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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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ACTS OF CONTRITION

From about December 28 to January 10 the national pastime is New Year's Resolutions. It's a short season, compared to other sports and occupations, but most of us find these two weeks to be more than enough time to do what needs to be done with the resolutions: talk about them, make them, break them, feel guilty about them, and forget them. The life cycle of the typical resolution is a lot like that of the seventeen year cicada. The cicada spends sixteen years underground in its immature state, emerging in its seventeenth year for an above-ground, adult life of just a few months. For eleven and a half months of the year our resolutions mostly lie quietly in our subconscious as imperfectly formed feelings that there are some aspects of our lives that we really need to change. As the end of the year approaches these feelings grow and develop, and once the insanity of the modern American celebration of Christmas is over, they emerge into consciousness, awash in guilt and a panicky recognition that yet another year has gone by in which we have remained our same old same old selves. The fully grown, adult resolutions flourish for their two-week (more or less) adult phase of life, and then they go off to die, having somehow and somewhere managed to lay the eggs that will make sure that the cycle continues into the next year.

As pointless as all this may seem, the annual resolutions season probably has its values. Ours is an age whose typical way of addressing ancient religious verities is that of amnesia. The truth is that our lives are not all they should be,

not anywhere near all they should be, and most of the time we prefer to deny, ignore and forget this. In the gospels, the public ministry of Jesus has as its necessary prelude the preaching of John the Baptist, who proclaimed a baptism of the repentance of sins. Jesus himself announces the Kingdom of God, whose coming demands a total conversion of heart. "The time is fulfilled," he calls out, "and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk. 1:15). Conversion and repentance are basically the same thing – both these English words are used to translate the single Greek word *metanoia* that is used in the gospels – and indicate that the person who hears this call is not where he should be or, if he is honest with himself, wants to be. The call to conversion insists that the person must change, that the old ways of sin that can only pointlessly wind down into death must be abandoned, and that a new way of living and thinking must be embraced.

By now the similarity of the gospels' conversion and the New Year's resolutions should be obvious. Indeed, the latter is perhaps best seen as a pale, secularized version of the former. If so, then the seeming pointlessness of the New Year's resolution has its religious analogue in the seeming pointlessness of the believer's confession of sins. Year after year we mostly make the same resolutions, and year after year our lives don't change, and we just get older within the old ways. Similarly, year after year or month after month or week after week we mostly confess the same sins, and we suspect or even know

that our next confession will be featuring precisely the same sins that we bring before the priest in this confession. For many of us, confession is, to borrow a phrase from Samuel Johnson, the triumph of hope over experience. Although our experience speaks volumes of the power of old habits and old ways and the unlikelihood of our ever being able to break beyond them, we yet hope that a new thing is possible, that our past is not the final word with regard to our future, and that our transformation in Christ can be a reality and need not remain an unrealizable, far off ideal.

Confession is the sacrament in which we encounter Christ, who died for the forgiveness of sins and who offers us the grace of conversion. Of course, anything that is good can be twisted into something evil, and so we must be on guard lest our confessions be perverted into the opposite of what they are supposed to be. One might think that such a deformation would have to be clear and obvious to all, especially to the person engaged in it, but that is not so. The differences between what a thing is supposed to be and the inverse of what it is supposed to be are often subtle to the point of near invisibility. If we are to see the truth about ourselves here, we must look closely and have a good mirror. When it comes to confession, one of the better mirrors available is Dietrich von Hildebrand's *Transformation In Christ*, which deals with this all under the heading of "contrition."

The very word "contrition" calls to mind the "Act of Contrition," the prayer uttered by every penitent receiving the sacrament. Although Von Hildebrand does not refer to the prayer, his chapter on contrition is really a commentary on the prayer's text. Although there are several versions in use, perhaps the most familiar is:

O My God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you. And I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of Hell; but most of all, because they

offend you, My God, who are all good and worthy of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of your grace to confess my sins, to do penance, and to amend my life. Amen.

Repentance is most basically a change of heart, and such a change always involves a lot of work and an uncomfortable dislocation. No one ever does that unless he feels that he must do so, and so the beginning of real contrition, as well as the first words of the Act of Contrition, must be a clear expression of the untenability of our present condition. We have offended God and so find ourselves under his judgment. God is all good and worthy of all our love, and yet we have sinned against him. Thus the Act of Contrition begins with the expression of sorrow for sin, an admission that we have done wrong, wrong which has placed us at risk with regard to our ultimate salvation. These are not pleasant thoughts or feelings, but they are both necessary and helpful, for without them we are sunk in our complacency and self-satisfaction, prisoners in a little world limited to what we are and excluding all that we might become.

And so, paradoxical as it sounds, the dark and negative feelings of a bad conscience are the indispensable first step to a person's being raised up in God's presence. All by itself, however, a bad conscience is not enough. It is quite possible to know that one is in the wrong, and yet be unwilling to change. A good literary example of this is Macbeth, who feels genuine remorse for his murderous deeds, but refuses to shift his position, to change his ways. He hardens his heart against his remorse, and keeps to the same path.

Conversion, true contrition, thus requires more than an awareness of having done evil. It requires an active disavowal of one's sinful past. Von Hildebrand writes: "He who is seized by contrition repudiates his former self, and abandons his former position completely. He quits the fortress of self-assertion, and casts off his armor." The dull, usually passive ache that comes with the sense of having done wrong now



becomes a vivid pain, out of which the person now reacts to his sin and rejects it totally. He wants to never repeat the offense and to undo the damage he has done to himself and others.

With this desire comes the honest admission that we are quite incapable of doing either. Even if the damage can be made up and even if we are able to hold ourselves back from future sin – and very rarely is this the case – there is still the guilt we have incurred and feel deeply. We know that we need forgiveness and mercy. If we have no faith in this mercy and no hope for it, then we end up in a cold despair, and our contrition is like that of Judas. Hope for God's mercy, however, leads us to surrender ourselves to him, to offer ourselves to him and to accept from him whatever he wills for us. We know that we deserve to be punished – punishment is exactly what we would give to anyone else who had done what we have done – but we hope for pardon, even though we know we have no claim on it. In the very act of our confession of our sins, we must dare to hope for reconciliation.

This hope, sustained by God's grace, leads us to Jesus, who atones for our sins and reconciles us to the Father. Curiously, this hope and this trust do not make an end to the pain that comes from the consciousness of sin. On the contrary, the pain is intensified and ripens into love. His gracious mercy, which we do not deserve, has been extended to us. This makes us keenly aware of the vast gulf that our sins opened up between ourselves and God, and that only his infinite mercy could bridge. Our love for him and our joy in his mercy depend upon our recognition of our guilt and our deep sorrow for what we have done, for without them there is no miracle of God's mercy, nor even any need for it. Thus the active rejection and repudiation of our past sins always remains the prime characteristic of contrition.

Nevertheless, repentance does not condemn us to the past, either by limiting us to our bad choices or by confining us within our sorrow for having made them. True contrition rejoices in the cross of Christ, which has reconciled us to God and which opens up for us the

way into a new life. For the authentically Christian understanding of repentance is not that we must first repent, and then we shall receive the love of God and the grace of Christ. On the contrary, it is the grace of Christ, given to us while we are yet sinners, that sets us free, brings us to conversion, and enables us to lead lives of penance. Sorrow for sin, and love for him who has pardoned our offenses, enables us to break away from the old patterns and habits and to begin to think and act in a way that is truly new. The amendment of life that is spoken of at the end of the Act of Contrition orients us to a future that is different from our past, a version of ourselves that is better and purer than what we have been.

Unfortunately, this vital link between past and future, between remorse for what we have done and an abandonment of the old ways for a new life, is all too often lost sight of and denied, if not actually by our words, then by the way we come to confession and depart from it. Instead of looking to the sacrament of confession for help in our transformation, we think that because we have confessed our sins we don't have to be overly concerned about changing our way of behaving. Yes, it would be nice to never commit the sin again, but that is not required. All that is required is the confession and receiving of the absolution, the declaration of God's forgiveness. To look for anything else, is at least unrealistic and perhaps even presumptuous. All we have to do, all we can do, is confess our guilt and receive God's pardon. We do not look for purification; we do not look to be changed.

People who think this way have, at best, a purely passive repentance, one that generates no desire, no resolution to begin a new life. Thinking that they have put their trust in God, they actually have a maimed faith, a highly restricted notion of what God can do and wants to do with them. He cannot change me, not really, they say, he can only forgive and his forgiveness and love will leave me just as I was before. If this were true, the last lines of the Act of Contrition would be a monstrous lie, our promising God an amendment of life that we do not believe in and have no intention of pursuing. True contrition knows better. It believes in the transformative

power of grace and looks to cooperate with it, to break beyond present sins and limitations into

the wideness God's mercy opens for us.

—Fr. Bob Spivott, O.F.M.

MEMORIAL VOTIVE LIGHTS



The action of prayer is often accompanied by the gesture of lighting a candle. The candle becomes an offering to the Lord, a sign of the offering of ourselves that we make to God whenever we come before him with a special intention or petition. After a while, we must leave the church to be about other business, but the candle stays, burning constantly in the church even as our prayer remains in the presence of the Lord.

Your gift to Saint Peter's for the year-long memorial votive light helps to support all of our ministry and works. And on our part, you and your intentions are remembered daily in our prayers for our helpers and benefactors.

APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

To be lit in honor of: _____
 Living _____ Deceased _____

Requested by: _____

Date candle is to be lit: Immediately _____ Specific Date _____

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.



MEMBERSHIP IN THE FRIARS LEGION *brings with it...*

- A sharing in all of the more than 40 masses offered at Saint Peter's each week
- A sharing in the daily Lauds and Vespers prayed by the Franciscans of Saint Peter's Friary
- A sharing in the Eucharistic Novena of nine Tuesdays before the Feast of Saint Anthony of Padua on June 13
- A special Eucharist offered for the living members on the Feast of Saint Anthony on June 13 and on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29
- A special Eucharist offered for the deceased members on All Souls Day on November 2 and on the Commemoration of All the Deceased of the Franciscan Order on November 5
- A sharing in all the ministry and good works done by the Franciscan Friars at Saint Peter's, whom you support by your generosity



APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

Please Enroll: _____
 as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter's Friars Legion.
 Living _____ Deceased _____

Your Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip Code: _____

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 _____ Family, \$100.00 _____ *(Immediate family, parents and children)*