

An Act of Contrition

When I was little, and learning my evening prayers, my parents taught me this Act of Contrition, which became my daily plea for forgiveness as I grew up.

O my God,

I am sorry and beg pardon for all my sins.

I detest my sins above all evil:

- **because they deserve Thy dreadful punishments,**
- **because they have crucified my loving Saviour, Jesus Christ**
- **and most of all because they have offended Thine infinite goodness**

**and I firmly resolve by the help of thy grace never to offend Thee again,
and carefully to avoid the occasion of sin.**

Amen.

Looking back on thirty-two years of hearing confessions, I realise that I have been getting more and more unhappy with this prayer, and wishing to take a swipe at it. Many, priests or layfolk, will join me in being unhappy about the Sacrament of Reconciliation as it is increasingly neglected and misunderstood. I think this prayer shows us some symptoms of what's wrong.

Quality Control

Sorrow for sins, like any good emotion, can be deep and good, or shallow and flawed. Deep goodness, in my book, shows itself in positive, creative traits, an openness to growth and fruitfulness: in religion it shows itself in delighting in God, the urging of divine charity, the overcoming of weakness and disability by the grace of discovered love.

This prayer is an impeccable expression of the classic understanding of “valid” repentance. It proceeds from the fear of Hell, by way of guilt for the Crucifixion, to the fear of offending Divine Goodness which used to be called “perfect contrition”. But to say it is a true picture of the dispositions that open us to God’s forgiveness is like saying that the 1917 Code of Canon Law was an adequate expression of the grace of married life. We have nourished and transformed that travestied expression, and renewed the practice of marriage-law beyond recognition. But the sacrament of forgiveness remains in the doldrums: no longer what it was, but not made what it should be.

Is Guilt Good?

My first problem with the prayer is the reeking sense of guilt which it conveys. Guilt seems to me to be a foothold of evil in us, rather than a location of goodness. It is a form of self-hatred. The personal sins which make up my people’s confessions seldom glow with shed blood or cry to heaven for vengeance. To hate ourselves because we have the capacity for sin may look like contrition. Often I think it is only a harnessing of the psychotic capacity of self-loathing which closes so many people off from belief in God’s love for them. We do such people little good by endorsing their contempt for what God has made in them, especially when all they can show to justify such contempt is a smattering of weaknesses and failings which many people might justly take in their stride. To draw a direct line between a child’s little failings and the Crucifixion of Christ is something I could not honestly do.

Lonely And Unholy

My second problem is in the loneliness which it expresses. The Christian is shown in the dock, self-convicted of heinous crimes (with dreadful penalties to expect), red-handed from Golgotha, and estranged from an “offended” God. The prayer seems to have ignored the Third Gospel; there is no trace here of the love of the Father in the Prodigal Son story, who does not wish to hear a recital of faults, or any proposal for lucrative but unfilial return; nor

the prayer for forgiveness of Luke's crucified Jesus, nor the graceful words between the crucified criminal and his Redeemer. The only God mentioned here is dreadfully punishing, unjustly perishing, or infinitely offended. The sinner remains, alone, friendless - "without one plea" except the shaky promise "never to offend" in the future. But where, in all of this, is the Saviour? I've always found the adjective "offended" unworthy of God. Anselm makes it sound credible in 1098, but in view of our greater awareness of metaphor and analogical language, we can surely accept that *an offended God* is a dangerous and deceptive concept for our times, and one which gives ammunition to those who find the whole idea of religious faith anachronistic and destructive of humanity.

Less Is Sometimes More

If you compare the so-called "short" Act of Contrition, you find something more hopeful:

**O my God, because you are so good,
I am heartily sorry for my sins;
and with the help of your grace,
I will not sin again.**

This is actually just as good an act of "perfect contrition": but it manages to convey the attraction of holiness, and the generosity of conversion, much better. Maybe the fact that *infinite goodness* is not said to be *offended* is welcome; maybe the *heartily sorrow* gives the suppliant a ray of hope: maybe the words *help* and *grace* add something positive. It has to be said that people habitually feel the need to expand the last line to

I will *try* not to sin again.

- which I resist; the fact is that, *given God's grace*, we really *won't* sin again; it is only our failure to accept grace that makes our "firm purpose of amendment" so vulnerable. The line is an act of faith, not a statement of future fact.

I'm Heartily Sorry

Mounting an attack on well-established devotional articles seldom brings approval, and I feel sure that many people will deplore my onslaught on this formula. But I think that people neglect the Sacrament of Forgiveness because they feel the Church is asking them to grovel, because they no longer feel the sense of communion which once enabled them to share the burden of their sins, and because they feel that priests habitually fail to represent a loving Christ in the confessional. I think this prayer reinforces all those faults, and that we should begin the process of relegating it to the past.