

Act of Contrition
2nd Sunday of Advent (B)
(Mk 1:1-8)

Last week the liturgy emphasized the vigilant prayer of expectation: “Thy Kingdom come.” This Sunday the emphasis is on prayer of repentance: “Forgive us our trespasses.” In the first Advent, John the Baptist prepared the people for the coming of the Messiah by calling them to repentance and baptizing them in the Jordan as they confessed their sins.

The *Act of Contrition* is a special prayer memorized as children prepare for their first confession. It is the prayer by which the Church teaches us how to tell God we are “sorry” for our sins. Together with integral confession of sins, absolution by the priest, and penance, it is one of the four essential parts of the Sacrament of Penance. There is no repentance or reconciliation without contrition.

The Act of Contrition should be prayed not only during the Sacrament of Confession but each day, especially at the end of the day. We must never go to bed without recalling any ways we sinned or failed to serve God, and asking forgiveness. Reconciliation begins by saying “I’m sorry” – having sorrow for sin with the firm intention of changing one’s life.

This prayer beautifully expresses what contrition means. It begins, “*O my God I am heartily sorry for having offended you.*” A sin is an offense against God, something which injures our most fundamental relationship. We are not just sorry, but *heartily* sorry, which means “from the bottom of the heart.” Sorrow for sin must be true and sincere. Like all prayer, the Act of Contrition must never be simply words, but a heartfelt expression of the inner self.

I detest all my sins... “Detest” means to hate. So often our sins are committed easily, even with relish and enjoyment because they seemed desirable to us (Gn 3:6). To repent and be reconciled with God, our actions need to be seen not from this perspective of self-will, but from the perspective of the covenant between God and man, which we must jealously guard as our highest priority. We must acquire the mind of Christ, and hate anything which violates that relationship, seeing sin for its true ugliness and offensiveness in the sight of God.

The prayer then expresses the reasons for being sorry. “...*because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell.*” Sin entails punishment. The coming of the Messiah is a reminder of the judgment we have to face, the accounting we will have to give for our stewardship before Him who is the full standard of Truth and Love. It is often the case that a child, when punished, starts to cry out “I’m sorry, I won’t do it again.” It is often the case with us that what keeps us from sin in the first place, or what causes us to repent after we have sinned, is the fear of “*Thy just*

punishment” to come. The Church calls this “imperfect contrition,” – being sorry out of fear of punishment. It is a sufficient motive for reconciliation through the Sacrament of Penance, but it is not the highest motive.

Instead, “perfect contrition” looks to standard of goodness to which we are called: “*most of all, I offend Thee my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love.*” This deeper sorrow for sin is based on love, which seeks the good. God is all good and worthy of all love. Sin does not acknowledge or honor this goodness of God, and betrays our own dignity as His children. It is not worthy of Him, or us. Contrition then, laments the loss of our status as sons of God which we have brought about, and seeks reconciliation with the Father on His terms.

In the final sentence of the prayer, we make our resolutions. “*I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace...*” We do not have the power to overcome our sinfulness by ourselves. The fallen condition of man is one of concupiscence, where the will is weak, the intellect is dark, and the desires of the flesh are tyrannical. We depend on God’s grace to overcome sin, but grace works through our free cooperation. Repentance requires firm purpose on our part, in three areas.

“*To confess my sins...*” The people going out to John confessed their sins as they were baptized in the Jordan. The prodigal son confessed his sins before the father (Lk 15:21). Confession means acknowledging our sins by speaking them on our lips. It is an essential part of repentance and reconciliation. These evil deeds are ours, we must own them, taking full responsibility. In sorrow we face our sins honestly and humbly. We do not ignore, minimize, rationalize, pretend, or make excuses.

“*To do penance...*” When the priest assigns a penance in the confessional, it is typically a token action to begin the pathway of healing and new life. Typically we are required to say a few prayers, reflect on a selection of Scripture, or perform some small good work. However, penance goes a lot further than this. This obligation means we take responsibility for the harm our sin has caused, accept the full negative consequences of our past behavior, and seek by whatever means to make reparation to those we have injured. If we lied, penance requires to tell the truth. If we stole we must repay. If we offended someone we must place ourselves in service to their good and well-being. If we committed a crime we must likely turn ourselves in.

“*And to amend my life.*” If we immediately return to the very same sins we just confessed, our contrition was not sincere. True contrition requires a firm purpose of change. Though we cannot guarantee the future, our contrition must translate into practical decisions regarding habits and lifestyle, and the avoidance of near occasions of sin. It is for this reason that those living in adulterous unions

cannot receive absolution until their situation is rectified according to God's law. Jesus said, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off! (Mt 5:30). John likewise counseled the people regarding the concrete changes they needed to make in their lives in order for their repentance to bear fruit (Lk 3:8-14).

The Act of Contrition brings together in a complete way the wisdom of the Scriptures and Tradition with regard to repentance. It is easy to *say* "I'm sorry," but to truly *be* sorry requires a lot more.

During this Advent season of preparation for the coming of the Lord, let us deepen our prayer, both of expectation and repentance, and like the people in the time of the Messiah, seek out the baptism of forgiveness in Confession.