

Episode: Contrition: The Secret Ingredient of Joy

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

Return to these blessed times of prayer in order to get to know the Master better. And in so doing, to discover His will for us. The Lord loves to stir up the waters. Or as Pope Francis likes to say, to unsettle us. Jesus says to us every time we listen to Him, If only you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is speaking to you.

Right now, we ask You, Lord, to launch us into the orbit of your designs for our life, to launch us into that orbit, in which we seek genuine sanctity. There is a secret ingredient that gives, to our spiritual life, tremendous dynamism. An ingredient that keeps us youthful, supple, and approachable. Surprisingly, that secret ingredient is contrition. Contrition plays an important role in this ongoing process of shaking things up, of renewing our quest for holiness. As Pope Francis put it, let us allow His words to unsettle us, to challenge us to demand a real change in the way we live. Otherwise, holiness will remain no more than an empty word.

How many times we have considered that stunning scene, that moment of conversion for Simon Peter, that conversion that was the result of his contrition. St. Luke tells us getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, Jesus asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. When he had ceased speaking, he said to Simon, put out into the deep and let your nets down for a catch. Simon answered, Master, we have toiled all night, we took nothing, but at your word, I will let down the nets.

We can imagine Simon Peter's attitude at the beginning of this episode. Discouragement at having caught nothing, but also a very understandable sense that that's the way it goes. That there's nothing to be done. Perhaps as he listened to Jesus, he said to himself, well, this is a big waste of time. What does this carpenter know about fishing? We're not going to catch a thing. But then he thought, but what is there to lose?

One way of summarizing the state of his mind at that moment could be complacency. Here, really there's nothing to be done. Complacency is seductive. It tells us that there is no point in trying to change things.

That there is nothing we can do because this is the way things have always been. And yet we always managed to survive. But thinking of Simon Peter at that moment in the boat, there was something very special there. The Lord was thrilled to see Simon Peter's willingness to obey in spite of good reasons to balk at such an illogical suggestion. And when they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish. And as their nets were breaking, they beckoned to their partners in the other boats to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats so that they begin to sink. Simon's reaction is magnificent. It is the stuff of saints. And we want to learn from that. When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus's knees, saying, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." And that is all that the Lord needed, the humility, the contrition of Simon Peter, that allowed the Lord to introduce him into His mission.

We shudder to think what would have happened if he had not had that reaction. If he had simply said to himself, well, that's pretty good. Not bad for a beginner. But in fact, he fell to his knees with that great act of contrition. Simon Peter could have simply held on to his own little vision of life there on the Northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. But instead, he allowed Jesus to enter his life with its full force, and change the world.

The Holy Father wrote in his document, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, "Let us allow the Lord to rouse us from our torpor, to free us from our inertia. Let us rethink our usual way of doing things; let us open our eyes and ears, and above all our hearts, so as not to be complacent about things as they are, but [rather] unsettled by the living and effective word of the risen Lord." Well, right there is our first petition that we ask Jesus; to give us that grace to be freed from our tendency to inertia to simply doing the things as we've always done them simply because we've always done them that way.

There is a bestselling author, whose book many people are reading these days, who makes the following observation about the human condition. Chaos and order are two of the most fundamental elements of lived experience. In fact, we find chaos and then order in the very first pages of the book of Genesis. Order is the world of explored territory, predictability, familiarity, things go according to plan and nothing is new and disturbing. Whereas chaos is the new, the unpredictable, the unexpected. To be balanced, is to straddle that fundamental duality, to have one foot firmly planted in order and security and the other foot to be in chaos, which is to say possibility, growth, and adventure.

Well, until that moment on the boat there by the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Simon Peter took that step. Took that step from security from the familiar. He took a risk. His humility, his contrition allowed him to take that first step. That first step into a marvelous adventure.

"A humble and contrite heart you will not despise. Oh Lord." Contrition restores our proper place in God's eyes. God is the loving Father who sees his little one lying there on the ground asking for help to get up. Contrition works only if we are humble. It takes humility to recognize that we have let our Father, God down. And then to say I am sorry. Rather than searching for excuses or sweeping our failures under the rug. It is a great thing to be supple. To be like a small child. Small children bounce back from a fall right away. It's because at that stage of the game, they're made out of rubber, practically. Grownups get hurt, but they're often too proud to admit it.

Years and years ago, a bunch of us decided to fabricate a skateboard. So, we took a plank of wood. We took someone's pair of roller-skates, the kind of skates that have not existed for a long, long time. Cut them in half, nailed two of the wheels at the front and two at the back on that plank. And then we started using the skateboard. No problem. And along came someone's dad who said, "That looks like fun. Let me try." And probably still to this day, he has trouble walking as a result of the fall that he took. That's just the

way things are. We want to remain very, very young, very youthful, very supple. And that will be thanks to our blessed life of contrition, this attitude of contrition.

Anyone coming along right now and listening in on our conversation with the Lord could say, how negative, how negative to be speaking about being contrite. We would then rise up very quickly and say it is wildly positive. Because to be a contrite soul is to recognize the heights to which we are called. The result is that we then fight harder to root out the obstacles to acquire those virtues.

Any professional athlete will tell us that they are never satisfied with their performance. There is a professional golfer who years ago as a very young person won the British Open. And everyone was dazzled by the perfection of his swing. But that golfer as soon as he finished receiving the trophy, walked off the course, went over to his coach and said, my swing stinks. Let's go to the driving range and figure this out. And he had just won the British Open. Complacency, of course, would have doomed him because he would have said, "Well, my swing is perfect. I just won the British Open. Let's go have a drink." But instead, he kept working and working harder.

Contrition does not shrink us, but it makes us bigger. When our contrition is authentic it facilitates sincerity. When it is authentic it leads us to seek the remedy to improve. Even now, as we speak to the Lord in this time of prayer, we can think back, we can ask Him to help us to really know ourselves. To ask for example, "Do I tend to slip into a bad temper, to have brusque reactions, to be impatient, to hold grudges?" If so, it is because I am not truly contrite. Contrition is this secret ingredient that gives to our interior life great dynamism. It is the secret to youthfulness, to attractiveness, to being approachable. And that is because contrition helps us to get off our proverbial high horse to come on down, to be accepting of other people. You could say that contrition is a kind of spiritual muscle relaxant.

There is one author who says, "Thanks to contrition, the spasm of dogmatic obstinacy forcing us to always defend our position is relaxed." We don't have to think too hard to realize that there are many people who spend most of their life in spasm, so to speak. And why because they're being stubborn. They're defending their position, even if they know that it's not right. But it's their position. Well, that of course, is a state of soul that we beg the Lord to liberate us from. This author says that spasm of dogmatic obstinacy is relaxed. Thanks to contrition, pride and stubbornness melt away, and the tight impermeability of our soul toward God and toward our fellow creatures disappears. Who wants to be impermeable? It's great to wear an impermeable when it's raining, but who wants to be that kind of Teflon coating?

St. Josemaria told us, acts of contrition improve the spiritual life. They confer peace and serenity. And, at times, they can even improve one's physical well-being. Now, perhaps at this moment, the Lord wants to say to us, take two aspirin, make five acts of contrition, and you'll be fine. Contrition produces interior peace. It produces serene joy. But how do we grow in not only our appreciation for contrition but also actually being a contrite soul? A great help is to make a careful examination of conscience in God's presence.

Right now, we can ask the Lord to help us get better and better at that, in such a way that we get to really truly know ourselves to be able to spot when we are coming up with excuses, excuses that might justify our behavior. Just as Simon Peter could very easily have come up with other explanations for that miraculous catch; but, instead, he fell to his knees and said, "Depart from me, from just a poor, stupid, sinful man."

Thank God that we have that sublime outlet for contrition which is confession, the Sacrament of Penance. Just as Simon Peter showed his magnificence by falling to his knees. We too, show our magnificence by falling to our knees in confession. St. Josemaria called it the sacrament of joy because it assures our return to God. Confession restores and rejuvenates our friendship with the Lord. Perhaps we should consider putting up a billboard with this intriguing message, "Five Minutes to a Lighter, Younger You." The other billboard could say, "Shed Pounds and Years in Minutes." Then, we could give the hotline for the hours of confession.

I thank you my God for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this time of prayer. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.