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# How to Make an Act of Perfect Contrition

*By* Leo T. Dowling, S. J.

**T**HERE is an Eastern tale called "The Peri and Paradise," which very aptly introduces our subject. One of the fallen angels, so the story goes, was somehow left hovering between heaven and earth. He was given a chance to regain paradise if only he could find on earth the one thing most highly prized in heaven.

He had an idea that a precious jewel would show the wisdom of God in its crystallization and His goodness in its abundance. So he discovered a large and brilliant diamond. Here, he thought, is something indeed valuable and so beautiful that it might well be an ornament in the court of heaven.

On arriving at the gates of heaven, the peri was told that God had adorned His kingdom with far more beautiful jewels than those to be found on earth. Sad and much depressed, the peri went away, wondering to himself where on earth he could find a beautiful object that did not already exist in far more excellent way in heaven.

Days glided into weeks and months, and still he could not imagine where this treasure might be found; and yet it must be somewhere, since he was told that it did

exist, and he must find it if he would regain heaven. Perhaps some heroic deed, some work of intense love for God produced by a saint might satisfy. Who knows?

One day in the midst of his pondering he passed a wayside shrine, a cross with the figure of Christ upon it, nothing more. Not the shrine, but the man kneeling before it attracted his attention. The eyes of this man looking up at the crucified form of our Savior glowed with a mysterious light, a love surpassing all earthly love, a vision of divine love streaming into his soul. Slowly there formed on the cheek of the kneeling man a tear of repentance prompted by love.

“Surely those tears are precious,” thought the peri, “not to be found in heaven and yet so valuable as to win heaven for me.” As the tears fell, the peri caught one and with it hastened to the gates of heaven. As he approached, the gates flew open as angels welcomed him home.

A fairy tale? Yes. And yet not more wonderful than what has happened in real life. There is that wonderful fact recorded in the twenty-third chapter of Saint Luke’s Gospel.

### **The Good Thief**

After our Savior had been nailed to the cross, two thieves were each nailed to a cross and the crosses raised on either side of Christ’s cross. One of the thieves blasphemed God and cursed his fate. The other thief, not thinking of himself and

his fate, watched the person of Christ and took notice of Mary His mother and the unearthly charm of her beauty. He scanned the faces of the mob, particularly the Pharisees, their scorn and ridicule, their glaring eyes of hate.

Again turning his gaze to the face of Jesus disfigured by the blood that flowed from the crown of thorns, he said to himself, "This man is innocent, and how patiently He suffers. Instead of anger, He shows meekness; and in answer to the shouts of His enemies, listen to His words: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' What kind of man is He? Over His head are the words 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.' Truly He acts like a king, but one whose kingdom is not of this world."

It was common talk in Jerusalem that He had healed lepers, given sight to the blind, and cast out devils. He claimed to be God; He had often spoken of a kingdom in the world to come, where He would rule as king. But now He had less power than any slave.

This thief felt his heart soften with pity. And as the pity grew in intensity, it melted into love for One who could ask a favor for the scoundrels who despised Him: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

For one brief moment our Savior raised His head and cast a glance at this thief, a look that poured into his mind a glorious

light disclosing the love that makes heaven and all that is beautiful and revealing- the ugliness of the sins defiling his soul. What else could he do but answer that look with a prayer: "Lord, remember me when thou shalt come into thy kingdom." And Jesus said to him: "Amen I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with me in paradise."

Doubtless there were tears of joy in the eyes of that thief over the pardon of his sins and the temporal punishment due them in purgatory. His soul was thrilled by the goodness and power of God, who had changed the world's greatest failure into its greatest triumph: He who had lost all and was in despair had won a kingdom. Here is fact and not fiction. And this one fact in the Gospel leads us to dwell on a very important lesson in Christian doctrine.

### **Perfect Contrition**

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

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

Is it so difficult then to lift the mind above that selfish fear and produce the love which will make an act of contrition perfect? Not at all. Saint Ignatius in his "Spiritual Exercises" has suggested a method whereby one in the state of mortal sin may be immediately reconciled with God. Here are the directions.

### **A Good Method**

Picture to yourself the fires of hell. Look at those condemned, and imagine how they must suffer from the torture of fire. Think of the agony of despair in these souls who know that all this torture will never end. Some of these souls have committed fewer grievous sins than you have. Then ask yourself why you were not condemned after your first mortal sin, as you deserved to be. What saved you from that eternal prison of fire?

For answer you turn your gaze to the cross. Look at the bleeding form of your Savior. Recall His words: "Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends." You would have to be hardhearted indeed not to love one who has loved you so much and paid such

a price for your redemption. The smallest amount of love suffices, says Saint Thomas, but it must be sincere. Then say: "O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee, and I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell but most of all because they offend thee, who art so good and deserving of all my love." Note well the phrase "most of all": It gives the principal reason for your sorrow; it makes your act of contrition perfect.

#### A Second Method

### **The Prodigal Son**

There is a parable told by our Savior which presents another method by which we may awaken love and dispose the soul to make an act of perfect contrition; it is the parable of the prodigal son.

The youngest son had gone far from his father's love and care in order that he might more easily squander the money given him—and his health too—in riotous living. Having spent his money, he was abandoned by his friends. Alone and sad, he said to himself: "I will arise, and will go to my father, and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee; I am not worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired servants."

The father is so happy over the return of this prodigal that he does all he can to make it clear to him that not only is he forgiven but he must also be rewarded for the joy he has brought to his father.



Now this is true to nature. We readily understand how an earthly father feels toward his younger son. But what we cannot comprehend is the fact that the infinite majesty of God, who owns and rules the universe and has no need of our service or our love, should so intensely love a poor mortal as to fill the court of heaven with joy when that mortal, after he has ignored Him and broken His laws, finally decides to come back to His friendship. We cannot understand it, and yet we must believe His words, as they are recorded in the Gospel of Saint Luke: "There shall be joy in heaven upon one sinner that doth penance, more than upon ninety-nine just who need not penance."

#### A Third Method

#### **Souvenirs of Love**

A third method by which to awaken love is suggested by our Savior in the words: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow." Most people admire flowers, but very few people stop to consider how a flower grows. Saint Augustine says that the growth of any flower is a greater miracle than the raising of a dead person to life.

The petals of a flower are finer and more delicate in their texture than was any garment worn by Solomon in all his glory. This work of art, this coloring from materials void of color and beauty, is made by some mysterious invisible force that has no intelligence of its own yet is capable

of producing an object more beautiful than any work of man.

These are souvenirs of God's love and care for us. They portray the infinite wisdom that knows how to direct all things and draw good out of evil. The countless variety of these souvenirs of love scattered over the earth shows the infinite power that does not do things in a small way, the infinite love that does not love in a small way.

So the heart may be easily moved to love one who does not love us in a small way but in each one of a million flowers appeals to us to stop and reflect on this souvenir of a love that cares for us with infinite power and wisdom.

By putting this love into our sorrow for sin, we make an act of perfect contrition, win immediately the friendship of God, and thereby remove all guilt of sin before we go to confession. So eager is God to be our friend that He welcomes the first advance we make and by the power of grace helps us to do what will reconcile us to His fatherly love.

You may now ask: Have we anywhere in the Gospels a statement which would prove that love is the element which makes an act of contrition perfect, in other words, a statement which shows that when God sees love mingled with sorrow and the love predominant He forgives sin immediately? Yes; there is in the Gospels a beautiful story which will make you love God

and fit you for an act of perfect contrition, if you think on it.

### **Mary Magdalen**

Saint Luke tells us that there lived in the city a woman who was a sinner, a woman known to be leading openly an immoral life. He does not explain how she came to be ashamed of her conduct or what extraordinary light enabled her to see possibilities heretofore undreamed of, a new life with joys surpassing all she had ever experienced, a life free from bitterness and regrets.

A little reflection will give us the explanation. Mary Magdalen, like many others, was eager to see and hear this wonder-worker who was accustomed to heal all manner of diseases, even to raise the dead.

She saw Him give sight to the blind and cleanse the leper; and though she was not suffering from blindness or leprosy, she knew that sin was corroding her being; she felt a darkness of mind that no physician could heal. She had known young men like the prodigal and young women too who had run their course of dissipation and now in abandonment were slowly rotting to death with no one to comfort them, despised outcasts like the leper, with no ray of hope.

And here was one claiming the power of God and saying: "Come to me all you that labor and are burdened, and I will refresh you." Something gentle in His manner inspired her to go to Him and declare her

sorrow for the past and her determination to give to God the best love in her passionate nature.

The occasion presented itself in the home of the Pharisee Simon. She knew that she would be despised by the assembled guests. But what did she care for their opinion, if only she could win the favor of Him whose friendship was the one thing necessary to the new life upon which she was venturing.

So uninvited she entered the house of Simon, secure in this her first step in a great adventure of love that would in time transform her whole being. Casting herself at the Savior's feet, she spoke no words, but the sentiments of her heart were expressed in tears as she kissed His feet. And Jesus, marking the suspicious glances and thoughts of those who knew nothing of the re-creating of a character that was broken, or of the inspiring of hope where failure overshadowed all, said to them: "Many sins are forgiven her, because she hath loved much." Could anything else be clearer than this statement that love is the element in contrition which He notes when He forgives sin, that love makes contrition valuable?

It is a scientific fact beyond dispute that a diamond is nothing else but a piece of coal that has been crystallized within the earth's surface by intense heat and great pressure. Like the piece of brittle coal Magdalen's character, once weak and de-

graded, was transformed by the fire of love into the brilliant and durable diamond.

She stood at the cross and shared the humiliations of our Savior. She was the first to visit the tomb early on that first Easter morning; and while the Apostles turned away disheartened and left the empty sepulcher, Mary stood there, loyal to her master, waiting in tears until He granted her the first recorded apparition, proclaiming the triumph of His redeeming grace over a soul that was wrecked and then rebuilt by the redeeming power of love.

### **Saint Peter**

There is one more example in the Gospel story which points to the act of love as a means of atonement; it is the case of Saint Peter. Without a doubt Peter had sinned grievously; for after being questioned and having denied a second and a third time that he was a follower of Christ, he cursed and swore that he never knew the man. And Peter knew Him better than did all the other Apostles. He had seen our Savior in glory on Mount Tabor.

It was shortly after Easter that our Savior appeared to the Apostles. Addressing Peter, He said: "Simon, son of John, lovest thou me more than these? He said to Him: Yea, Lord, thou knowest that I love thee." Three times the question was repeated, and three times Peter answered in the same words. Our Savior could not have indicated to us more clearly the value

of love as an element of contrition and a means of atonement.

It is well to remember here that God forgives not only the guilt but also the punishment due to sin—forgives in proportion to the amount of love in the sorrow. Furthermore, says Saint Thomas, one act of contrition can contain so much love that it will remove all the penalty due to our sins in purgatory. As proof of this he gives the words spoken to the good thief: “This day thou shalt be with me in paradise.”

As a help toward the practice of making our contrition perfect with a view to the formation of the habit, we might use other motives to excite in ourselves love for God.

Recall the story of the Good Shepherd’s going after the lost sheep. When He finds it, instead of roughly driving it back in an angry mood, he raises it tenderly to his shoulders and carries it back in rejoicing. In this way the Savior pictures His love and His desire for our friendship.

Then there is the picture of the scourging. We need only think of the power of God to understand how much He must have loved us to have submitted Himself to such a disgraceful punishment.

The crowning with thorns, when the soldiers mockingly bent the knee and laughed at His kingship, presents another view of Christ’s love as we think of His infinite majesty.

Christ comes from the regal splendor of heaven to the altar and humbles Himself

under the appearance of bread because in His great love He wishes to be near us, yes even to be one with us, as bread becomes one with the body: "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, abideth in me, and I in him."

The complaint of disappointed love is expressed in our Savior's words to Saint Margaret Mary: "Behold the heart which has loved men so much that it has not spared the shedding of the last drop of its blood and in return meets with so much coldness, indifference, and ingratitude."

Why is this habit of perfect contrition so important? It is most important because death may come upon us when no priest is at hand to absolve us. "Watch and pray," said our Savior, "for ye know not when the time is." We notice that the prodigal returned to his father's house to stay. Mary Magdalen not only abandoned her former associates, but she chose to associate with our Savior and His blessed mother as a means to safeguard her intention to lead a better life. Too many Catholics in going to confession think they have satisfied the precept of penance by the telling of their sins without the giving of any thought to the question of what means they are going to adopt to avoid the occasions that gave rise to temptation and led to sin. And yet if a person does not intend to try to avoid certain sins, his contrition is defective; it certainly does not contain the love which constitutes an act of perfect contrition. One who makes no serious effort to avoid

the repetition of the offense he has given God cannot be said to love God—no matter how often he repeats the words of the act of contrition—because the sentiments of his heart do not correspond to his words.

Another reflection seems to be appropriate here. One who claims to love God is deceiving himself if he fails to profess openly his respect for God and neglects to attend church services on Sunday.

Finally it would be well to remember the words of St. John: "If any man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar." Anyone who is regularly unkind to others and thinks nothing of damaging the reputation of others cannot pretend to have the love which goes to make an act of perfect contrition. One who loves God must intend to do the will of God. This will has been expressed by our Savior in those sublime words: "This *is* my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you." (*John xv, 12*)

### **An Important Fact**

In considering this matter, it is important to remember that no one may receive Holy Communion after he has committed a mortal sin, presuming that he is in the state of grace by reason of the act of perfect contrition which he has made; he must first go to confession. There is always a danger of abuse in this matter on the part of those who might too easily imagine they have made an act of perfect contrition and might therefore neglect to go to confession.



We must also bear in mind that as the precept of penance obliges a person to tell in his next confession a mortal sin forgotten in a previous confession, even though that sin was removed by the absolution, so is he obliged to tell in his next confession the mortal sin that was removed by his perfect contrition. This is done, not to obtain pardon, for the sin has already been forgiven, but to fulfill the sacrament of penance, which obliges us to tell all our mortal sins in confession.

### **Additional Proof**

Now to come back to our argument proving the efficacy of perfect contrition. Before the coming of Christ there was no baptism or confession. Then how do you suppose people obtained forgiveness for original as well as personal sin? The only means they had was the act of perfect contrition, just as it is the only means available to the millions now living who never even heard of our Savior or those who do not realize their obligation to belong to the true Church of Christ.

### **Help the Sick**

It may happen that you are visiting a friend who is dangerously ill. This person is not a Catholic, may not have been baptized, or is perhaps in the state of mortal sin. You would like to prepare this person to meet God as a friend and not as an enemy. How would you go about this?

Patience is a good topic to begin with and is needed by all sick people. Picture to the sick person our Savior on the cross. Speak of His kindness and love in His choosing to be like us in suffering. He takes on Himself the punishment we deserve for our sins, and He does this because He loves us and wishes to save us from the evil effects of sin. The sick person will be inspired with love; this love will induce sorrow for his having offended God, even though he does not speak words to that effect. Here we have an act of perfect contrition that will remove mortal sins, if there be any, and prepare the person to meet God as a friend.

### **The Triumph of Love**

In conclusion we may consider this quotation from Shelley's poem "The Cloud," with which to illustrate in a way the power of love. Shelley is here describing the marvel of sunlight's fashioning the rainbow.

*From, cape to cape with a bridge-like shape,  
Over a torrent sea,  
Sunbeam-proof, I hang like a roof,  
The mountains its columns be.  
The triumphal arch thro' which I march  
With hurricane, fire, and snow,  
With the powers of air chained to my chair,  
Is the million-colored bow;  
The sphere-fire above its soft colors wove,  
While the moist earth was laughing  
below.*

Just as the sun weaves the beautiful colors of the rainbow and forms those colors in an arch of triumph from the dark clouds, so does God's love by its creative power change the gloom and the threatening evil of sin into the bright colors of hope and an arch of triumph. Certainly the world has never seen a greater triumph than that of the good thief, whose life was a dismal failure, without hope, until the light of our Savior's love changed the dark clouds into a brilliant arch of triumph: "This day thou shalt be with me in paradise."

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