

Confession: A God Who Runs to Meet Us

During these days of quarantine, most of us find it very difficult to go to confession. Perhaps a return to normalcy is still far off, but the moment God sees that we are repentant, He hurries towards us, excited and proud that we are returning home.

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Jesus sees that the moment has come to show us how greatly his Father loves us. He wants to help those

listening to Him share in the joy that God experiences each time a sinner decides to return home. So He tells them a parable. It is hard to imagine how greatly the apostles were surprised when they heard for the first time the story of the prodigal son (cf. *Lk 15:11-32*). The disproportion between the insolence of the younger son and his father's affection must have amazed them, as well as the older brother's angry reaction.

During these days of quarantine, most of us find it very difficult to go to confession, and certainly to do so with the frequency with which perhaps we would like to. The restrictions in place may force us to delay indefinitely the reception of the sacrament of divine Mercy. This painful situation, along with others that we are going through, are also an opportunity to "grow on the inside." "It is good to keep in mind

that God gives us his grace also to sanctify these circumstances of uncertainty.”^[1] Although many of us don’t know when we will have access to the sacrament of confession again, we should never doubt that our Father God, when we go to Him with a “contrite and humble” heart (cf. *Ps 50:19*), is always ready to offer us his forgiveness, no matter how great our weakness may have been (cf. *Lk 15:20-24*).

An undeserved gift

The younger son longs for his home. “How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger!” (*Lk 15:17*). He doesn’t seem to be worried about the anguish and sorrow he is causing his father, but he decides to beg for forgiveness, trusting in his father’s goodness. And that is already an initial change of heart.

At times something similar happens to us. We struggle to go to confession with the regularity our soul needs. We are very aware of how much good it does us and the joy that a contrite confession gives rise to. Certainly we don't view this as a right before God, since no one has the right to be forgiven. As Saint Bernard wrote: "No one shows greater mercy than a person who gives his life for those sentenced to death and condemnation. My only merit is the mercy of our Lord. So I will not be lacking in merits so long as He continues to be merciful."[2]

We are convinced that everything in our life is a grace. And we sense the need to ask for God's forgiveness, perhaps even more so during these days. But do we think of the effect that our repentance produces in Him?

A God who runs to meet us

The heart of the prodigal son has much more to discover. “But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (*Lk 15:20*). Saint Josemaria was moved on contemplating this scene: “When God runs towards us, we cannot keep silent, but with Saint Paul we exclaim: *Abba, Pater*: ‘Father, my Father!’ Though he is the Creator of the universe, he doesn’t mind our not using high-sounding titles, nor worry about our not acknowledging his greatness.”^[3] The marvel is not only that his father is so good, but that he still sees him as his son, as his beloved child. It is not only that he doesn’t want to punish us, but that he wants to embrace us and cover us with kisses, whispering “my son, my daughter....”

Perhaps a return to normalcy in our access to confession is still far off, but the moment God sees that we are

repentant, He hurries towards us, excited and proud that we are returning home. So it does not make sense to put things off for too long regarding our sins: “Responding to the impulse of the Spirit, who draws us into the depths of God’s heart, let us think of the loving-kindness of the Lord, how good He is in Himself. Let us also ask, with the psalmist, to rejoice in God’s goodness, contemplating not our own heart but his Temple, saying with the psalmist: ‘when my soul is troubled, I remember you.’”[4]

“Give me your sins”

Pope Francis likes to tell this story: “I am reminded of a passage from the life of a great saint, Jerome, who had a temper, and tried to be meek, but that temper... Because he was a Dalmatian, and the Dalmatians are strong, he had managed to dominate his way of being and so he offered

the Lord many things, a lot of work... And he asked the Lord: 'What do you want from me?' – 'You still haven't given me everything' – 'But Lord, I have given you this, this and this...' – 'One thing is missing' – 'What is missing?' – 'Give me your sins.' It's beautiful to hear this: 'Give me your sins, your weaknesses, I will heal you, and you will go forward'.”^[5]

Our suffering and sadness, which result from giving in to the deceit of sin, make God sorrowful. But when we return to Him, his sorrow comes to an end, and our evil does as well. The power of sin is limited, the Cross has robbed it of its poison: we are saved, if we are humble and we let ourselves be saved.

We will often be able to say: “All I have to do is to examine my behavior in the few hours since I woke up this morning to discover so much lack of love, so little faithful

correspondence. This truly saddens me, but it does not take away my peace of mind. I prostrate myself before God and I state my situation clearly. Immediately He helps me, He reassures me, and I hear Him say slowly in the depths of my heart: ‘*Meus es tu!* I know the way you are, as I have always known it. Forward!””[6]

In confession we hear the tender and serene voice of God who says to us: “I absolve you from your sins.” During this time when many of us can no longer hear these words, we need to sharpen our hearing in order to recognize Jesus’ affectionate voice consoling us.

The best devotion

Saint Josemaria liked to compare acts of contrition with something he had learned from an Italian saying with regard to cups of coffee: *drink at least three and no more than thirty-*

three: the more the better! As he says in *Furrow*: “Renew your acts of contrition during the day. You must realize that Jesus is being offended constantly, and unfortunately these offences are not being atoned for at the same rate. That is why I have so often said: ‘Acts of contrition, the more the better!’”^[7]

Contrition is the sorrow we experience for the sins we have committed. The Church’s tradition distinguishes between perfect and imperfect contrition. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that perfect contrition is the sorrow that “arises from a love by which God is loved above all else.”^[8] Since it is an act of Love, it is already a work of grace, and therefore it “remit[s] venial sins” and also obtains “forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible.”^[9]

An *imperfect contrition* is also possible, which is “born of the consideration of sin’s ugliness or the fear of eternal damnation and the other penalties threatening the sinner (contrition of fear).”[10]

Although an immature sorrow, it “is also a gift of God, a prompting of the Holy Spirit”[11] that prepares us for confession and absolution of our sins, although by itself it does not obtain forgiveness of grave sins.

Pope Francis has stressed this in a homily during these days: “If you don’t find a priest to go to confession, speak to God. He is your Father. Tell Him the truth: ‘Lord. I did this and this and this. Pardon me.’ Ask His forgiveness with all your heart with an act of contrition, and promise Him, ‘afterwards I will go to confession.’ You will return to God’s grace immediately. You yourself can draw near, as the Catechism teaches us, to God’s forgiveness, without

having a priest at hand. Think about this: it's time! This is the right moment, the opportune time. With a well-made act of sorrow, our soul will become as white as snow.”[12]

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Knowing all this may not be sufficient at times to restore peace and joy to our hearts. We then need to turn to our Mother, whose caress will set everything right: “All the sins of your life seem to rise up against you. Don’t lose confidence. Call on your holy Mother Mary, with the faith and abandonment of a child. She will bring peace to your soul.”[13]

Diego Zalbidea

[1] *Letter from the Prelate of Opus Dei*, 14 March 2020.

[2] Saint Bernard, *Sermon 61*, 3-5.

[3] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 64.

[4] Saint Bernard, *Sermon 5*, 4-5.

[5] Francis, Homily, 7 July 2017.

[6] *Friends of God*, no. 215.

[7] *Furrow*, no. 480.

[8] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1452.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1453.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Francis, Homily, 20 March 2020.

[13] *The Way*, no. 498.

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