

# THE POWER OF WORDS IN THE “ACT OF CONTRITION”: A PLEDGE FOR PEACE. THE CANONICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Article History	Abstract
<b>Original Research Article</b>	<p><i>Words are powerful when being uttered either in sincerity of heart or in concealment of some realities perceptible to the senses. No wonder, the tongue is said to be sharper than a double-edged sword which cuts finely beyond human imagination, though without bones, which goes to show the power of the tongue in uttering words in their usage, be they in content or context. The Church, as a sacrament as well as the dispenser of that very reality she stands for, is full of signs and symbols which are often expressed either by words or through signs perceptible to the senses. Words and actions, as a result, can either compliment or contradict, both in usage as well as the intention behind their utterances in communication. That brings to mind the meaning of prayer as communicating with God for the different reasons, either spontaneous or regulated, not as mere play of words but offering mind and heart to God with an intention for respite or in thanksgiving for favors received. To this end, the article titled: The Power of Words in the Act of Contrition’s Prayer: A Pledge for Peace. The Canonical Perspective, sets out to appreciate the power of words in prayer, their appropriate usage, the effect of those words uttered as well as their end or destination through the canonical lens, bearing in mind the canonical jurisdiction of prayer as belonging to the Church for the salvation of her members.</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Power, Words, Act, Contrition, Prayer, Pledge, Peace, Canonical, Perspective.</p>
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## Introduction

The creation of man is a wonderful art of God when he, out of the dust, formed man through the power of his word, to become like him, hence the creation of man in the image and the likeness of the creator.<sup>1</sup> This creation is for a purpose of which man is expected to love, obey and be at peace with the creator, himself which extends to other creations, as the creation of man is the ultimate in the creation account, created to be at peace with God, his kind and creation in generation, given for his use and care. This domination excluded the quest of being tyrannical and domineering which endangers the human existence but to use everything, including life, to grow, to mature and to bring the human adventure to its final destiny: salvation of

souls. Indeed, the creation of human beings are not hopelessly confined to the world of their fantasies and illusions; they are not prisoners of their own categories and structures, instead they are created for the truth.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the fall of man brought about three realities and these realities are: temptation, sin and judgement. The commission of sin, pushed the man to blame the woman, with the woman blaming the serpent when God discovered they were into hiding and asked the reason for such an act, hence the demand of accountability and the owning of one’s action as being responsible. Because it was a deliberate act, God did not accept man’s excuses and had to pronounce a punishment for all three, nonetheless, his mercy for the

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:27.

<sup>2</sup> An extract from the Commentary on the book of Genesis Chapter 1, The Christian Community Bible, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, 1998, St. Pauls, Ibadan, Nigeria, 191.

helplessness of man, brought about the promise of salvation. The Church has it at heart to call the faithful to continual conversion and renewal. It wishes that when the baptized should fall from grace they should acknowledge the sins they have committed against God and their brethren and should be truly penitent in their hearts,<sup>3</sup> for the salvation of their souls. This salvation comes with acceptance, and not denial, of crime and the plea for forgiveness in the bid to restore friendship with God once severed by sin, through a sincere Act of Contrition in the restoration of peace, amidst pronounced judgement of God in justice.

### Clarification of Concepts

The concept “**word**” means a single unit of language, a speech sound or its written representation that conveys meaning. It can also refer to a brief conversation, a promise, or news/information, it can also be used for a unit of information in computing.<sup>4</sup> A word can be said to be a basic element of language that carries meaning, can be used on its own, and is uninterrupted.<sup>5</sup>

**Prayer:** the Latin root is *prec-*, from the word *prex*, meaning “prayer” or “request”. This root evolved into the Latin verb *precari*, meaning “to ask earnestly, beg, or entreat,” which was then passed through Old French and Middle English to form the modern English word “prayer”.<sup>6</sup> Prayer, in its noun forms are either a devout petition to God or an object of worship, or a spiritual communion with God or an object of worship, as in supplication, thanksgiving, adoration, or confession, or a sequence of words used in or appropriate for praying.<sup>7</sup>

**Power**, is the ability to control, influence, or have an effect on others or events. It can also mean physical strength, the capacity to do something, or the rate at which work is done. Power, in its synonyms and related terms means an authority, influence, control, strength, force, right, and

ability. Power is the ability to act or produce an effect; specifically: an ability that seems extraordinary or superhuman.<sup>8</sup>

**Acts:** the term is from the Latin “*actus*” and “*actum*”, both derived from the verb *agere*, which means “to do, drive, or perform”. *Actus* means “a thing done”. The relationship of the term to other words in their respective qualification, remains the root foundation for many English words, such as actor, action, active, and react.<sup>9</sup>

**Contrition:** the term “contrition” comes from the Latin word *contritus*, which means “ground to pieces” or “crushed”. The root is from the verb *tenere*, meaning “to rub, grind, or wear away,” combined with the prefix *con-*, meaning “with” or “together”. This reflect the deep sorrow or remorse for sin that feels like one’s spirit is being crushed.<sup>10</sup> The term ‘sin’, is of Germanic origin as it originates from the old English word *synn* and is related to Germanic languages. However, the standard Latin word for “sin” is *peccatum*, derived from the verb *peccare*, which means “to sin,” “to miss,” or “to make a mistake”<sup>11</sup>, so also its Greek equivalent of sin as *hamartia*.<sup>12</sup> Sin becomes powerless through the grace of God, whereby, the Latin root of “grace” is the word *gratia* which means “favour,” “charm,” or “thanks”. The root of *gratia* is *gratus*, meaning “pleasing” or “thankful”.<sup>13</sup>

**Peace:** the Latin root of the word “peace” is *pax*, which means “peace, agreement, or treaty”. The English word “peace” come from the Old French and Anglo-French words *pais*, *pes*, that also derived from this Latin root.<sup>14</sup> Other words derived from this root include *paciscor* “to agree” and *pact*, all of which relate to a sense of agreement or binding together.<sup>15</sup>

**Canonical Perspective:** this concept refers to an evaluation or assessment conducted according to specific, recognized standard, rule, or authoritative body of law within a

<sup>3</sup> Paul VI *Reconciliationem*, Decree Promulgating the New Order of Penance, 2 December, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Collins Dictionary: Word definition and meaning|Collins English

<sup>5</sup> Word – Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org>, accessed on 13 November, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Prayer Definition & Meaning – Dictionary.com, <https://www.dictionary.com>, 26 Nov 2025, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Prayer Definition & Meaning – Dictionary.com, <https://www.dictionary.com>, 26 Nov 2025, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Merriam – Webster, Power Definition & Meaning, <https://www.merriam-webster.com>, accessed on 13 November, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Act Definition & Meaning – Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com>, 25 Nov 2025, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Contrition – Stanford Couples Counselling, <https://www.stanfordcouplescounseling.com>, 11 Mar 2024, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Merriam-Webster, What is ‘Sin’?, <https://www.merriam-webster.com>, 16 May 2017, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary, Sin – Etymology, Origin & Meaning, <https://www.etymonline.com>, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Vocabulary.com, Grace – Definition, Meaning & Synonyms, <https://www.vocabulary.com>, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Translating Peace – The Peace Museum, <https://www.peacemuseum.org.uk>, 28 Jul 2022, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Peace – Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org>, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

particular field contained in the ecclesiastical law governing the Catholic Church, with particular reference to the Latin rite.<sup>16</sup> It is an assessment of a situation, practice, or document based on the established rules, laws, and doctrines of the Church.<sup>17</sup>

### Acts in General

Human freedom is intrinsically linked to responsibility, meaning that for every right and freedom there is a corresponding duty for individuals to be accountable for their actions and their consequences.<sup>18</sup> The right to do something or to express oneself comes with the responsibility of respecting other people's right in the daily affairs of the human person in his relationship to God and his fellow being, hence, man can confidently talk of an act which can be either act of God or act of man. The right to speak freely comes with the responsibility to listen to others and to consider the ethical implications of what is said,<sup>19</sup> as it is subject to canonical interpretation. An act can be said to be that of God '*actus Dei*' as a legal term referring to a happening in which the cause is beyond the foreknowledge or control of man; hence the occurrence is attributed to God, the Author of nature. Natural disasters, such as earthquakes, are acts of God.<sup>20</sup> This is different from the actions carried out by man as either act of man "*actus humanis*" or human acts "*actus humanus*."<sup>21</sup>

A human act is performed with deliberate knowledge, intention, and free will, making the person morally responsible, hence subject to canonical evaluation<sup>22</sup>; while an act of man is an involuntary or instinctive action that lacks these qualities and carries no moral accountability.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, an act of man cannot be canonically judged because it refers to actions performed without deliberation, free will, or conscious intention, hence the omission of due

diligence.<sup>24</sup> Only human acts are subjects to canonical scrutiny, hence the crust of the matter, be it in the ecclesiastical or civil law, as they constitute objects of trial,<sup>25</sup> where the Church has its own and exclusive right to judge spiritual matters or link to it,<sup>26</sup> the violation of ecclesiastical laws and whatever contains an element of sin, to determine guilt and impose ecclesiastical penalties.<sup>27</sup>

In effect, canonical judgement is concerned with moral responsibility, which only arises when a person makes a deliberate choice, given other variables to select, be it in their speech translated into action or the projection of the mind in form of a consent of the end or goal which the act leads.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, acts of man can become human acts when he employs his intellect and will in performing the act<sup>29</sup> where acts of man like eating, sleeping, hearing, smelling, spitting can be judged as offensive in circumstantial cases, especially when done out of malice. Malice<sup>30</sup> may influence the moral quality of the act, but it does not negate its classification as a human act, hence in principle, acts of man of man become human acts. For instance, spitting is an act of man, but it can be human act if one deliberately spits<sup>31</sup> on someone, hence a canonical issue. Furthermore, the Church has its own inherent right to constrain with penal sanctions Christ's faithful who commit offences, which could be either medicinal penalties or censures,<sup>32</sup> or expiatory penalties<sup>33</sup> which can deprive a member of Christ's faithful of some spiritual or temporal good.<sup>34</sup>

### Words in General

In general terms, a word is a basic, independent unit of language that carries meaning and can be used on its own. It is composed of one or smaller units of meaning called morphemes and is typically separated by spaces in written

<sup>16</sup> Canon 1.

<sup>17</sup> Canon law | Wex | US Law | LII/Legal Information Institute, LII | Legal Information Institute <https://www.law.cornell.edu>, accessed on 28 November, 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Understanding Human Freedom: Types, Responsibilities, and Decision-Making Study Guide, quizlet.com, January 2007, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>19</sup> With Four Freedoms, Four Responsibilities – Ford Foundation, <https://www.fordfoundation.org>, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>20</sup> John Burke, SMA, A Dictionary of Canon Law, An African Inculturated Edition, Revised and Updated by Robert Lezohupski, OFMConv., Paulines Publications Africa, 2014, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Two General Forms of acts – Prezi, <https://prezi.com>, Feb 8, 2014, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>22</sup> Human Acts – Carolina Museum of the Marine, <https://www.museumofthemarine.org>, 24 Oct 2023, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>23</sup> Difference Between Human Acts and Acts of Man, <https://www.scribd.com>, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Canon 1321 &3

<sup>25</sup> Canon 1400 &1.

<sup>26</sup> Canon 1401 no.1.

<sup>27</sup> Canon 1401 no.2

<sup>28</sup> Unit 3 Analysis of Human Action, <https://egyankosh.ac.in>, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>29</sup> Human Act and act of Man | PDF | Free Will | Intention, <https://www.scribd.com>, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>30</sup> Canon 1321 &2.

<sup>31</sup> Unit 4 Human Acts | PDF | Natural Law | Reason, <https://www.scribd.com>, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>32</sup> Canon 1312 &1 no.1 and for more reading of the medicinal penalties in the Church, confer canons 1331 – 1333.

<sup>33</sup> Canon 1312 &1 no.2, while for the expiatory penalties, they are contained in can. 1336.

<sup>34</sup> Canon 1312 &2

language. However, true their usage as small units of meaning, words in communication are beyond simple definition due to their powerful and flexible symbols that allow humans to communicate complex ideas and emotions. Its usage can best refer to speech or talk, lyrics of a song, a promise or assurance, news and information or even a command or a signal.<sup>35</sup> Words in general describes the creation of every word which belongs to a class which summarizes the ways in which it can be used in grammar. The major word classes for English are: noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, determiner, pronoun, conjunction and many more, as a matter of fact, these word classes are sometimes called ‘part of speech’.<sup>36</sup> In a world where everyday conversations are commonly reduced to emoji-filled texts or SMS messages and character-limited tweets, words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate and to humble. Think of the power we have to speak truth and hope to those under us by way of command or admonition. A few quick words can make all the difference.<sup>37</sup>

### The Power of Words

This power of words is derived in its usage as words are used to express what we think and how we feel. We use words to ask questions, give directions, and explain things,<sup>38</sup> hence our words represent our beliefs, morals, prejudices, and principles – sometimes in ways we may not mean – and can shape an audience’s perceptions of us as well as the issues about which we speak and write. Words are powerful in their abilities to shape perception and influence reality, having the power to both build and destroy, heal and harm. Words can inspire, change minds, and alter the course of lives, but they can also hurt, humiliate, and cause division. The impact of words depends not only on their literal meaning but also on the emotion and intention behind them.

The following, therefore, become areas of concern on the power of words:

- a. encouragement, as words can be used to build confidence and change someone’s mindset for the better, as seen when a kind word to a child can stop negative behavior;
- b. they can inspire when being used appropriately, wisely and respectfully too, where powerful words

ginger individuals, groups or even nations to overcome challenges and achieve what seems impossible;

- c. words can be used or serve as mediums of communication, where the rightful usage, the timing of their usage and the consideration of audience can build connections and improve relationships, while opposite can cause deep emotional pain and trauma;
- d. words can be used to hurt as hurtful language, which can humiliate, and break down someone’s spirit, while hateful or aggressive language can incite violence, hatred, animosity and despair;
- e. words can be used to misinform someone, as a single sentence from a negative or dismissive statement can have a lasting negative impact on a person’s path in life, hence words can be misleading such that it determines its destination as wise words save while foolish words destroy;
- f. words can be used to either control or create awareness, as the power of words come from their intents behind them, the same words spoken with different tones can have vastly different reactions;
- g. words used to refer to ourselves can have an adverse effect on us, thereby influencing our perception and limits; the ability of the art of using words in their power, comes with it a serious responsibility to use them thoughtfully. Being mindful of what we say can help build up others and create a more positive environment.
- h. Words are not just means of communication, they are a force, a powerful tool that shape the reality we live in, hence when you speak, you’re not just sharing information; you’re creating energy, setting intentions, and influencing the world around you.<sup>39</sup>

### The Word of God

Scripture speaks of “the Word of God,” meaning “the things God has said.”<sup>40</sup> But Scripture also uses the phrase “the Word of God” as a name. specifically, as a name for Jesus Christ.<sup>41</sup> The Word of God contains the power of God. The power is activated when we speak God’s Word to our situations. Speaking God’s Word brings breakthrough and also aligns our heart with His truth over our situation,

<sup>35</sup> Word – Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org>, accessed on 30 November, 2025.

<sup>36</sup> What are Types of Words? | Definition & Examples – Twinkl <https://www.twinkl.co.in>, accessed on 13 November, 2025.

<sup>37</sup> The Power of Words – Compassion International <https://www.compassion.com> accessed on 13 November, 2025.

<sup>38</sup> The Power of Your words <https://focus3.com>, accessed on 13 November, 2025.

<sup>39</sup> The Power of Words – How the Things We Say Shape Our Reality <https://emmagmusic.com>, accessed on 13 November, 2025.

<sup>40</sup> The Word of God – Ways to Learn at Ligonier <https://learn.ligonier.org>, accessed on 13 November, 2025.

<sup>41</sup> John 1

causing faith and hope to rise in our hearts as we take hold of His promise.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the word of God to mankind has been that of peace, reconciliation, conversion and renewal from the old self to being a new creation through the power and the proclamation of the abiding presence of the word made flesh. That in essence is the plan of salvation when Christ commissioned his apostles to teach the observance of all that he had commanded,<sup>43</sup> hence the case of not only on what to be believed, but with what has to be done. Docility to be guided by the Holy Spirit, therefore, entails the obligation to live and grow under the prompting of the Spirit as well as the faithful observance of God's commandments, of the laws of the Church and of just civil laws.<sup>44</sup> As such, the regulation of the Christian liberty in daily affairs, respecting their consciences and guided by the virtue of prudence are subject to the Church's magisterium, hence the existence of binding norms on the baptized. For this reason, the saints gave witness to Christ by the exercise of heroic virtues and the martyrs suffered torture and death rather than deny Christ.<sup>45</sup> In the sacrament of confession, the penitent is called by God through the conscience, having realized the wound caused to the Church in moments of sin which in turn affects their own relationship with God, by a deliberate act to confess in an act of contrition for the restoration of friendship with God and the Church for satisfaction. The action is remorseful and the prayer is to ask for forgiveness.

### **The Action in Accompanying the Act of Contrition**

Contrition is made in a remorseful manner through the exhibition of an act of being sorrowful for the sin committed symbolized in an act of kneeling down while seeking for forgiveness from a lawfully ordained minister, best known as the sacrament of penance. In the sacrament of penance the faithful who confess their sins to a lawful minister, are sorry for those sins and have a purpose of amendment, receive from God, through the absolution given by that minister, forgiveness of sins they have committed after baptism, and at the same time they are reconciled with the Church, which by sinning they wounded.<sup>46</sup> In other words, all Christ's faithful are free to confess their sins to lawfully approved confessors of their

own choice, even to one of another rite.<sup>47</sup> In order that the faithful may receive the saving remedy of the sacrament of penance, they must be so disposed that, repudiating the sins they have committed and having the purpose of amending their lives, they turn back to God.<sup>48</sup> Hence an essential part of absolution by the Church and only in absolution does it acquire its full meaning. Together with absolution it constitutes a salvific whole, even if the contrition aroused by God in the sinner is enough to make God receive him again into the embrace of his love.<sup>49</sup>

It is an act because it involves a deliberate action emanating freely from a contrite heart, where contrition is the expression of inner conversion, that is, the inward turning away from the sinful action and from the way of life inimical to God which it reveals...it includes the determination to live a new life.<sup>50</sup> This inner expression is made audibly through the pronunciation of every word in a meditative manner, interpreting same according to the gravity of the offence, bearing in mind the mercy and goodness of God amidst the human weaknesses. Words, therefore, bring many benefits as the words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. The one who guards his mouth preserves his life; the one who opens wide his lips comes to ruin. A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.<sup>51</sup> The following words best described what an act is, its means, purpose and end, such that a sincere act is often made possible through serious desire leading one to prepare, care, believe, forgive, change, risk, listen, choose, relax, pray, persist, smile, focus, act, trust, accept, and wait for the fulfilment of that which is being desired and prayed for. However, only a priest is the minister of the sacrament of penance.<sup>52</sup>

### **The Prayer of the Act of Contrition**

This prayer is said by a penitent before a confessor who acts in the name of Christ and the Church as a judge and a healer, to absolve the penitent of their sins through a sacramental confession, having confessed their sins and the firm believe of saying the much remembered, while those not remembered are begged to be forgiven too. This prayer is so powerful that when recited with a sincere heart, there

<sup>42</sup> Facebook, It's so important that we declare God's Word's and His Promises over our situation, <https://www.facebook.com>, 19 Dec. 2024, accessed on 13 November, 2025.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew 28:20.

<sup>44</sup> Sacred Congregation for Clergy, *Ad norman decreti*, General Catechetical Directory, 11 April, 1971, no. 63.

<sup>45</sup> Sacred Congregation for Clergy, *Ad norman decreti*, General Catechetical Directory, 11 April, 1971, no. 63.

<sup>46</sup> Canon 959.

<sup>47</sup> Canon 991.

<sup>48</sup> Canon 987.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Schmaus, *Dogma, The Church as Sacrament*, Volume 5, Sheed and Ward, London, 1983, 227.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Schmaus, *Dogma, The Church as Sacrament*, Volume 5, Sheed and Ward, London, 1983, 227.

<sup>51</sup> 31 Scriptures About the Power of Your Words – Kenneth Copeland Ministries <https://www.kom.org>, accessed on 13 November, 2025.

<sup>52</sup> Canon 965.

emerged an inner peace, fulfilment, happiness, joy, gladness and the exuberance of being forgiven of one's weighing, burdensome and restlessness occasioned by sins. The prayer goes thus: An Act of Contrition, oh my God, because you are so good, I am very sorry that I have sinned against you and by the help of your grace, I will not sin again. Some core or key words worthy of mention are: oh my God, because you are so good, I am very sorry, that I have sinned, against you, and by the help, of your grace, I will not sin again.

- a. An act of contrition, which depicts a human act as voluntary, free and deliberate too.
- b. Oh my God, which expresses the recognition of the supreme power of God over and above every other power and dominion. He remains and reigns supreme as God, hence the vocative usage.
- c. Because you are so good, meaning that his goodness supersedes every other, hence he is goodness itself and should not be tampered with nor his goodness be abused.
- d. I am very sorry, reflecting the sinfulness of the penitent whose sins have become thorns in his flesh and constituting an adverse effect felt also by the society in his relationship with God, the Church, the community and loved ones. Sorry is the expression of being remorseful for a wrongdoing.
- e. That I have sinned, where sin is seen as a transgression of divine, moral or canonical law, understood as an offence against God and man, more or less, an act of rebellion, an expression of a corrupt nature, or a failure to meet a religious, moral, canonical or civil standard. It is a legal infraction, a bridge of relationship, a deliberate act of defiance, or an attitude of self-centeredness that opposes divine will.
- f. Against you, signifying contradicting God's law or his commandment to love one another, hence despising his person and laws reflected in the usage of the second person singular. It is an acceptance of being guilty and culpable for an act of disobedience resulted in a broken relationship with God, hence seeking for a reconciliation.

Against you, depicts a loss of love for God, and a failure to glorify Him fully.<sup>53</sup>

- g. And by the help of your grace, meaning alone one cannot overcome sin but with the grace of God, the Almighty, the omniscient, the benevolent, the merciful Father and the forgiven Savior who gives his gifts to those in most need of them, if only they are requested for.
- h. I will not sin again, which expresses the firm resolve, a conscientious and a deliberate promise not to return to one's old self by avoiding circumstances and occasions for sin. This is why Paul cautioned against continuing in sin as grace abounds.<sup>54</sup>

### The Canonist Perspective of the Act of Contrition

Actions, in canon law, are judged based on their intentions, especially those which seemed to have originated from an informed consent, made possible through deliberate and free will, automatically become imputable. However true is the fact that the Church has its own and exclusive right to judge<sup>55</sup> cases which refer to matters which are spiritual or linked with the spiritual,<sup>56</sup> the violation of ecclesiastical laws and whatever contains an element of sin, to determine guilt and impose ecclesiastical penalties.<sup>57</sup> Canonically speaking, any person is considered innocent until the contrary is proved,<sup>58</sup> hence no one can be punished unless the commission by him or her of an external violation of a law or precept is gravely imputable by reason of malice or of culpability.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, a person who deliberately violated a law or precept is bound by the penalty prescribed in that law or precept,<sup>60</sup> as such, where there has been an external violation, imputability is presumed, unless it appears otherwise.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, a sinful act always takes place in a given moment of free will or decision, hence the lasting effect of contradiction in the life of the individual as against his conscience, as well as in his relationship with God and fellow human beings. Thus, sin reveals itself as not only a wrong action against God but also as a wrong action, permanent in its effects, directed against the person who does it and against all other men.<sup>62</sup> Contrition for sin includes the will to make restitution for the havoc it has worked in the sinner's own life, in the of the community, and in the whole creation.<sup>63</sup> Penalties in the Church,

<sup>53</sup> Christian views on sin – Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org>, accessed on 1 December, 2025.

<sup>54</sup> Romans 6:1-2.

<sup>55</sup> Canon 1401.

<sup>56</sup> Canon 1401 no.1.

<sup>57</sup> Canon 1401 no.2.

<sup>58</sup> Canon 1321 &1.

<sup>59</sup> Canon 1321 &2.

<sup>60</sup> Canon 1321 &3

<sup>61</sup> Canon 1321 &4

<sup>62</sup> Michael Schmaus, Dogma, The Church as Sacrament, Volume 5, Sheed and Ward, London, 1983, 235.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Schmaus, Dogma, The Church as Sacrament, Volume 5, Sheed and Ward, London, 1983, 235.

therefore, are not for witch-hunting but to safeguard and promote the good of the community of Christ's faithful through pastoral charity, way of life, advice, exhortation, and if necessary through the imposition of declaration of penalties with canonical equity for restoration of justice, the reform of the offender, and the repair of scandal.<sup>64</sup> As such, penal remedies and penance become the aid given in moments of offense depicting the internal and the external fora, where in penal remedies, as obtained in canon 1339, the aim is to prevent offences through warning and fraternal correction as pertaining to the external forum, while penance<sup>65</sup> is to substitute for or to augment a penalty. A public penance, however, is never to be imposed for an occult transgression,<sup>66</sup> though penance, based on the prudent judgement of the Ordinary, may be applied as part of penal remedy or correction.<sup>67</sup>

The application of penalty is reserved exclusively to the head of a Church whose duty it is to safeguard and promote the good of the community itself and of each of Christ's faithful, through pastoral charity, the imposition or declaration of penalties according to the law to be applied with canonical equity for restoration, reformation and reparation.<sup>68</sup> Penance in the Church is one of the seven sacraments, where the minister of the sacrament of penance is the priest,<sup>69</sup> however, only the local Ordinary is competent to give to any priests whomsoever the faculty to hear the confessions of any whomsoever of the faithful. It is not to be given except to priests whose suitability has been established, either by examination or by some other means.<sup>70</sup> This is because the sacrament of penance is about healing, reconciliation, restoration, rehabilitation and growth from grace to grace in the journey of faith, especially in moments of fall. It is an occasion where a person confesses sins to priests, expresses sorrow, and receives God's forgiveness through the priest's absolution, instituted by Christ who gave his apostles the power to forgive sins. The minister, in the confessional is both the judge and healer, and that he is constituted by God as a minister of both divine justice and divine mercy, so that he may contribute to the honor of God and the salvation of souls.<sup>71</sup>

### **The Juridical Effect of the Action in the Act of Contrition**

The juridical effect comes with the free and deliberate action of the penitent in approaching the sacrament of penance, within which the prayer is said after the sins must have been enumerated consciously by an adult who has come of age. This age determines the level of discretion of the penitent, bearing in mind that all the faithful who have reached the age of discretion are bound faithfully to confess their grave sins at least once a year.<sup>72</sup> Needless to say, is that the free decision of the sinner consists in listening to God's call and responding to it by appreciating the sacrament of penance and being able to avail oneself for it, following the canonical process. The canonical process involved in the celebration of the sacrament of penance in its nature as one of the actions of Christ and of the Church as signs and means by which faith is expressed and strengthened, worship is offered to God and our sanctification is brought about,<sup>73</sup> includes the following:

- a. disposition to confess through preparation, that repudiating the sins they have committed and having the purpose of amending their lives, they turn back to God. Here, if the confessor is in doubt about the penitent's disposition and the penitent asks for absolution, it is not to be denied or delayed.<sup>74</sup>
- b. Asking for blessing from the minister, accepting the fact of being guilty of offenses against the Church, the civil authority, oneself and neighbor, while specifying the last time one confesses after their baptism,
- c. then the owning of the human acts which violated the commandments of God, civil law as well as other virtues worthy of a Christian living with one's neighbor by enumerating them, in kind and number, all grave sins committed after baptism,<sup>75</sup> so also venial sins.<sup>76</sup>
- d. having enumerated them as much as one's memory is able to recall with a sincere heart in kind and in number, all grave sins committed after baptism, the ones unable to recall are equally begged for their pardon and forgiveness.
- e. The minister, in hearing confession as both a judge and a healer,<sup>77</sup> asks questions in prudence and discretion, taking into account the condition and

<sup>64</sup> Canon 1311 &2

<sup>65</sup> Canon 1340

<sup>66</sup> Canon 1340 &2.

<sup>67</sup> Canon 1340 &3.

<sup>68</sup> Canon 1311 &2.

<sup>69</sup> Canon 965.

<sup>70</sup> Canon 970.

<sup>71</sup> Canon 978 &1.

<sup>72</sup> Canon 991.

<sup>73</sup> Canon 840.

<sup>74</sup> Canon 980.

<sup>75</sup> Canon 988 &1.

<sup>76</sup> Canon 988 &2.

<sup>77</sup> Canon 978 &1.

the age of the penitent, refrains from inquiring the name of a partner in sin;<sup>78</sup>

- f. After the admonition, the minister then imposes salutary and appropriate penances, in proportion to the kind and number of sins confessed, taking into account, however, the condition of the penitent. The penitent is bound personally to fulfil these penances.<sup>79</sup> The imposition of penance is to complete the healing and restoration process.<sup>80</sup>
- g. then the act of contrition is said, having listened to the admonition of the minister and the commiserating penalties given,
- h. afterwards comes the absolution where the priest pronounces God's forgiveness over the penitent, through the ministry of the Church, and then the sending forth in peace to sin no more.

All these are done in confidentiality, as the sacramental seal is inviolable, hence, it is absolutely wrong for a confessor in any way to betray the penitent, for any reason whatsoever, whether by word or in any other fashion.<sup>81</sup> In case of impairment, interpreters are allowed but are obliged to observe this secret, as are all others who in any way whatever have come to a knowledge of sins from a confession.<sup>82</sup> Consequently, the proper place for hearing sacramental confessions is a church or oratory,<sup>83</sup> according to norms provided by the Episcopal Conference either in an open place, fitted with a fixed grille between the penitent and the confessor,<sup>84</sup> however flexible is the just reason, else it is forbidden outside the confessional.<sup>85</sup>

### Benefits Derived from the Act of Contrition

In the sacrament of penance, the faithful who confess their sins to a lawful minister, are sorry for those sins and have a purpose of amendment, received from God, through the absolution given by that minister, forgiveness of sins they have committed after baptism, and at the same time they are reconciled with the Church, which by sinning they wounded.<sup>86</sup> The benefit is the act of contrition is that there is an expression of guilt seeking for forgiveness in accordance with the call to conversion and believe in the Gospel<sup>87</sup> which sin seemed to have severed between the individual and the creator. This conversion is made possible

by the profession of the mouth from the meditation of a penitent heart wounded, crushed, battered and soiled by sin as a result of human acts in their inhumanity to their fellow being, the effect of which is extended to the society through jealousy, wickedness, hatred, malice, cheating, killing, coveting, injustice and so forth.

The recognition of the goodness of God which sin initially blocked the view of the penitent is once again remembered and praised as being so good not to have allowed one to die in their sin but provided a platform to amend so as to be at right with oneself. The acknowledgement to have sinned against God by sinning against one's neighbor is highly regretted in the act of contrition, praying not to sin again through the help and the provision of the necessary grace to overcome the temptations of life. Every word uttered at this point in time matters a lot as not merely spontaneous words but well-thought-out words of contrition, meant to be owned, believed and expressed with remorsefulness, sorrow and the resolve never to go back to one's old self. This is because true penitence, however, cannot ever prescind from physical asceticism as well. Our whole being, in fact, body and soul, indeed the whole of nature, even animals without reason,<sup>88</sup> must participate actively in this religious act whereby the creature recognizes divine holiness and majesty.<sup>89</sup>

The benefits of the sacrament of penance, therefore, is to receive God's mercy and grace, be freed from the guilt of sin, and be resolved to sin no more, which restores one to a state of grace and reconciled with God and the Church.<sup>90</sup> The spiritual effects are reconciliation with God by which the penitent recovers grace; there is healing;<sup>91</sup> reconciliation with the Church; remission of the eternal punishment incurred by mortal sins; remission, at least in part, of temporal punishments resulting from sin; peace and serenity of conscience, and spiritual consolation; and an increase of spiritual strength for the Christian battle.<sup>92</sup> Confession is an act of genuine worship with sacramental efficacy. It fosters a more careful examination of

<sup>78</sup> Canon 979.

<sup>79</sup> Canon 981.

<sup>80</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia: The Sacrament of Penance – New Advent, <https://www.newadvent.org>, accessed on 1 December, 2025.

<sup>81</sup> Canon 983 &1

<sup>82</sup> Canon 983 &2

<sup>83</sup> Canon 964 &1.

<sup>84</sup> Canon 964 &2

<sup>85</sup> Canon 964 &3.

<sup>86</sup> Canon 959.

<sup>87</sup> Mark 1:15.

<sup>88</sup> John 3:7-8

<sup>89</sup> Paul VI, Apostolic constitution on Penance, *Paenitemini*, 17 February, 1966.

<sup>90</sup> Reconciliation: A Short Guide – Catholic Diocese of Broken Bay, <https://www.bbcatholic.org.au>, accessed on 1 December, 2025.

<sup>91</sup> James 5:16.

<sup>92</sup> Sacrament of Penance – St. Martin de Tours Catholic Church, <https://saintmartindetours.org>, accessed on 1 December, 2025.

conscience, counters spiritual negligence, provides spiritual direction and is a way to true, humble penance.<sup>93</sup>

### Challenges in Praying the Act of Contrition

The power of words is such that it can either make or mar their users, hence the caution in their utterances, especially if one does not use them well from the heart but a mere use of words in a joking manner. Findings have shown that words are often the projection of the mind and can be used to express consent, own up responsibility as well as be held responsible for one's actions too. That brings to mind the challenge in praying the act of contrition, where it primarily involves internal struggles with sincerity, genuine sorrow, and a firm purpose of embodiment, rather than merely reciting the words. Other obstacles are common prayer difficulties like distractions, lack of time, and various spiritual barriers. These challenges, among others, are:

- a. difficulty in forgiveness, where one tends to hold onto anger, hatred or refusing to forgive others, which can create more barrier than ever, as reconciliation with others become difficulty, which should have been the essential element to a right relationship with God;
- b. lacking true sorrow or remorse during the prayer as common feeling dictates the commonness or the formal nature of the prayer which demands memorizing by those who are not well educated, thereby making it hard to genuinely feel penitent. Most times, people come with the feeling of meeting a familiar person, where in the end, it hinders true contrition which requires heartfelt regret for having offended God, not just a fear of punishment from a familiar person;
- c. the utterance in the crucial aspect of the prayer not to sin any more and the avoidance of the occasion for sin often times lack the firm purpose of amendment, hence insincere intentions, but patiently waiting for the final word from the confessor so as to go. It is more of avoiding words which contradict one's actions, hence the challenge in genuine willingness to change, which requires action beyond just saying the words;
- d. the challenge of distraction and a wandering mind is also an issue to contend with, where the cares of life, unfinished labor, scheduled programs and so forth. Often preoccupy penitent minds, thereby making it difficult to focus on God's presence, to

meditate on every word spoken, and to situate oneself in the meaning of the prayer;<sup>94</sup>

- e. sometimes shame, the feeling of unworthiness and fear in reciting prayers generally makes one to relapse, the sentiment or which should have drawn one closer to God who alone qualifies and makes worthy the sinner who comes with shame for the sins committed and with eyes raised to heaven for forgiveness. Most times, shame and unworthiness creep in when the penitent is familiar with the confessor, hence the reservation of some grave sins in trying to cover up and the maintenance of the so-called good personality known outside, forgetting the essence of confessing not to the priest but to God;
- f. the prayer can be used or be rooted in self-centeredness or a desire for personal comfort rather than aligning with God's will and seeking his glory, bearing in mind the sacramental effect in its sign and symbol;
- g. most Catholics find it difficult to benefit from the sacrament of penance because of spiritual dryness, thereby distancing themselves from the activities of the Church, including the sacraments as unattractive, leading to disinterest and spiritual slot, making any form of prayer feel difficult;<sup>95</sup>
- h. the prayer is aimed at a change in heart and the challenge has always been that of the failure to act, thereby watering down the good intention of the prayer which should have translated into the actions of the faithful and a change in heart not to hurt, cheat, fight, kill, covert, oppress, exploit, or disrespect others.

### Recommendations

Overcoming these challenges involves humility, diligence, making a conscious effort to focus on God's love and mercy, and seeking support through the sacraments, specially of reconciliation, confession or penance and Christian fellowship. In the sacrament of confession, the penitent is made whole again through the instrumentality of the Church and the cooperation of the penitent to own up their sins by accepting to have erred, preparation to meet the Lord, waiting patiently at the confessional, go and meet the minister, seek for his blessing in shame and having been weighed down by sin, confess your sins, listen to the judge and healer in the person of the minister, be truly and sincerely sorry for the offenses committed by being responsible for the action through the

<sup>93</sup> Karl H. Peschke, *Christian Ethics, Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican II*, Vol. II: Special Moral Theology Revised Edition, Theological Publications in India Bangalore, 2001, 147.

<sup>94</sup> 12 Barriers to Effective Prayer and How to Overcome Them, marvinwilliams.com, <https://marvinwilliams.com>, 2 Feb 2016, accessed on 1 December, 2025.

<sup>95</sup> Some Difficulties in the Practice of Frequent Confession and Communion Two Instructions Given in a Retreat, Project Canterbury <https://anglicanhistory.org>, accessed on 1 December, 2025.

acceptance of the penalty, the pledge of being a sinner and unworthy and with the help of God's grace, never to sin again, and then carry out the penance given as medicinal and expiatory:

- a. examine your conscience by a prayerful reflection on one's thoughts, words, and actions to identify sins, based on the commandments of God, the laws of the Church, those of the civil society and many more in the daily experience of man;
- b. be sorry for the sins committed which have severed the relationship with God and not just being sad for oneself;
- c. have a firm purpose of a sincere repentance for the sins confessed by making resolution to avoid the occasions, situations, people, and places that lead to sin, having learnt a lesson from the fall;
- d. if the tendency to forget grave sins sets in, it is advisable that one writes down sins, as it helps to remember them, not to be obsessed in trying to remember every sin, as it is innate in man to forget. That does not mean hiding mortal sins in the name of forgetting them, else it becomes an insincere act of contrition owing to the act of a deliberate omission of sins. It is not an occasion for making excuses but to focus on the number and types of sins committed, including mortal sins, as most times people only confess venial sins only.
- e. Be at peace before the minister as though in the presence of the Almighty who searches the minds and knows the heart and who alone has the power to forgive sins through the ministry of the Church by listening attentively to the minister. It is the main reason why one is there, hence the need to fulfil the purpose of being there for the salvation of soul and not for familiarity's sake, whatsoever.
- f. The penance must be carried out in all honesty and sincerity of purpose, failure to do so means the violation of the ecclesiastical law which regulates, safeguard and promote the sacrament of reconciliation.

- g. Be remorseful in reciting the prayer of the Act of Contrition as it ushers in the much-desired moment, the absolution of sins, thereby restoring one to wholeness, unity, friendship, oneness and love of God, his Church and neighbor.
- h. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for his grace, favor, blessing, forgiveness, kindness, goodness, gentleness, mercy and benevolence, asking for help to live a new life, filled with love, justice and peace.

## Conclusion

Confession remains a sacrament deeply rooted in the Scripture as a God-given law that the sinner shall confess his sins,<sup>96</sup> as many texts refer only to a confession of sin to God, not that the sinner goes directly to God, as taught by the *magisterium*, but also before men.<sup>97</sup> The purpose of confession is not primarily to present a report or inventory but to accuse and condemn oneself before the priest as the representative of the Church community and ultimately before the omniscient and all-holy God, in confrontation with the cross of Christ by which the Father in his mercy has judged sin. Thus, confession is to be understood as contrition expressed in words rather than in some visible sign, reason being that a man can make the clearest self-representation in words: words are his mode of self-expression; he is a word-being.<sup>98</sup> The words in Act of Contrition, therefore, reflect the inner being and the true state of the penitent who seeks for forgiveness, mercy, grace, peace and healing from the wounds caused by sins through his disposition for the sacrament as an act of submission to the power of God. St. Augustine helps us to understand the statement that a human being has sacramental quality when he says that man gives himself to another through his words, i.e. that in his words he gives more than mere information, he gives his own self. In hearing his words, the man addressed receives not only a particular spoken content but the speaker himself.<sup>99</sup> In the Act of Contrition, powerful words are expressed in form of a prayer and a pledge for peace through the act of a promise, emanates from within, bringing about the sense of fulfilment, ease, joy, happiness and liberation, thus, blessed is the one whose sin is forgiven, whose iniquity is wiped away.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Genesis 3:9-13, 4:9-15; Leviticus 5:5-19; Numbers 5:7; 2 Samuel 12:13; 1 John 1:9.

<sup>97</sup> James 5:16.

<sup>98</sup> Michael Schmaus, *The Church as Sacrament, Dogma 5*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1983, 223.

<sup>99</sup> Michael Schmaus, *The Church as Sacrament, Dogma 5*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1983, 7-8.

<sup>100</sup> Psalm 32:1.