, do not neglect step number one in the Catholic program of personal transformation. Like the Psalmist, pray and ask God for the gift of *contrition*.