

Perfect Contrition as a Panacea for God's Mercy: A study of Luke 15,17-20

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Abstract

God is perfectly merciful. He is also perfectly just. Perfect contrition on the part the repentant is what makes the difference. 1John 5,16-17 distinguishes between venial and mortal sin but yet defines every sin as sin. The difference between Peter and Judas is their mode of approach to God's throne of mercy. Jesus foretold Peter's denial just as he foretold his betrayal. Denial is a form of betrayal. But whereas in Matt 26,69-75 Peter went out and wept bitterly after he remembered the words of Christ concerning his denial. Judas in Matt 27,3-5 saw that Jesus was condemned. He also felt remorse for his action but then went and hung himself. Peter's remorse could be seen as metanoia (repentance from the heart) and Judas' as metamelomai (repentance from the head). Abstracting from this but from the backdrop of the action of the prodigal son in Luke 15,17-20 this paper posits perfect contrition (metanoia) as the master key ensuring one of God's mercy. The paper sails from exegetical prism to a pastoral application of the hermeneutical implication of the text.

Keywords: metanoia, metamelomai, perfect contrition, exegesis, hermeneutics.

Introduction

The Pope declared 8th Dec 2015 – 20th Nov 2016 as a Year of Mercy. As a response, Doors of Mercy were opened in selected Churches. A pictorial representation of God as a Merciful Father was seen hanging at the entrance or altar of most churches all over the globe. The proclamation was made. Announcements were all over the place. Vision and auditory systems of communication were used. The faithful was encouraged to prayerfully pass through the Door of Mercy. Priests were reminded to come with their parishioners and pass through the Door of Mercy. Thoughts flowed in my mind like speed flowing water. This was yet another activity in the Church that people are meant to observe with little convincing catechesis. Undoubtedly, every one of us knows that the physical passage is only an externalization of what ought to be inward. The big question is whether the average faithful out there is very much at home with the meaning. It is similar to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The practice has been in the Church for centuries. People are encouraged to avail themselves of the opportunity. Our local Igbo Catechism teaches that every believer must go for sacramental confession at least once a year. Festive periods especially Easter and Christmas usually witness a huge turnout of people for confessions. The situation in our society simply proves that what many do is simply mechanical. It does not come nor get down to the heart. Thomas Merton while discussing the different levels of reception of the Word of God talks of the Mind level, the Soul level, and the Heart level. One bears fruits when it gets to the Heart level. Similarly, until confessions come from and get to the

Heart level we can as well forget about it. Based on this brief observation, the researcher thinks that this paper is situational and progressive. It is situational because its point of departure is based on the observations of the reality in our lives as the faithful. It is progressive in as much as it draws from the exegesis of Luke 15,17-20 to concretely push for a repentance from the heart as a condition for one to obtain the mercy of God. It is the conviction of this paper that what is externalized must be from the inside in order that the reason for the Papal Declaration of the Year of Mercy would be actualized. The paper posits that a look at the action of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15,17-20 encapsulates what the feeling and action of a true penitent ought to be. Perfect Contrition is a *conditio sine qua non* for reconciliation with God. It is this Perfect Contrition as seen in the act of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15,17-20 that this paper calls metanoia. Externalization of repentance devoid of internal conviction and true change of attitude is *metamelomai*. Going for confessions or Passing through the Door of Mercy is a welcome development but the interior repentance is the substance that gives meaning to the action of passing through the door.

Perfect Contrition

Landau et al. (1975) sees contrition as a sincere sorrow for wrong doing. For Reese (1980) it is sorrow that one has sinned coupled with intention to abstain there from in the future. Perfect Contrition is a feeling of repentance for sin, with an intention to amend, arising from love of God and consideration of his goodness. Contrition is not unconnected with repentance. The later is from the Latin word “*poenitere*” (to regret, to be sorry). It involves abhorrence of one’s past life and a disposition for the new birth. Léon-Dufour (1988) notes that only repentance or perfect contrition prepares man to face the judgment of God (Acts 17,30). Baptism once and for all seals the act of conversion and is non-repetitive (Heb 6,6). But the baptized are capable of falling once again into sin. Faced with this reality, the Apostolic Community soon realized that repentance or contrition is necessary if one wishes to share in the salvation in spite of everything. Peter urged Simon the Magician to repent (Act 8,22). James urged the fervent Christians to lead back the stray sinners (James 5,19ff). Paul was happy that the Corinthians repented (2Cor 7,9) but still feared that some have not done so (2Cor 12,21). In 2Tim 2,25 he urges Timothy to correct the dissenters, hoping that God will grant them the grace to repent. Apoc 2,5.16.21ff have clear calls to repentance presupposing the fall of the churches from their first favour (cf. also Rev. 3,3.19). Without explicitly talking of the Sacrament of Penance, these texts underscore the importance of contrition or repentance in the life of a believer.

The Fathers of the Council of Trent according to McHugh (1982) define contrition as “A sorrow and detestation for sin committed, with a purpose of sinning no more ... If joined with a confidence in the mercy of God and an earnest desire of performing whatever is necessary to the proper reception of the Sacrament, it thus prepares us for the remission of sin” (Pp. 273-274). Contrition is therefore a detestation of sin. The efficacy does not just consist in ceasing to sin, or in resolving to begin, or having actually begun a new life; it supposes first of all a hatred of one’s ill-spent life and a desire of atoning for past transgressions.

Contrition means breaking of an object into small parts by means of stone or some harder substance. It is used metaphorically in theology to signify that our hearts, hardened by pride, are

beaten and broken by penance. Hence no other sorrow, not even that which is felt for the death of parents, or children, or for any other calamity, is called contrition. It is used explicitly to express the sorrow with which we are overwhelmed by the forfeiture of the grace of God and of our own innocence. Contrition is expected to be supreme, intense, and universal.

Basing her teaching on the call of Christ to conversion, The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) sees contrition as a movement of a 'contrite heart' drawn and moved by grace to respond to the merciful love of God who loved us first (Ps 51,17; John 6,44; 12,32; 1John 4,10). Contrition, the Catechism continues, does not aim at outward works but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion without which contrition remains sterile and false. This does not mean a rejection of externalization of contrition. No. It only emphasizes repentance as a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. It entails the desire to change and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of his grace. It is generally accompanied by a salutary pain and sadness which the Fathers called *animi cruciatus* (affliction of Spirit) and *compunctio cordis* (repentance of heart).

Perfect and Imperfect Contrition (metanoia and metamelomai)

Easter and Christmas seasons and even week days in some places are remarkably torturing for many priests in parishes. This is because hours are spent at the confessionals because of the number of supposed penitents. The faithful that trooped to churches with doors of mercy within the period of 8th Dec 2015 – 20 Nov 2016 also underscore the fact that contrition is not so much a concern as to the deepness of the feeling of compunction.

Metanoia translates the Hebrew words *šūb* or *niḥam* meaning to alter one's purpose out of pity; to repent; to change one's mind or intention. It denotes a movement away from a position previously adopted. In the OT it is seen in cultic and ritual acts. In 1Kgs 21,17-19 after Ahab went down and possessed Naboth's vineyard, God directed Elijah to him. He humbled himself putting on sack cloth. God relented but said that the ills will come on his son. In Jon 3,6, the people of Nineveh clothed themselves with ashes after Jonah preached. Metanoia is a change of heart and hatred for sin. Zacheus is a good example of one with metanoia in the NT. In Luke 19,1-10, he not only left his place of work to struggle to see Jesus, he confessed his sins and made amends instantly. Metanoia is repentance from the heart as the faculty of moral reflection. Metamelomai on the other hand is repentance that begins in the head and ends there. It is not deep rooted. The other is of the heart, the later is of the head. It regrets because of the consequences of one's acts. Judas' reaction after betraying Jesus is a good example. In Matt 27,1-3 he repented of what he did but instead of having a contrite heart, he went and hung himself. His action was totally of the head and not of the heart. He was under the pride of human reason ruptured by emotion. One who is truly repentant sees the love and mercies of God and so acknowledges his unworthiness before the all Holy God. He is troubled at heart. His reasoning convicts him and his heart fills him with regrets and need for reconciliation. Moved to pity in this way, he goes back to the origin of all love – God filled with contempt. He not only regrets, he now hates the sin. This is perfect contrition. This is metanoia. This is what we see in the prodigal son. It is what is expected of all penitents. An analysis of Luke 15,17-20 explains it more.

Exegetical analysis of Luke 15,17-20

The Greek text of Luke 15,17-20 reads: Eis heauton de elthōn efē. Posoi misthioi tou patros mou perisseuontai artōn, egō de limō hōde apollumai. ¹⁸ anastas poreusomai pros ton patera mou kai erō autō. Pater, hēmarton eis ton ouranon kai enōpion sou, ¹⁹ ouketi eimi axios klēthēnai huos sou. Poiēson me hōs hena tōn misthiōn sou, ²⁰ kai anastas ēlthen pros ton patera heautou. Eti de autou makran apekontos eiden auton ho patēr autou kai esplagknisthē kai dramōn epepesen epi ton trakēlon autou kai katefilēsen auton.

Textual Criticism

Nestle Aland (1998) notes some textual difficulties. In v. 17 some manuscripts X Q l 844. L 221 l al have pōs oi as alternative reading to posoi seen in the text. Also a D L W Q Ψ *f*³ 33 ū have perisseusousin for in perisseuontai in the text. The text under study is supported by $\hat{\iota}$ ⁷⁵ A B P *f*¹ 579. 1241 *pc*. Looking at the manuscripts that have alternative readings one sees that they are all recent manuscripts. On the other hand, the text being studied is supported by very ancient manuscripts including a papyrus. It is therefore very highly probable that the more recent manuscripts attempted a correction of the original. The researcher is therefore convinced that most probably, the text under study is closer to the original. In v. 20 a D K L N P Q Q *f*³ 579. 1241. 1424. 2542. l 844. l 2211 *pm* have autou as alternative reading to heautou in the text witnessed also in $\hat{\iota}$ ⁷⁵ A B W G D Ψ l. 655. 700. 892 *pm*. One sees an evident correction of the text in the alternative reading. Based on the principle of *lectio difficilior* and the ancient nature of the manuscripts containing the reading in our text, the researcher believes that our text is closer to the original.

Presentation of a Working Translation

The translation presented here is not dependent on any English translation. It is strictly an attempt to be as literal as possible rendering the Greek text in English.

“but coming into himself was saying: ‘how many hired labourers of my father are rich of breads, but I am here perishing of hunger? I shall arise to go back to my father and I will say to him, father, into heaven and before you I have sinned. I am not worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired labourers’. And rising, he came to his father. But still far away, his father received him and had compassion on him and running fell upon his neck and kissed him fervently”.

Delimitation of the Text

Luke 15,17-20 is part of a large pericope, Luke 15,11-32 dealing on the parable of the prodigal son. The entire Luke 15 is a long chapter with three parables told by Jesus in reaction to the negative attitude of the Pharisees against the so called sinners. Luke 15,3-7 is on the parable of the lost sheep. Luke 15,8-10 is on the lost coin. Luke 15,11-32 is on the lost son. The chapter dwells on the three losts. They appear to be on the same theme but obviously from two different perspectives. They are not even similar stories. The first two parables treat the Divine side of

grace; the seeking love of God. The third parable, the prodigal son gives the human side. It expresses man rising to repentance. Luke 15,17-20 is therefore delimited by its own story as differentiated from the story coming before it.

Studied in the context of the its own pericope – Luke 15,11-32 one could say that it is further delimited. This is because Luke 15,11-16 presents the unthoughtful action of the son and the eventual repercussion. Luke 15,17-20 concerns itself with his thoughtfulness when he came back to his senses. From v. 20 we see the positive response on the part of the father.

As with writings which are popular over a long period like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* which was written as a criticism of the evils of colonialism and culture conflict, one can miss the real point of the story. The parable of the Prodigal Son is a defense of Jesus' good news to the poor and a trap-like invitation to his opponents to repent. Thus, with Kealy (1979) the researcher believes that the popular title 'The Prodigal Son' distorts the point and message of the story. This is because, his prodigality is only a detail. In fact the opening verse makes it clear that the story is about two sons. Thus the parable is also variously titled 'The Loving Father', 'The Father's Love', 'The Waiting Father', 'The Two Sons', 'The Two Brothers'. It is vv. 17-20 that really brings out the crux of the message: the invitation to repentance. It is a call to true repentance and not just any type. It is a repentance that comes from the heart.

Exegesis

The verse begins with the preposition 'eis'. This preposition generally means 'into'. The author of the gospel of Luke probably adopted this preposition on purpose. The use of this preposition with the aorist participle *elthōn* demonstrates the seriousness of the message. The prodigal son has been wandering away in thought and deed. This time, he comes back to his senses. The aorist expresses the conclusive nature of the action. The thought was deep and from inside (*eis*). The decision was taken once and for all. He was not in doubt that something must have to be done. Years of waywardness, wasted times and months in debauchery and loose life, worldly frivolity and thoughtless unconcern have really brought him to a base level. The situation was precarious. The regrets show the urgency. All these pushed him into a melancholic introspection. He went into himself. It is not just a meditation done many days. He came back to himself just a day, hence the use of the aorist. The action was not repetitive. The preposition shows the rise and growth of repentance in the heart of the prodigal son (Plummer, 1896). Nolland (1993) sees *eis heauton de elthōn* as an idiom for coming to one's senses. It was coming to his senses that propelled him to action. He came to his senses once. He continued to remain in that feeling. He did not fluctuate. Oepke (1995) discerns a psychological use of *eis* here. In this sense, it denotes the intrusion of corruptive or salutary influences into the centre of personality. Demons go into a man (Matt 9,25; Luke 8,38). Satan puts evil into the heart of a man (John 3,2), or himself comes into him (Luke 22,3; John 13,27). The former is also true of the avenging God (Rev. 17,17). On the other hand, God sends his Spirit into the hearts of believers (1Thes 4,8; Gal 4,6). Oepke (1995) understands 'return to oneself' as denoting a restoration of normality. Thus the return of the Prodigal begins when he goes into himself (*eis heauton de elthōn*). It designates the centre of spiritual experience (Elliger, 1990). It was a permanent coming back to his senses. He returned to himself and never again thought of remaining in his evil. The use of the aorist participle *elthōn*

expresses this. He did not vacillate. The feeling of remorse was a permanent one. But he did not just stop with remorseful feeling. The imperfect *efē* shows that his conscience pricked him continuously. He said and continued to say to himself that the hired hands in his father's house are better off. It was this imperfect tense with present stem of continuity that really pushed him to very urgently get up and do something about his awful and hopeless condition of servitude.

The servility of the prodigal son is brought out in a picturesque with adjectival pronoun *misthioi* used in nominative masculine plural. He compared his servile status in a foreign land with the better condition of hired hands in his father's house. His sin was a carefree and spendthrift fashion of life (Eph 5,18; Tobith 1,6; 1Pet 4,4). As a result of famine and its corresponding inflation, he ended up in a disaster. He had to hire himself out to a Gentile pig-rearer. The Jews considered pigs impure and the source of a curse (Lev 11,17). A Jew hiring himself out to a gentile and worse to feed pigs shows that the son was in a regrettable disaster. He was so reduced to poverty and misery that he longed to eat swine fodder, the fruit of a carob tree (1Kgs 8,47) but no one gave him anything. Thus an opportunity to become a hired hand in his father's house would surely make his condition better. This is why in his regrets when he came back into himself, he used *apollumai* a middle verb indicating that his condition is not only awful but disastrous. He is perishing in the condition, meaning that unless he does something, that would lead to termination of his life.

The verb *apollumai* is richly attested in secular Greek in both transitive and intransitive, active. The basic negative meaning of the entire word group, frequently with a violent tendency, aims to express loss, destruction, and annihilation in a very general sense which can extend to the final destruction of the human being in a death.

In the LXX it translates the Hebrew *'ābaḏ* to emphasize that the existence of the individual as well as that of the people as a whole can stand in the balance and that the loss of life is accounted for by the culpable behavior of human beings (Deut 28,20; 30,18). It also has eschatological nuance expressing a final statement of ruin as in Prov 15,11; 27,20; Sir 44,9.

In the New Testament the verb occurs about 90x, the substantive 18x. The verb is predominant in Luke. Used transitively it has to do with a value of irretrievable good like life, human existence. In Mark 8,35 it is used in double sense to mean slipping away and thus a final loss in a negative sense and in a positive sense as the renunciation of every human security.

The verb occurs intransitively or in the middle to speak of the 'lost' in a real or figurative sense. Matt 10,6 and 15,24 talking of the lost sheep of the house of Israel come to mind here. In Luke 15 it appears 8x in both metaphorical and figurative sense. In Luke 19,10 it has a redemptive perspective. Luke 13,33 talking about the fate of the prophets has the sense of perishing or dying. It is in this nuance that it is also used in our text. Kretzer (1990) points out that the word can really express a destructive action in reference to persons or objects (Mark 3,6; 9,41; 12,9). Oepke (1995) teaches that it can mean "definitive destruction" or "hopeless destiny of death". One who has fallen victim to destruction is called in Semitic fashion "*ho huioi tēs apōleias*" like Judas in John 17,12. It is a favourite word in 2Peter to express damnation.

Thus, when the prodigal son uses this word in Luke 15,17 it communicates a serious meaning of total destruction. It shows the hopelessness of his situation and the urgent need for something to be done to avoid perishing definitively.

It is because of this feeling that he is in a wrong place that may even lead to his damnation that calls for his immediate action -*anastas*, an aorist participle (having arisen). Nolland (1993) observes that the verb is somewhat pleonastic but marks the beginning of the son's decisive change of direction. The verb seems to strike a parallel with the resolve of faithless Israel to return to her first husband in Hos 2,7.

It is true that the basis of the son's repentance is his own situation of desperate need, and a desire to improve his lot it is wrong to question his sincerity or to think that he would not have repented if not because of his deplorable situation. To do this is to miss the point of the parable. The son could have as well taken his life like the case of Judas in Matt 27,1-3. The focus of the parable is the repentance of the son and the readiness of his father to welcome him back. He could not have repented if he did not decide to do so. The father could not have welcomed him back if he had not repented and gone back to him. The fact that he took a radical decision quite contrary to what he used to be strikes the point. He was pricked at heart. His conscience did not give him a breathing space. He did not just go back. He did not sneak into his father's house. He did not go back to terrorize or accuse his father or elder brother. He accepted his fault fully. He went back a changed person with a decision to be better if given the opportunity. It is this change of attitude that moved the father to pity. This is what the researcher regards as perfect contrition.

Perfect Contrition and God's Mercifulness

Prov 28,13 teaches that whoever conceals his sins will never prosper but the one who confesses them shall be forgiven. Compunction of heart and a total u-turn from the former evil way is a sure sign of repentance. In 2Sam 12,13 David was so touched after Nathan spoke to him. He repented and was forgiven. In Luke 19,1-10 Jesus forgave Zacheus after he has repented and promised restitution. In all cases, it is always repentance first before forgiveness. This is why the church teaches that a sinner already is forgiven with perfect contrition though he must still have sacramental confession whenever the opportunity comes. Without perfect contrition, there is no true repentance. There cannot be divine forgiveness without perfect contrition. This is because the later entails a firm resolve never to go back to former way. To feign divine forgiveness without perfect contrition is to make a joke of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It makes it look mechanical and unserious. It simply contradicts God's attribute as a just God. It is just like someone slapping you and telling you sorry only to slap you again and again.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The Church as a caring and loving Mother and custodian of souls is ever concerned about the spiritual needs of her children, the Christian faithful. As the mystical body of Christ (Col 1,18) she is always in perfect communion with her invisible head. She holds the key to life and death (Matt 16,18-20). In her continued work of evangelization and care for souls she exercises her salvific function through the sacraments instituted by Christ, her Founder and Lord. Like the

prophets of old, she continues to call on her children to return to God. The call is even more urgent now with the lots of confusion in our world. The opening of the Door of Mercy is one of her many prophetic ways of getting her children back to God. Taking bearing from the Luke 15,17-20 the researcher makes case for the Church's benevolent act. The prodigal son took a decision that was decisive and determinate. He left his familiar landmark to seek for a pathway through trackless ocean. He came back to his senses and decided to leave the location of sin to go back to the light, his father. He did his part. He repented. He went back to his father as a true sign of repentance. It is in this backdrop that this paper submits that in as much as the Holy Father's opening of the Door of Mercy is a welcome and timely development, the faithful needs a proper catechesis to fulfil the conditions necessary to merit God's forgiveness. Passing through the Door of Mercy needs to be preceded by a perfect contrition and firm resolve to do better.

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