

CAN GOD FORGIVE A SIN IF THE SINNER IS NOT REALLY SORRY FOR THE SIN?

Dear Father Kerper: Can God forgive a sin if the sinner is not really sorry for the sin? I have a friend who had a baby without being married. She told me that she is not really sorry for having had the child. Yet she went to confession and says that she is now reconciled with the Church. I don't understand how sin can be forgiven without sorrow.

Your basic intuition is correct: If a person has no sorrow for sin, God will not grant forgiveness. Why? Because the absence of sorrow prevents a person from seeking forgiveness. God, who always respects human freedom, will not impose mercy on someone who doesn't want it.

The absolute necessity of sorrow becomes much clearer by examining the word "contrition," which the Church uses specifically for "sorrow for sin."

We usually think of sorrow as a "feeling" of profound sadness, remorse, regret, grief and so on. But contrition is much more than a mere "feeling" – it actually changes a person's self-understanding, which then changes behavior.

We see this more clearly in the word "contrition," which is related to two Latin

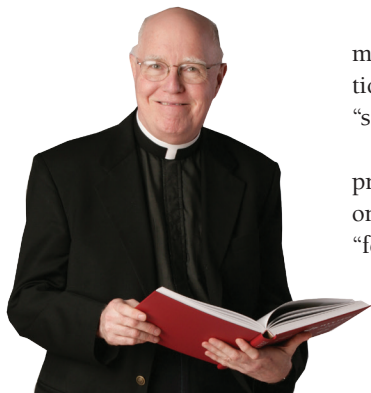
words. The first is *contristo/are*, which means "with sorrow." The second is *contritio*, which means "destruction, smashing an object into pieces, or ripping apart land by the force of an earthquake."

St. Gregory the Great, quoted by St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*, defined contrition as "humility of the soul, crushing sin between hope and fear." In other words, contrition fosters humble obedience to God's ways, thereby leading a sinner to replace his or her favorable view of a sinful act with God's truthful view.

True sorrow for sin, then, refers to one's gazing upon a sinful act, regretting it, and – most important of all – "smashing" one's original belief that the sin was actually good.

The Church, always aware of human weakness, has long acknowledged that many people never quite experience the fullness of true sorrow for sin. In light of this, the Church teaches that "imperfect contrition," when assisted by the sacrament of penance, can suffice to obtain the Lord's gracious forgiveness.

"Imperfect contrition" refers to sorrow that flows either from one's revulsion against the ugliness of specific sins or fear of punishment, especially eternal loss (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*). Whereas true contrition flows from

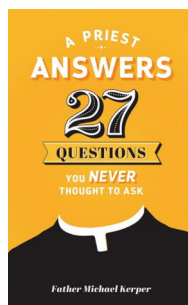


Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Nashua, N.H.

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genuine love of God, the “imperfect” form often reflects a stunted relationship with God, who is viewed as an angry overlord rather than a loving Father.

Now let's consider the woman with the baby.

Good things may emerge from sinful acts. For example, wonderful people may result from irregular unions, in vitro fertilization clinics, fornication and even rape.

When the young woman you mentioned said she is not sorry for having had the baby, we should not immediately assume that she has not repented of the sin that led to her pregnancy.

I suspect that she means that she is glad to have brought new life into the world, that she is thankful to God for the vocation of motherhood, and that she finds joy in caring for her baby. How could anyone be sorry for any of these things?

Her decision to go to confession suggests sorrow for getting into a situation that did not accord with God's plan for life-giving marriage. Why else would she bother? And only God knows whether she had true sorrow for her sins or only “imperfect contrition.”

When I first read your question I immediately remembered a great little story from *The Name of God is Mercy* by Pope Francis. The Holy Father cited a scene from a novel in which a French priest heard the confession of a young German soldier about to be executed. The German confessed many erotic encounters with a young woman. He then frankly admitted that he wasn't really sorry because he had greatly enjoyed the woman. The poor French priest then asked, “Are you sorry that you're not sorry?” The young German answered, “Yes, I am sorry that I'm not sorry.” Pope Francis commented: “The soldier apologizes for not repenting. The door was opened just a crack, allowing absolution to come in ...”

Our unfortunate tendency to speculate about people such as the woman with the baby reminds us of the vast difference between the human and divine capacities for mercy. We tend tightly to restrict mercy; but God bestows mercy in abundance. We see many closed doors; but God sees many doors “opened just a crack.” And he enters in when least expected. ■

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