

## ***Contrition – Confession – Conversion: our Nineveh-effect***

Recently I had my piano tuned, as I noticed not only did two strings snap when I least expected it during several dashing crescendos, but the pitch was also getting sour, and dulling the sparkle that the instrument had, say 12 months before. It needed a tune up, big time. It got me thinking - our lives are like that too, things dash us when we least expect them, and also that little by little some of our spiritual fruitfulness can sour, little things which can grow into bigger things, such as a string snapping all of a sudden – a temper tantrum, repeated white lies growing to defrauding a person's good name, chipping away prayer time to leaving it altogether and finding the order of the day becomes – well sour. Out of tune. And then strings snap. Very uninviting.

Today in the reading from the Book of Jonah, this interesting man was instructed by God to go to a large city which would by any standard overwhelm anyone who intended to lead a repent banner through it. Well, at first he shirked the task and instead boarded a boat and took off far from Nineveh. As fate would have it, the boat he was in got caught in a storm, and Jonah's conscience hit him hard for disobeying God. Others threw him overboard and *"The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights"* - a scripture line which the Church will already early in its history see as an allusion to the Lord's burial and resurrection. Yes, Jonah came back too, as the fish coughed him up. This time he gets up and goes to the great city. Better that than being fish food!

This very simple story continues with amazing effect. Jonah is not even one day through the metropolis - well it did take 3 days to get through – when things changed *rapidissimo*. The people hearing Jonah's threat that in 40 days the city would be destroyed now change heart. Next the king, seeing this wonder endorses it with a penance, we would say, of wearing sackcloth and ashes – the forerunner of Ash Wednesday and even the medieval penances meted out

to sinners after confession. It was to be a positive collective sign of and interior conversion for the people of Nineveh, and later for Christian Europe. But a real conversion. The king specifically restricts and commands an abrupt end to their violence, with a sort of risky hope (“Who knows?” he says!) that God might spare them what this total stranger threatens of their demise. An all-forgiving God spares the repentant city.

A lot happens here, and with lightning speed. Nineveh must have had good GPS instruments or static free radio stations. The message is clear: ***A heart contrite and humbled, O Lord, you will not spurn!*** (our Resp Ps 50). What are the ingredients? ***Contrition – Confession – Conversion.***

***First. God touches the hearts of his people*** through the mouth of a spokesman sent from him, Jonah, then prophets, priests, preachers, parents. Here even the king gets the message. Would that we had that today! They are often the last ones, though there were some great Catholic saints that were humble and selfless monarchs as well. Here the people did not waste time: again, ***Now is the acceptable time***, Lent tells us. Don’t mess with God if He is calling you, Jonah says. You have 40 days. And they got it in record time on day 1.

***Second.*** the people ***acknowledge their sin*** – not just their mistakes, their sin – their offenses, especially ***violence*** which we note the king singles out for his people to rid themselves of radically. The effect of the king’s ratifying a fast – including the animals, all to be covered with itchy cloth – again including the animals – is so complete a sign that nothing was left out. It solidified the city with him, in a penance they themselves had already begun before the edict. Their heart was unified with the king’s wishes. Even anticipating it.

***Third.*** They did come to their senses ***and repent.*** Chapter 3 tell us so. ***“Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.” (3:5)***

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That's the process: **contrition, conversion, confession**, and they are linked together. Another way of describing it as one who comes to realize one's own sinfulness, is next moved to sorrow for one's behavior, and then moves to correct it with an outward sign of the inner conversion.

In the Catholic Church this is named variously the sacrament of Reconciliation, or Penance or Confession. Around the year 1900 we read many people were on long line for confessions. they recognized their sin, and maybe it was drummed into their heads perhaps with too heavy a beat, but they got the idea of sin. They saw the follow-up need for contrition, conversion, confession. Very few unfortunately received Communion, but that was rectified by Pope Saint Pius X encouraging frequent Communion. In some ways people felt they were not worthy, and there were other bad ingredients that got into why **even after confession** they did not receive, including lingering heresy. But the situation then was **many** confessions and **few** Communions, proportionately. Fast forward to our times and everybody **now** comes up for Communion and very few avail themselves for Confession. One has got to ask the question: Has human nature so evolved and advanced in its moral state that we have very few sins now that most don't need to utilize the powerful sacrament of forgiveness to the point that so few avail themselves of this sacrament?

I think you know the answer to that one without my having to go into contortions proving it. Of course we haven't. Human nature may get more refined as centuries go on in its cosmetics, lifestyle and technology, but I think one has a tough job proving human betterment if we look at everyday violence – the very thing the king of Nineveh symbolically singles out – at wars, bloodshed in cities, homes, and in the 50,000,000 unborn children slaughtered every year around the world. Denying the concept of sin as an antiquated dealing with self is the biggest danger to our spiritual life and salvation, to say nothing of its maintenance and growth. The greatest victory for Satan is to get us to deny the all-importance of acknowledging that we are sinners, me and every single one of

you. What we confess are not just mistakes; they are personal offenses against God, against others, against self. The amazing thing in the Nineveh story is how fast the people were willing to change. Listen to what St John tells us of sin in his First Letter:

***If we say “we are without sin,” we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing. If we say “we have not sinned” we make him a liar. (1 Jn 1:8)***

Calling Christ our Savior means little if we do not acknowledge that we are in deep need of repentance, that we are sinners. Then we are not even as good as pagan Nineveh which was moved to acknowledge and then turn from sin.

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Sins which destroy our relationship with God, which take us from the state of grace to the state of sin as it is called in the history of the Church’s teachings, are called ***mortal sins***, like the broken strings of the piano. The sacrament of Confession is primarily for these, as it allows us once again to be brought back to the state of grace. For example getting into pornography is a big one, because it pollutes the soul and mind and like all addictions destroys a certain “freedom of choice” rightly understood to resist evil, and now willfully compromised. not as this expression has been used deceptively to allow the slaughter of the unborn “as freedom of choice,” itself seriously sinful, a complete reversal of the meaning of freedom. Sin can be against self as well as neighbor and of course always against God, Who made you, the other and all creation.

Going back to that piano again, it was little by little over time that the good strings began to loosen ever so slightly in tension, but still created a discord resonating through the whole instrument. Other strings fudged into the sour sounds and eventually it became an instrument that I did not want to play without grabbing a tuning fork, which does the trick for a bit. Tightening the good strings in a balance was the issue, but I really needed to call the tuner, which I

did. Remember he also had to replace several strings. That piano needed conversion bad! But the instrument was itself not bad. Nor are we. God does not make junk as we used to hear in various therapy slogans in the 70s and 80s. Well, it's true. But those strings needed replacement. They snapped and as mentioned, ***when I least expected it***. Sometimes our state of grace can be snapped – we snap it. Even with the piano, I hit the keys after all, it didn't just happen with a gust of wind! The good strings just need tuning and that will do it. The tonal atmosphere within the instrument and in the outer environment around it becomes inviting once again; but the instrument won't cut it unless those broken strings are replaced. Same with our own lives and God Who tunes them. Some things need extracting; others need tuning.

***Mortal sins*** in our lives may be likened to broken strings in the instrument of our soul, habits long developed and struck upon with lust, thievery, cheating, violence, rage, and worse. The instrument of our heart and soul before God will never play right unless we get those ***replaced, not just tuned***. They need to be ***unwound, extracted***, thrown away and new ones need replace them. So this takes strong decision and effort, but with God's help it is so much easier. Just as new piano new strings need replace the discarded ones, our habits need to be steadily tightened, that is ***worked on, muscled up***, because, like human nature that has been weakened in those string areas, they need greater attention, toned upwards until they keep the right pitch and don't fall back into sour tones. So too we need to be patient with ourselves in regaining spiritual tone.

As to the other good strings out of tune, only a good tuner who hears the overtone spectrum of sound and measures the tuning accordingly, can adjust their pitch more readily when tightened and balanced in fine tuned vibration. Like the details of the moral life vibrating from the directives of the Commandments, those strings give off a sound pleasing or displeasing, and so much of it has to do with the strength and character of the tuned string, and of course how often they are tuned. These deficiencies are called ***venial sins***, the souring and the

loosening of good habit tension. That tension is like the discipline of a disciple, and when it slackens the moral and spiritual atmosphere suffers.

Tuning pianos costs and some things are very costly; whereas confession is free. It just takes a *humble, contrite heart, which the Lord will not spurn.*

Lent is a time therefore to follow the promptings of Jonah: “*repent.*” This is not a joke on a placard in Hyde Park, London, or on some soap box. It is reality, as sure as sin, the reason we acknowledge the need to repent in the first place and without which we call God a liar. Serious stuff.

Get to confession often throughout the year, but especially now in Lent.

Church commandments tell us to go at least once a year. That itself is a serious obligation, for the protection of the patient, the Church prescribes this. Certainly we need much more however. The more one becomes aware of the deepening relationship he wants with the Lord, the more he will return to the Sacrament for spiritual prognosis.

But how do people who have not availed themselves of the Sacrament of Penance for some time, return to it?

Let’s start by saying that when you mention you have not been to confession in years, or whatever, the priest is not going to be shocked or will not blame you.

**Quite the opposite.** A priest is ready to hear the confessions of *anyone* whose heart is disposed by the grace of God prompting him or her to come. But there is a special joy in someone who has not received the sacrament in quite some time, years and years, and decides to come back. Please don’t hesitate.

*There is more rejoicing in heaven when one sinner returns than 99 who need not penance* – or think they don’t!

**Secondly,** you need not wait until the confession is scheduled in your parish, nor need you go to your own parish priest. You have a right to assure your an-

onymity. And more important is the level of confidentiality. No priest may ever divulge anything about your confession. Ever. Very serious business

So come back if you wish in a foreign setting apart from anyone who knows you. The main thing is to return. God keeps calling “Come back to me with all your heart.” The prodigal Father calling back his son; or his Mary Magdalen, or Saul turned St Paul. St James tells us: “Confess your sins to one another” right from the first years of the Church. It is important amidst the situation that has clearly deteriorated with fewer confessions and many more communions nonetheless, that one must be in the state of grace to worthily receive Holy Communion. This is not an option. One must confess mortal sin before receiving the Eucharist or incur a sacrilegious sin. That’s a bass string breaking.

If you drive at night you may think your windshield is clean as can be. The next morning the bright sun shining into the windshield might reveal all sorts of blotches you were totally unawares the night before. . We are all responsible for our spiritual health. An examination of conscience has to be open to others’ suggestions and not just our own. Pick up a good examination of conscience booklet on line or in a Catholic shop if near you. We can’t see dirt on our forehead unless we look in a mirror, which this booklet is like, or unless someone else points out the mark to us. They don’t condemn; they help us by pointing it out before we go into the board meeting! So too with any serious meeting with the Lord through his representative in Confession. And ***“May Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to eternal life.”*** AMEN!

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