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"Greater than your heart": Contrition and Reconciliation

Only God is greater than our heart, and therefore only He can heal it and reconcile it to its depths. The sixth installment in the "Combat, Closeness, Mission" series.

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Part of Jesus' fascination for his contemporaries was due to his ability to heal the supposedly incurable. The Lord also drew great interest

because of the astonishing nature of some of his miracles, the power and originality of his preaching, his kindness and good humour, and because He appeared as the Messiah promised in the Scriptures... but many people approached Him first because of the miracles He worked for the sick. Word had spread that lepers, paralytics, the blind, the deaf-mute, and people with mobility problems had been healed by His words and gestures.

But that mysterious physician healed bodies to reveal an even greater power: the power to heal souls. Jesus reconciles in a way that only God could: He comes to heal the depths of our hearts. *“Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—”* He said to the paralytic, *“I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home”* (Lk

5:23-24). Above all, the Lord wants to heal our inner blindness, the blindness that prevents us from realising all we receive from Him. He wants to cure our muteness, our inability to put the evil within us into words; the deafness that prevents us from listening to God's voice and the needs of our neighbour; the paralysis that keeps us from moving toward what can truly make us free; and the leprosy that makes us feel unworthy of a God who never tires of seeking us. Every moment of Christ's life, especially his Passion and Resurrection, manifests his desire to heal. All He needs is to find that same desire in us. Healing is only possible if we do not hide our wounds from the One who has the power to heal them.

God is greater than our heart

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us

the ministry of reconciliation, St. Paul writes to the Corinthians. *For in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation* (2 Cor 5:18-19). The first Christian communities, perhaps due to the contrast with the harsh social logic around them, began to understand that reconciliation with God and with others was a gift that could only come from above. They realised that we cannot “cause” God's forgiveness with our penance or our acts of reparation; we can only accept with gratitude the free gift — the “grace” — that He offers us.

Without realising it, we may find ourselves applying the logic of an *overly human* forgiveness to God's forgiveness. For a strictly legal mindset, the important things are the payment of a penalty, the amount that has to be returned, and our

effort to reestablish the balance from before the damage was done. But Jesus came to overcome that logic and the silent despair it can generate in those who have no way to make amends. “What depths of mercy there are in God's justice! For, in the judgments of men, he who confesses his fault is punished: and in the Judgment of God, he is pardoned.”^[1] —

The First Letter of St. John also speaks of this comforting news, in words that can fill us with peace: *In his presence, we will reassure our hearts, even if our hearts condemn us, for God is greater than our hearts and knows everything* (1 Jn 3:19-20). Jesus repeats time and again that He has come to save us, not to condemn us,^[2] — but even so, unsettling voices can easily arise within us. The voice of weak hope tempts us to give up because it cannot fully believe that God can forgive everything, and the voice of pride cannot bear to

recognize its own weakness again and again.

The Pope encourages us to confront these voices: “You, dear sister, dear brother, if your sins frighten you, if your past worries you, if your wounds do not heal, if your constant failings dishearten you and you seem to have lost hope, please, do not be afraid. God knows your weaknesses and is greater than your mistakes. God is greater than our sins. He asks of you only one thing: that you not hold your frailties and sufferings inside. Bring them to him, lay them before him and, from being reasons for despair, they will become opportunities for resurrection.”^[3] —

In this same spirit, St. Josemaría invites us to look at those who approached Jesus, knowing they had no way to pay for their healing, either physical or spiritual. That conviction opened the doors to true

spiritual life, to the realm of grace, where *grace* is what matters most: “Are you worried that your sins are so many that Our Lord will not listen to you? It is not so, because Jesus is full of mercy. (...) See, too, what St. Matthew tells us when Jesus had a paralysed man brought before him. The sick man doesn't say a word. He is simply there, in the presence of God. And Christ, moved by the man's contrition, by the sorrow of one who knows he deserves nothing, responds immediately, as merciful as ever, ‘Take courage, your sins are forgiven.’”^[4]

Heal me, Lord, of what is hidden from me

The conviction that God always forgives us also resonates in psalms: *I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and You forgave the guilt of my*

sin (Ps 32:5). This is how we approach the mystery of the Holy Mass: when we want to unite ourselves with the Cross of Jesus and to enter into his loving transformation of all the evil in history, we begin by humbly acknowledging our guilt; and we strike our chest as we do so, as if to awaken our hearts.^[5]

Some people see this insistence on recognizing our sins, whether conscious or unconscious, as a possible psychological imbalance or a desire to burden our soul unnecessarily. In reality, while scrupulous tendencies would hinder our growth in the interior life, there is also a healthy sense of guilt, essential for spreading the wings of the heart. Freedom exists only together with responsibility, when our actions are taken seriously. Every process of spiritual growth involves looking squarely, realistically, at our

own actions, including those that cause us discomfort or remorse. We need to look, with God, at our thoughts, words, deeds, or omissions; ^[6] to understand where we may have hurt God and others (or worse, treated them with indifference), and where we have harmed ourselves by allowing weeds to grow in our souls. Only the truth can set us free (cf. *Jn* 8:32), especially the truth about our own lives.

In this task, we must avoid three temptations: first, the temptation to minimise our guilt, either through a superficial examination of conscience or by avoiding the interior silence where the Holy Spirit awaits to reveal our own truth to us; second, the temptation to shift the blame to others or to circumstances, so that we habitually appear as victims, or like we never harm anyone; and finally, a temptation that seems the opposite of the previous

one but leads to the same sterile complacency: the temptation to divert our repentance from God and others to focus on our wounded pride and on the fact that we have failed *ourselves* once again.

Who can discern their own errors? Cleanse me from my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression (Ps 19:13-14). At the heart of a healthy sense of guilt is not the attitude of a “neurotic collector of good behaviour reports,”^[7] but the humility of those who want to discover what separates them from God, what creates division in their soul and around them, and what prevents them from giving and receiving love. We do not confess our “imperfections,” but our indifference or lack of love, manifested in concrete details: “Has there been anything in me which could, my

Lord, my Love, have hurt you?^[8] This attitude gives rise to the light that leads us to serenely discover our own truth, enabling us to look deep within our heart, where the Kingdom of God is already present, seeking to make its way in us (cf. *Lk 17:21*). A healthy sense of guilt is an ally in our desire to belong more fully to God; a catalyst for our “later conversions,”^[9] provided we remember that without Him, we can do nothing.

A sacrament that restores beauty to the world

St. Augustine once said: “The Church is the reconciled world.”^[10] The family of God grows by “reconciling the world with God. That is the great apostolic mission of everyone.”^[11] The sacrament of reconciliation is one of the central points of this great movement of reconstruction, peace, and forgiveness. It is the best place from which to distance ourselves

from our guilt: here, we realise that, although we are sinners, we are not our sin. Before a Father who loves us unconditionally, there is no need to hide anything. The sacrament of reconciliation helps us face our fragility, our contradictions, our wounds, and to show them to the only physician who can heal them. St. Paul did this with boundless confidence: *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me* (2 Cor 12:9).

This confidence, however, goes hand in hand with contrition, which is the heart's suffering over the evil it finds within itself: *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me* (Ps 51:4-5). Catholic tradition typically distinguishes between two types of contrition: the contrition that arises from love for God — repentance for

having rejected the love of the Trinity, that is, the most important Persons in our lives — and the contrition that arises indirectly, either by understanding the harm caused by sin, its spiritual consequences, or by trusting in the wisdom of the Church.^[12] The first is called “perfect contrition.” Through it, God forgives sins, even grave ones, as long as we resolve to go to the sacrament of reconciliation when possible. The second is called “imperfect contrition,” and it is also a gift from God that initiates a spiritual journey: it prepares us to receive the forgiveness of sins in the sacrament. Acts of contrition, which can be short, spontaneous prayers throughout the day — “Forgive me, Jesus!” — awaken this sorrow in our heart and prepare us to receive and share God's mercy more abundantly.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also reminds us that, in addition to

the sacrament of penance, which is the only place where Jesus frees us from grave sins, we can also receive reconciliation from other sins in different ways. Scripture and the Fathers mention, among these ways, “effort at reconciliation with one's neighbour, tears of repentance, concern for the salvation of one's neighbour (cf. *James* 5:20), the intercession of the saints, and the practice of charity ‘which covers a multitude of sins’ (1 Pet 4:8).”^[13]

Nonetheless, the Church continues to recommend sacramental confession for less serious faults as well. St. Paul VI recalled that “frequent confession remains a privileged source of holiness, peace, and joy.”^[14] St.

Josemaría taught, “I would like to see you going to the holy Sacrament of Penance, the sacrament of divine forgiveness, every week, and indeed whenever you need it, without giving in to scruples. (...) We will find a new joyful perspective to the world,

seeing that it has sprung forth beautiful and fair from the hands of God. We will give it back to him with that same beauty, if we learn how to repent.”^[15] —

Frequent confession helps us refine our heart and prevents us from becoming accustomed to our coldness and resistance to God's love. Pope Benedict XVI once commented: “It is true: our sins are always the same, but we clean our homes, our rooms, at least once a week, even if the dirt is always the same; in order to live in cleanliness, in order to start again. Otherwise, the dirt might not be seen but it builds up. Something similar can be said about the soul, for me myself: if I never go to confession, my soul is neglected and in the end I am always pleased with myself and no longer understand that I must always work hard to improve, that I must make progress. And this cleansing of the soul which

Jesus gives us in the Sacrament of Confession helps us to make our consciences more alert, more open, and hence, it also helps us to mature spiritually and as human persons.”^[16]___

“The Sacrament of Reconciliation must regain its central place in the Christian life,”^[17]___ Pope Francis wrote. Beyond the healing of great wounds, it is a necessary ally in daily Christian life: it helps us to know ourselves better and to become familiar with God’s merciful heart. It is difficult to overcome all the habits or dispositions that lead us to evil immediately: grace works in time and must become part of our story.^[18]___ Therefore, without unrealistic expectations that can make us despair over our weakness, or even over grace, let us keep our gaze fixed on Jesus; let us not cease to go to Him who both wants to and can heal us. The spiritual life is “a constant beginning and beginning again.

Beginning again? Yes! Every time you make an act of contrition.”^[19] —

^[1] — St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 309.

^[2] — Cfr. for instance Jn 3:17; 12:47.

^[3] — Pope Francis, Homily, 25-III-2022.

^[4] — St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 253.

^[5] — Cfr. *Roman Missal*, introductory rites.

^[6] — *Ibíd.*

^[7] — St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 75.

^[8] — St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 494.

^[9] — St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 57.

^[10] — St. Augustine, *Sermon 96*, no. 8.

^[11] — F. Ocáriz, Pastoral message, 21-X-2023.

[12] Cfr. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1452-1453.

[13] *Ibid.*, no. 1434.

[14] St. Paul VI, *Gaudete in Domino*, no. 52.

[15] *Friends of God*, no. 219.

[16] Pope Benedict XVI, Catechesis, 15-X-2005.

[17] Pope Francis, *Misericordia et misera*, no. 11.

[18] Cfr. Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, no. 50.

[19] *The Forge*, no. 384.

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