

## 083009 HAVE WE DONE AWAY WITH THE CONCEPT OF SIN?

### An Act of Contrition

“O my God I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee my God who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of Thy Grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin. Amen.”

I was seven years old (over sixty years ago) when I learned the Act of Contrition and I still use it when I go to Confession or before Mass sometimes or Communion or at night before I go to sleep. It may be an oldie but it is still a goodie.

But listen to those words again. They are so simple and straightforward. There is no weaseling about or room for rationalizations or explanations or extenuating circumstances. The Act of Contrition is about sin, the reality of sin, the real presence of sin in my life and my need to turn to God alone, in my sin, and seek forgiveness, a forgiveness that only the Lord can give. We are not ever able to absolve ourselves of our sin although we try often enough. This little prayer of 64 words acknowledges that I deserve to be punished for my sins but by the Grace of God I have been offered forgiveness instead.

It also says that there is some unfinished business that is left for me to do. It is for me to do but can only be accomplished by God's help. I have to summon the inner resolve to avoid these same sins and the things that lead me to these same sins over and over again. We call these the “near occasions of sin.” What is a near occasion of sin?

If my sin is coveting what another person has or the relationship he or she enjoys then the near occasion of sin is that first longing, desirous glance that I allow myself to take, allowing that longing to take root in my heart. I can choose to look the other way. I just don't always want to look the other way. I can consciously choose not to look with such longing because it only leads me down a bad path for me.

If my sin is anger and I can begin to taste in my mouth how justified I feel and how entitled I am to feel the way I do and to express my feelings with rage and impatience, then the near occasion of sin I must avoid is allowing myself to begin to taste the rage. Right then I have to turn off the spigot. I can only do this with God's help.

If my sin is lust and my lust is triggered by fantasies or by what I allow myself to look at then I must develop custody of the eyes and custody of the imagination. I cannot pretend that what I look at on television or cable or what I see on the Internet or read in novels has no effect on me. I have to change the channel or stop reading the book or magazine or turn off the computer. Right away. Near occasion of sin. The fateful time is when I think I can handle whatever it is. We decidedly cannot. These triggers are often near occasions of sin for us.

If, like the Pharisees, my sin is deception and it is fueled by my desire always to come across as the impeccable one where someone else is at fault then the near occasion of sin for me is this trying to avoid ever being perceived as wrong. I have to own the possibility of weakness or selfishness or actual sin. I have to come to recognize what the particular trigger is for me that inevitably leads me down a path that I know is not good for me but a path I will go down over and over again.

If my sin is resentment and hatred then I have to realize whenever I am tempted to put blame on others that I have to step back from that. I have to catch myself doing that

and feeling pretty justified in doing that. I must consciously choose not to do this kind of judgment or condemnation no matter how right it makes me feel initially.

If my sin is that I am more of a taker than of a giver but I want everyone to think of me as a giver and so tend to hide behind the appearance of serving others when I am only really serving myself then the near occasion of sin for me is when I begin to feel that there is not going to be enough for me and I have to reach out and take more. I have to turn to God in trust and remind myself that the Lord has always watched over me and provided for me. Perhaps it was at the last minute or only in the nick of time but God has been there and I have been given enough—not all that I wanted but what I truly needed. I was given enough.

You get the idea. Sin follows from being in an occasion of sin and some occasions are much closer than others. They are truly nearby. In the first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy we learn that the commandments were not given just to help us keep score about our sinning. The commandments were given us for enlightenment. The Lord always hopes we are thinking and reflecting and learning and making the necessary wise adjustments in life so that we do not self-destruct or destroy those around us. The commandments identify the things that we tend to do that are destructive. Avoid them. Avoid what leads us to them.

Saint James reminds us that while we can go so far on our own steam we cannot fully lift ourselves into goodness or sanctity. Genuine goodness and authentic sanctity are gifts from God that come as a result of cooperating with God's grace. "Every worthwhile gift, every genuine benefit comes from above," the apostle says. We have to recognize this and we have to have the humility to ask. And we must ask over and over again. Each day. Daily prayer. Daily bread. So what we do not find in ourselves we must look for in God and what we find ourselves unable to do we must ask the Lord's help.

And in the Gospel of Saint Mark, the first of the gospels written somewhere in the 60's of the first century probably in Rome after the persecutions where Peter and then Paul were put to death, Jesus talks about impurity of heart and he is not simply talking about sexual sins but includes sexual sins. Anything that poisons the heart makes it impure. It is not the things that are done to us that make us impure. It is what we allow to take up residence within our hearts that makes us impure. The message is clear. Take ownership and responsibility for your sins. This remains true no matter how good you are or how esteemed you have become.

Sin is real and at any moment, if we are not on our guard, it not only can derail us it will derail us. The evil one is a "roaring lion that goes about seeking someone to devour." If we do not realize that then we are oblivious to the nearest of all near occasions of sin, the malevolent presence of the evil one, a subtle and lying spirit but effective. It is not a spirit that can overcome God's Spirit which is precisely the Spirit that has been poured out on us and through us is the same Spirit that makes Christ present under the forms of bread and wine at each Mass. We have been given all that we need to overcome the near occasions of sin. All of them. We have only to ask. We have only to believe. And so we turn to Eucharist.