



This is a matter we seldom talk about with clarity, I don't know exactly why. **My impression is that we talk a lot about sin in an abstract way, or using an academic-theological terminology that the common Christian doesn't always understand.** Nevertheless, we are before a crucial aspect of Christian life, and it is important to be clear: we are all sinners, and whether we want it or not, we rarely confront our personal sin in all its existential crudeness: "I've hurt myself and those I love, what must I do?" **We must learn to face this painful experience, which almost always comes loaded with feelings, thoughts, and spiritual impressions, that are not precisely abstract nor academic, from a balanced Christian faith that doesn't give in to hopelessness and discouragement.** This faith must also be mature and not engage in those willful battles where God's grace is merely decorative, and ends up burning, without distinction, the wheat and the weeds in our lives.

In my Christian life, **I always thought that the devil didn't rest until inducing us to sin, now I am convinced he doesn't rest until we feel forgiven.** Do not misinterpret me. The devil has not converted, he simply knows, as you do, that sin, once assumed, understood, and correctly integrated, can become a great spring of grace and conversion in the life of a Christian. This is why one's fall is just the starting point of a much more complex combat between good and evil, because when we look at our own sin, two things can happen: **we can either sense the immensity of God's mercy, and open our hearts to the embrace of Christ crucified, or we can enter a self-referential and self-scourging process where Confession and penance become psychological mechanisms that make us feel temporarily forgiven.** The devil only rests when the latter happens, that is, when he has successfully constrained us to ourselves, moving us away from the loving dialogue Jesus wants to have with us.

I hope I am clear about the importance of the matter I want to address here. Note that I will not address this problem from a theological perspective, but from the point of view of

an experienced sinner who has committed many of the mistakes that I am about to explain. Well, let us begin. **So, how should I face my own sins?** I will divide my answer in steps, but consider that this is an artificial division; many times these steps take place simultaneously in our heart and mind, other times, they are part of a stage process. So, the first step is:

1. Recognize the wrong you have done

Even if it isn't a nice experience, we must recognize the wrong we have done and face it calmly. This is the moment to gradually open ourselves, recognize, and assume our own responsibility in what we have done, no more, no less. For this reason, we must consider if there were causes that attenuate or aggravate our fault. The sentimentalities that lead us to exaggerate our fault do not help us at all. Wanting to feel bad, very bad, isn't the way to assume our responsibility, it's more a way of focusing on ourselves, allowing the devil to sow his first thistles. Recognizing the wrong we have done doesn't mean entertaining ourselves predicting things that have not happened yet ("She will never trust me again..."), nor thinking hypothetically about what already happened ("If I had only done this in another way..."); these typical attitudes make us look away from that which is essential, and make us focus—once again—on our own sentiments. In this stage, we must simply see things objectively, removing any covers that may be preventing us from calling our acts by their name: "sins."

2. Repent

In the previous point, I put a "dam" to value judgements and feelings of guilt, because it's fundamental to express our pain and direct our emotions through faith. Without faith, the wrong done becomes a blind affliction, deprived of sense and hope. It is a pain experienced in the style of the Greek pathos, that is, "an emotion of sympathetic pity," a suffering that hits our heart, attacking and damaging the person's self-esteem and, in many cases, leading the psique to a state of exhaustion and sadness.

Is the pain for one's sins, experienced through faith, any different? Absolutely. The pain is still pain, but is not experienced as pathos, but as penthos; that is, as mourning, a pain that takes place in relation with someone, not with oneself. This is very important because, even though there is the suffering of having offended the other, this is not a vehement and blind pain, since it tends to God. It is repentance that seeks outside of itself, that runs to the encounter with the forgiveness it will never find in itself. And, as we know, God's forgiveness is never on delay; the Lord hurries to embrace the repentant sinner and transforms his pain into "labor pains," of a newborn, into tears of happiness for receiving God's immense and undeserved love, a love that regenerates us, and make us new again—forgiveness after forgiveness—in the profound and beautiful mystery of our condition of being children of God.

This way, as Fr. Rupnik says, “the heart does not break, but the lock that keeps it captured, breaks to pieces and so the heart can beat freely again. Repentance is the motion that leads to the embrace (...), that sets us on the track of a free relationship where even guilt can be interpreted in the light of a more genuine and close relationship in God’s love.”

How different it is to live the sacrament of Reconciliation when one has experienced penthos, than when one has only experienced pathos due to our sins. I’ll elaborate on this in the following points.

3. Integrate fragility

I would not want to cause any confusions with the division I’ve made. Integrating fragility is not a stage between repentance and reconciliation. In fact, it is a spiritual attitude, transversal in all this process. Integrating fragility means reconciling our condition of being loved children of God, with the fact that sin exists and probably will always exist in our lives. This apparent paradox of divine love is not new to Christianity, for Saint Paul, “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rm 5:8). Please read well. Saint Paul doesn’t say “He died for us because we were good,” nor “He died for us because we repented,” the words are: “while we were still sinners Christ died for us,” and this is the proof, that is, the act or argument that resolves all our doubts about God’s love for us.

Did anyone think about the consequences this phrase would have on Christian life? Get ready, because we are before a great mystery. This means that my weakness can be a doorway to one of the most intense and beautiful experiences of God’s love in my life; and so, holiness itself “is not on the opposite extreme from temptation, but within the heart of temptation itself. We will not find it beyond our own weakness, but within weakness itself” (André Louf).

One day a good friend advised me to go to Confession immediately after I committed a sin. I don’t know if it was good or bad advice, the only thing I know is that running away from sin should not mean that we are running away from our condition of sinners. According to Louf, integrating fragility means “learning to stay in our weakness while at the same time trusting God’s mercy.” Whoever repudiates his own fragility and runs away from it, is not integrating it into his life. Instead, the person enters a path of personal disappointments that will take him away from God’s grace and mercy, the only two balms capable of healing the wounds of sin.

Finally, how can I know that I am integrating fragility correctly? I believe that a person that has begun to experience God’s love is capable of growing even under difficult circumstances. One begins to connect, little by little, with one’s own sins and miseries no longer according to a self-referential pathos, but according to an experience of the

penthos open to God, that is, with the experience of pain and love of someone who knows that Christ, through the cross, carries and assumes all our sins. Being capable of placing our miseries on the cross liberates us from a relationship with God centered on sin, lived with anguish, constantly filled with promises of change, feelings of guilt, and a disordered expectancy of waiting for God to say something that makes us feel His forgiveness. A correct integration of sin in our lives, should make us capable of relating with God, making Him and his love the center of our lives, enjoying all the extent and deepness of a relationship with Christ, where the dialogue about one's own sin is part of that relationship, but it is not the only, nor the most important element. Symbolically speaking, I would say: the cross is the golden coat stand where Jesus invites us to hang our miseries to enter more lightly— as the redeemed children we are— into the sanctuary of our relationship with God.

4. Confession and Reconciliation

The key to make a good Confession is to let God be God. If after Confession you think something like this: “Yes, I know, I have sinned, I have done this and that because I really did not know who God was and how He saved me, but now I know it and understand it. From now on, I will never do it again. More so, Lord: I repent and promise I will do this and that penance, this and that sacrifice, because I have sinned. From now on, Lord, be assured that I will change, I'll pay attention to this and that...”. Fr. Rupnik would say this reasoning is “totally focused on the ego. It uses the structure of a dialogue, but creates a monologue. It does not result in a true relationship, but continues doing its own will, proposing sacrifices, improvements, missions, heroic acts, and good deeds, but all inspired by the ego.”

It is very important to avoid using Confession as a psychological mechanism to feel better, or as an important milestone to resume our spiritual combat. **Confession is a sacrament through which we truly enter in contact with God's grace and mercy, which are poured out, through the merits of the cross of Christ, within the hearts of those who turn to it.** It is running to the embrace of mercy what regenerates us and converts us, it is letting ourselves be surpassed by the unconditionality of God's love, what turns our hearts from stone to flesh. Those who are able to live Confession this way, “gradually identify more—says Fr. Rupnik— with the image of Peter in the high priest's courtyard who, in front of the servant girl, carried out all his promises and oaths and, vulnerable and defenseless, feeling unworthy of mercy and forgiveness, is touched by an unexpected gaze of mercy and goodness. This is the gaze that transformed Peter's life, and converted him into the saint he now is. A gaze that loved him at the most difficult and miserable moment of his life, precisely when he could not articulate any justification or make new promises since his betrayal and stinginess were evident to all...What did Peter do to get out of that situation? Do you want to know? He didn't do anything! He simply let Christ's loving gaze touch him...he just let himself be loved. This experience, in my opinion, reflects the true meaning of Confession.

5. Combat and Relapse

Resolutions to change are not bad, and I do not intend to condemn them; nonetheless, they must be seen and lived with the cooperation of grace and God's providence. In many cases, this requires lots of patience and trust from us; God's grace is mysterious, and His ways are not always our ways. Do you remember what Martha and Mary did when their brother, Lazarus, fell ill? They sent a message to Jesus saying that his dear friend was ill. Do you know what Jesus did? He did not go! He stayed where He was for an extra couple of days. Of course, Lazarus died, and the sisters experienced a profound sorrow, especially because they knew the cure for their brother's ailment, but it never arrived. Can you imagine how Martha and Mary felt when Jesus finally decided to come? Martha was the only one who had the strength to face him and reproach his attitude. Mary did not have the courage to face him, probably due to the disappointment and sorrow she felt. I do not want to stop at the beautiful dialogue between Jesus and Martha (which is one of my favorite dialogues in the entire Gospel), I just want to mention the phrase that Jesus says after listening to Martha's complaints. He told her: "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

I believe that spiritual combat and the experience of committing the same sins has many things in common with this passage from the Gospel. Just like Martha and Mary, we too can do everything to try to prevent evil and death (which brings sin) from appearing in our lives, even asking Jesus for his help; and nevertheless, evil and death appear. Was Jesus late again? Did He deny me his grace? These are understandable questions that can come to our minds, but they reveal a very human way of understanding God's action. Really, the only question we should ask ourselves is what Jesus asked Martha: "Do I believe that Christ is the Resurrection and the Life?, Do I believe that if I have faith in Him, even if I die, I will live?". We must honestly answer these questions.

The personal efforts to prevent Lazarus's death are fundamental; the pleas for help to Jesus are even more important; the sorrow for his death; the complaints to Jesus, and even like Mary, a timid struggle to meet Jesus, are understandable things, and we must live them with naturally. Jesus Himself is touched by our situation and comforts us...but what is most important is the question He asks us: "Do you believe that my love for you is greater than your sin?". The affirmative answer to this question is, in my opinion, the heart of spiritual combat, the "furrow" that directs one's personal efforts, and the light that help us keep our hope when we suffer a relapse. Our Lord's love is greater than our sin, and God's grace, even though we do not always understand how it works, will never let us die, even if we "die".

This certainty generates in the sinner a spiritual experience full of peace, serenity, and hope that is, in my opinion, the best way to cooperate with Christ's

reconciling action. If this is clear, the promises of change, and the personal efforts are positive and are not at risk of leading the person to a self-referential and willful battle against sin.