



# Boston Catholic Journal

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## TRUE AND PERFECT SORROW

### How can I possibly know if I am really and truly sorry for my sins?

**At the beginning** of [Compline in the Office of The Blessed Virgin Mary](#) we pray. "Convert thou us, O God our Savior." (note that we are not just praying for ourselves, but for *all* Christians).

It is part of the agony we all know once we have sinned and have turned back to God. We do not so much doubt His mercy and forgiveness .... as we doubt the sincerity of our own sorrow. We tend to look for quantity in sorrow, rather than intention. We ask ourselves, "are we sorry enough for this sin? Are we sufficiently sorry to receive the merciful forgiveness of God?"

In this sense we are trying to leverage God's mercy; acquire forgiveness through insufficient means, presuming, as we do, that we can render a finite quantity for an infinite return. In a word, we presume that we can, of ourselves, in some measure, effect our own absolution.

It is a matter of quantity, and the wherewithal is sorrow. It is an odd equation: "if I yield sufficient sorrow, in terms of intensity and duration, I can leverage that sorrow into absolution; a kind of quid pro quo not unlike Abraham's bargaining with God: the perennial "*if*".

The problem with this approach is two-fold: God is not a Capitalist and we are very poor investors.

The question, we find, must be asked in entirely different terms, terms that will provide us with a clear answer that has nothing to do with quantity ... a quantity that we cannot possibly calculate, accumulate, and proffer to God as so much currency of reciprocal value to an exacting merchant.

Sorrow must be understood differently: not in the way of a quantifiable exchange suggesting parity in terms of the bargainers; that is to say, not as quantity, but in the way of intentionality.

## PERFECT CONTRITION

Let us totally scrap the quantifiable model and take another tack altogether; something rather along these lines:

**If — upon deep, and completely honest reflection — we can say:**

*"Could I go back in time, I would that I had never done this. I would that I could erase what I have done and that it had never been, never happened. I know I cannot undo it — but if I could, I would." In other words, if we can say this with total honesty (and that means with a sincere and resolute intention never to do it again — even if, and despite our best efforts, we nevertheless fall again and again!) ... then what we express to God, and what we ourselves experience, is true contrition; in other words, we are truly sorry: our sorrow is perfect.*

On the other hand, if we can withstand our own withering honesty, and still have the courage to acknowledge that we really are not entirely sorry for our sin, and were it possible without penalty, we would, in fact, do it all over again — then, yes, our sin remains with us ... but ... we have not compounded our sin with a lie.

## HOPE

In truly recognizing that we are not entirely sort, it is extremely important to understand that all is not lost!

Despite our imperfect sorrow we nevertheless have the integrity to recognize sin; we do not deny, minimize, or gloss over it; what is more, we acknowledge our weakness toward it. (most likely we simply regret it, we regret all the pain, sorrow and suffering it has caused — but regretting, and being sorry are different — regret does not seek forgiveness or make amends).

But what does this all this mean? It means that we are being truthful with God, and with ourselves ... despite our sin. Even though we have offended Him, we still honor Him. He knows this. And He will help us.

Why?

Because even in our imperfect sorrow, we have acknowledged God and know what He expects of us — and we realize that we have not lived up to it.

## **ABSOLUTION**

When we finally see beyond the immediate consequences of our sins ... to the crucifixion of Christ on Calvary ... perfect sorrow will not be given us ... it will overwhelm us!

We will sorrow because we love. And because we love, we will be forgiven. How can we be sure? Jesus Christ promised us.

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