

Frequently asked questions about perfect contrition

These are just quick answers put together by Fr. Michael Fagan, and not meant to be exhaustive. While they stand alone, they will be all the easier to understand if you first read the systematic explanation offered by the diocese of Dallas https://www.cathdal.org/Perfect_Contrition.pdf

What is contrition? Is it mainly a feeling?

Contrition is “‘sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again.’ [Council of Trent] (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1451).”

Note that contrition is not essentially a feeling or an emotion. It is an *acknowledgment* of having offended God or neighbor in thought, word, deed or omission; it is a *rejection* of that sin (“I hate that I have done this and wish I had not”) with the desire to be restored to full union with God; it is a firm *decision* to do what we can to avoid it again. This last point means that we resolve to cut with an avoidable occasion of sin. For example, if someone is sorry for having gotten drunk, a necessary step for repentance *may* well include the resolve to give away the bottle of vodka sitting on the shelf in his bedroom (especially if this is not the first time). All these acts require God’s grace, so one should ask God for the grace to resolve to avoid the near occasion of sin.

What is the difference between perfect and imperfect contrition?

First let’s have the definitions clear in our mind:

Imperfect contrition: “The contrition called “imperfect” (or “attrition”) is also a gift of God, a prompting of the Holy Spirit. It 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). Such a stirring of conscience can initiate an interior process which, under the prompting of grace, will be brought to completion by sacramental absolution. By itself however, imperfect contrition cannot obtain the forgiveness of grave sins, but it disposes one to obtain forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance.” (emphasis added; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1453).

Perfect Contrition: “When it arises from a *love by which God is loved above all else*, contrition is called “perfect” (contrition of charity). Such contrition remits venial sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the *firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible.*” (emphasis added; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1452).

The difference is more easily understood with examples, perhaps. Think of the sorrow when you say or do something hurtful to one of the people you love most in the world (a parent, spouse, good friend etc). Hopefully, what hurts is not *mainly* fear of losing some great benefits (peace in the home, access to all the families utilities, being welcome at all the family reunions, etc.) but above all the sorrow for the *hurt we have caused the person we love*. A perfect apology is not from fear of losing all the benefits of the relationship (full access to the kids, the home, the bank account, nice dinner together, romantic moments together, etc.), but of having deeply wounded the heart of the most wonderful person in our life. The formula for the act of contrition expresses this beautifully: **“O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments, but *most of all* because they offend Thee, my God, *Who art all-good and deserving of all my love.* I firmly resolve,**

with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin.” Note that, of course, one also fears the pains or effects of sin (you would have to be crazy not to fear hell), but one repents even more out of love for God.

What is the relation of each to the sacrament of penance?

Both are essentially oriented to and perfected in the sacrament of reconciliation. *Imperfect contrition* can move someone to go to confession, and if he or she strives to cooperate, the Holy Spirit can transform that fear of punishment into sorrow of love through his action in the sacrament (at times also through the help of the minister who stirs up sorrow if it seems to be lacking, or aids in the resolve to avoid the occasion of sin). *Perfect contrition* already is that full sorrow in the heart (with the resolve to rip away anything that separates us from God), and therefore always includes a sincere desire for reconciliation with Christ in the sacrament of confession. If the will to go to confession were lacking, it would be a clear sign of presumption rather than sorrow. Interestingly, one sign that perfect contrition has been granted by the Holy Spirit is precisely the desire to go to confession as soon as possible.

Therefore, true sorrow never leads one to neglect or put off sacramental confession longer than necessary “just because I can make an act of contrition”. But this does not mean that one who has perfect contrition will have immediate or even proximate access to confession within a few days or even a few weeks’ time. Think of so many men and women in the armed forces, on submarines or deployed abroad. Or, think of people who live many hours away from the nearest priest. Or think of people whose cities are beset by a dangerous virus and access to confessions has, temporarily, become dramatically curtailed and practically impossible.

How do we know if we have this gift of perfect contrition from the Holy Spirit?

With confidence in God’s goodness, we pray to him *as he taught us* “forgive us our trespasses”, and trust that he will not deny it to the sincere and humble heart. A little bit of healthy self-doubt is actually good for us, since it leads us to beg the Holy Spirit for perfect contrition and puts the emphasis on trust in God’s action in our heart more than on creating feelings or tears or mega acts of will-power. Note what St Paul says: “...I do not even pass judgment on myself; I am not conscious of anything against me, but I do not thereby stand acquitted; the one who judges me is the Lord.” (1 Cor 4:3-4). That said, God is the best of Fathers! “Do I indeed derive any pleasure from the death of the wicked? says the Lord GOD. Do I not rather rejoice when he turns from his evil way that he may live?” (Ez 18:23). God has promised that he will grant it to the humble heart *in confession*, so why would he deny it to the humble heart outside of confession, as long as that heart sincerely desires confession, and all the more when that person cannot get to confession? “*For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him?” (Luke 11:10-14).*

If one is pretty certain of having made an act of perfect contrition with the help of the Holy Spirit, would he or she still have to confess any mortal sins (were that the case) the next time he goes to confession?

Yes, the catechism is explicit on this: “All mortal sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in confession...” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1456). And, “[Perfect contrition] remits venial sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the *firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible.*” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1452).

Can one who has done his best to make a perfect act of contrition then go on to receive the Holy Eucharist without previously going to sacramental confession?

No, except for some very special cases. Here is what the Catechism says: “Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion, *even if he experiences deep contrition*, without having first received sacramental absolution, unless he has a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possibility of going to confession.” (emphasis added; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1457). So, one must not only lack the possibility of confessing that sin, but also have a grave need of holy communion (we won’t get into what does and does not constitute “grave need” for communion here, but it is clear that simply experiencing an ardent desire for Holy Communion, or happening to be at Mass, are not equivalent to a grave need). So, a person who has the hope and even the moral certainty of being in the state of grace, still needs to wait for sacramental confession before receiving the Holy Eucharist. In another part of the Catechism, it speaks of this clearly and strongly: “To respond to this invitation [to eat His Body and drink His Blood] we must prepare ourselves for so great and so holy a moment. St. Paul urges us to examine our conscience: ‘Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself.’ (1 Cor 11:27-28). Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1385).

Lastly:

For some recent words of Pope Francis on precisely this point to those in similar situations in Italy and around the world: <https://aleteia.org/2020/03/20/pope-addresses-what-to-do-since-many-cant-get-to-confession/>. For the **video of this with subtitles**: <https://opusdei.org/en-us/article/indulgences-confession-absolution-coronavirus/> (scroll down to second video).