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That Firm Purpose of Amendment

Many non-Catholics, observing only our exterior conduct, have the idea that we go to Confession, rattle off our sins, come out, and start to sin all over again -- with a blithe heart and a clear conscience. Many of us, by our exterior conduct, give them reason to think thus, and so be scandalized -- because we regularly fall into the same sins. They imagine that we do what we like, in the comforting belief that everything can be made straight by a subsequent Confession. It has even been said that the Sacrament of Penance gives permission for future sinning.

Often this is due to the failure of some of us to realize that the most important feature of the Sacrament of Penance is not confession itself, but sorrow for sin. And any penitent who confesses sin without a firm resolve to amend his sinful way of life can derive no possible benefit from this Sacrament. On the contrary, to make use of this Sacrament, without true sorrow and firm purpose of amendment, leaves the soul in a worse condition than before the Confession.

Sometimes the penitent is highly discouraged to find himself confessing the same sins week after week; and he wonders whether or not the graces of the Sacrament are helping him at all. How explain repeated failure? Very likely his purpose of amendment is not the reality it ought to be.

What It Implies

A firm purpose of amendment consists of an act of the will -- it implies not only a willingness, but a firm determination on our part -- to avoid not only the sin itself, but also those occasions that lead to that sin.

An occasion of sin may be a person, a place, or a thing. Under certain circumstances in the past, they have been occasions of sin because of our association with them. A firm purpose of amendment is the resolve to avoid these circumstances in the future. This resolve demands not only moral strength, but courage -- a courage that implies self-denial. No one ever finds self-denial easy.

Our best intentions, alone, are not very powerful, and offer little security. A humble man realizes this. God knows us even better than we know ourselves. And so, He comes to our assistance with His grace -- the grace of the Sacrament to bolster our weak, human limitations. He gives us the help we need to overcome our particular weaknesses.

But even here we must cooperate with God's grace by avoiding the occasion for sin. Otherwise we are guilty of presumption. God helps those who help themselves. We must show good will by avoiding the occasion; and God will give us the strength we need to overcome the habit of sin.

In other words, a sincere resolve to avoid the occasion, plus God's grace in the Sacrament, will enable us to make progress in overcoming our most stubborn habits of sin -- no matter what they are. Even Communion will mean little or nothing, if we deliberately walk into occasions of sin.

We conclude -- a good confession doesn't terminate with our rattling off sins, and paying mere lip service regarding contrition and amendment. Indeed, there still remains for us the task of putting into effect our firm purpose of amendment -- namely of taking whatever means are needed to avoid the occasion of sin. A confession without a firm purpose of amendment is useless. God's mercy is infinite -- but it extends only to those who are sincerely resolved to sin no more.