

3.2.8. Sins can be forgiven outside of Confession

It is true that the Sacrament of Penance is of great value, but this fact has little bearing on whether jurisdiction is supplied in any particular case. To determine that, one must consult the law and practice of the Church and the opinions of theologians and canonists.

It should not be supposed that sins cannot be forgiven, or can be forgiven only with great difficulty, outside of the Sacrament of Penance. The Church teaches that an act of perfect contrition obtains the forgiveness of all mortal sins, and she encourages Catholics to make such acts frequently. The phrase "perfect contrition" may sound like a practical impossibility, something that only great saints could have, but this is not the true sense of the words. *Perfect* refers to the type of contrition, not its intensity; it is sorrow for sin based on the love of God for His own sake. It is common for ordinary virtuous Catholics to have this love and thus to have perfect contrition.

The following quotations explain these points in more detail.

As the specific difference between various virtues lies in the formal motive inspiring them, it is necessary to search for the motive of perfect contrition in order to obtain a real definition. All theologians agree in teaching that contrition is perfect when inspired by charity, that is, a perfect love of God (*contritio caritate perfecta*). We love God perfectly when we love Him as the supreme good for His own sake and above all else. "Caritas est amor Dei propter se super omnia." To understand this definition we must know wherein the essence of charity (as an act, not as a habit) consists.

A) We can love God either as He is in Himself, for His own sake, on account of His own goodness (*summum bonum in se*), or because He is good to us (*summum bonum nobis*). If we love Him for His own sake, we have what is called the love of benevolence or friendship (*amor benevolentiae s. amicitiae*). If we love Him because He is good to us, we have the so-called *amor concupiscentiae*.

a) This difference of motive gives rise to a difference of quality in the act of charity underlying contrition. But there are also differences of degree within each species. Both the *amor benevolentiae* and the *amor concupiscentiae* admit of degrees. Perfect charity is the love of God as the supreme good for His own sake (*propter se*).

b) To avoid misunderstanding it will be well to add an explanation. Perfect charity, like friendship, though it loves its object primarily for that object's sake, takes pleasure in the act. Fenelon's view that perfect charity must be absolutely disinterested (*amour désintéressé*) was condemned by the Church. Personal pleasure and self-interest, however, must remain strictly subordinate to the interest of God. The devout Catholic finds greater pleasure in contemplating the divine perfections and enhancing the divine glory, than in the joy which his own soul derives from that contemplation.

B) What does it mean to love God above all else (*super omnia*)?

To love God above all else does not mean to love Him with all the ardor of which the heart is capable. Such affection is beyond the power of the human will. The very notion of an absolute maximum of finite love involves a contradiction. Even relatively speaking, no matter how ardently one loves, a higher degree of affection is always conceivable, and hence the relatively highest degree of intensity would have to be sought for in the greatest effort of the will (*totus conatus possibilis*), which is possible with the grace of God, but nowhere demanded by Revelation. All that is demanded is that our love of God be supreme or sovereign in estimation, or appreciatively; in other words, that we love God with both intellect and will so as to prefer nothing else to Him. A mother may love her child more ardently than she loves God, yet her charity will be perfect if she is ready to give up her darling rather than see him commit a

mortal sin.

c) When contrition is inspired by a perfect love of God it is called perfect. Perfect contrition, therefore, may be defined as sorrow for sin inspired by a perfect love of God.

What theologians term a preliminary stage of perfect contrition is the so-called love of gratitude (*amor gratitudinis*), which is quite often identical with perfect contrition or at least naturally develops into it.¹

Perfect contrition restores the sinner to grace at once, even before he has approached the Sacrament of Penance, though the desire of receiving the Sacrament is necessary; it removes the eternal punishment and in part the temporal punishment. . . . Perfect contrition arises from love and is in its essence nothing but an act of love. Now perfect love unites us to God, so that we live in Him and He in us. This perfect union with God overcomes all separation from Him which arose through sin.

Such, then, is the effect of perfect contrition, however poor and weak it may be, for in spite of this it is a sorrow which is inspired and informed by perfect love. Nor does a greater or less degree change the species; the Council of Trent is positive in its declaration that perfect contrition reconciles us to God, and assigns no limit which must be attained before producing this effect. Such, too, is the unanimous teaching of St. Thomas, St. Alphonsus, and the other great theologians.

The sinner is restored to grace by perfect contrition without the Sacrament only when he has the intention of receiving it, for the actual, or at least intentional, reception of the Sacrament is the one single means ordained by Christ for the removal of mortal sin. This intention is included in the act of perfect contrition, as the Council of Trent goes on to teach; hence all theologians hold that the implicit desire (*votum implicitum*) is sufficient, for whoever has true contrition has the wish to fulfill all the commands of God, and hence the command of Christ enjoining the confession of sin. Perfect contrition is an act of perfect love, and this urges man to fulfill the commands of God in accordance with Christ's words: "He who loves Me will keep My word." Hence it may happen that a sinner is justified by an act of perfect contrition without any actual confession; it is sufficient that he does not exclude the purpose of confessing his sin.

The resolution to confess the sin does not include the resolution to confess it as soon as possible (*quam primum*). It is enough to confess when a precept of God or of the Church urges.²

Since perfect contrition is so pleasing to God and so helpful to those sinners especially who have fallen seriously, the pastor of souls should seize every opportunity of instructing the faithful and urging them to elicit such acts frequently, especially when they are in danger of death and have no opportunity of approaching the Sacrament of Penance.³

Penitents frequently make acts of perfect contrition, or are already in the state of grace.⁴

[I]t is manifest that charity exceeds the natural power of the will. Therefore, unless there were superadded to the natural power of the will some faculty by which the will is inclined to the act of love, the act of love or charity would be more imperfect than natural acts and than acts of the other virtues, and the act of love would not be easy and delightful. But this is clearly false: because no virtue has such a strong inclination to its own act as charity and no virtue

1 Pohle, *The Sacraments: Penance*, pp. 135-38 (citations omitted)

2 Schieler, *Theory and Practice of the Confessional*, pp. 81-83 (citations omitted)

3 Schieler, *Theory and Practice of the Confessional*, p. 88

4 Kearney, *The Principles of Delegation*, p. 136, cited by Miasiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 160

operates with such great delight. Whence it is most necessary that for the act of charity there exist in us some habitual power inclining itself to the act of charity and causing it to operate promptly and with delight.⁵

The commandment to love God does not impose on the faithful an unbearable burden, but rather a yoke which is sweet and a burden which is light. The faithful, who are God-fearing and are not slothful in their care of their salvation often make acts of love for God, although they do not advert that these are acts of love; for they make acts of love when they desire that all would serve God; when they wish to keep the commandments or to do pious works from the purpose of pleasing God. Therefore when they hear Mass, fast, hear a sermon, say prayers, give alms from the motive of pleasing God, they make acts of charity. Moreover, the Our Father contains three acts of charity; namely, the desire that the name of God be hallowed, that all on earth would do the will of God, and that there would come to us the Kingdom of the love of God. Therefore, whoever says the Our Father with attention and devotion really makes three acts of love for God. Then, as for those who say the Breviary, how many acts of love will they find in Psalm 117, if they say it with attention and devotion. Moreover, to resist temptations or abstain from mortal sins because they grievously displease God, is an action or omission from the love of God.⁶

One may therefore conclude that the indispensable thing is to love God, not to go to confession *per se*. It is love of God that must be pursued and practiced above all else. It is quite possible to lose one's soul despite having access to sacramental confession, as many Catholics have done, if one does not cultivate the love of God by prayer and good works. It is possible to save one's soul when deprived of confession, as many have also done.

For most of the world's history – those thousands of years before the New Covenant was instituted – perfect contrition was the only means by which actual mortal sin could be forgiven. It is not credible that this means was extremely difficult to use, even in those times when grace had not been poured out in such profusion as after the day of Pentecost.

If it is objected that one cannot be sure of having made an act of perfect contrition, the same can be said of having made a good confession. From the Council of Trent:

For even as no pious person ought to doubt of the mercy of God, of the merit of Christ, and of the virtue and efficacy of the sacraments, even so each one, when he regards himself, and his own weakness and indisposition, may have fear and apprehension touching his own grace; seeing that no one can know, with a certainty of faith, which can not be subject to error, that he has obtained the grace of God.⁷

If Catholics are left without the sacrament of Penance, it does not follow that they must suffer a spiritual loss. God's grace is not bound to the sacraments, and one may expect Him to give graces to compensate for the loss of Confession. He can even make one's being deprived of Confession the occasion of a greater good, such as the awakening of spiritual fervor in Catholics who must now rely on perfect contrition to obtain forgiveness. “And we know that to them that love God, all things work together unto good, to such as, according to his purpose, are called to be saints” (Romans viii. 28).

On the other hand, for Catholics to think they have been absolved when in fact their traditionalist priests lack jurisdiction would involve a spiritual danger, at least insofar as it gives a false sense of security. If jurisdiction is not supplied, then it's better for people to be aware of this.

5 St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, II. ii. q. 23, a. 2; quoted by Rev. Henry Semple, S.J., *Heaven Open to Souls*, p. 59

6 Rev. Joseph Aertnys, C.S.S.R.; quoted by Rev. Henry Semple, S.J., *Heaven Open to Souls*, p. 56

7 *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. Waterworth, p. 37