

FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES: THE POWER OF PENANCE

BY TANIA M. GEIST

Failure can at times make the pursuit of virtue feel like “one step forward, two steps back.” Sin gets in the way, and discouragement with it. In grappling with our shortcomings, it might seem we have two options: either to blindly and idealistically forge ahead, or to deem the whole thing futile and scrap the mission.

If we zoom out a bit, however, the picture starts to become more heartening. Yes, we are human and imperfect: but it is precisely the acknowledgement of our flawed nature that can be a springboard of hope in our journey towards God in this life and, ultimately, the next. For, as St. Thomas Aquinas explores in the *Summa Theologiae*, repentance is itself a virtue, and a uniquely powerful one. Through his reflections, we can expand our notion of penance’s¹ pivotal role in the pursuit of good—both in bringing us closer to Christ and in restoring what progress in virtue we may have already made before stumbling.





As a sign of repentance,
pilgrims ascend the Sancta
Scala in Rome on their knees.

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How, then, can repentance be a virtue? Surely, it rends the heart to admit wrongdoing, to build up the courage to become vulnerable by confessing fault. But it is not for sheer difficulty alone that it is virtuous to repent; the strength of character involved is complex. In a Catholic context, penance can be understood as sacrament, passion (or emotion), and virtue all. For true repentance involves not only an emotional response of sorrow for sin but also intellectual grief and the intention to turn away from that sin (which we can then bring into the confessional). Aquinas looks at penance in each of these capacities in the *Summa*, and clarifies that its place as a virtue specifically is due to its rational nature—since “it includes a right choice on the part of the will.”²

Taking it one step further, Aquinas calls penance a “special virtue” because of its potential to erase the effects of our mistakes: “Every special virtue removes formally the habit of the opposite vice, just as whiteness removes blackness from the same subject: but penance removes every sin effectively, inasmuch as it works for the destruction of sins,”³ which happens through an interplay of God’s pardoning grace and our own cooperation. Repentance is “special” because it entails a stride forward in goodness and in nearness to God *and* it bats away the ruinous habits that had been nipping at our heels and holding us back. The combination of sincere remorse and God’s mercy is enough to erase the stain of sin from our lives, so that, after repentance, we are not merely returned to a flat homeostasis but rather are left better equipped to face future trials.

Moreover, through repentance, the power and efficacy of the good deeds we have already done—but have allowed to peter out—can come back to life. Through sin, those good works are “deadened,” but in penance they are revived, thus entering back into God’s acceptance.⁴ At the crux of his argument regarding the deadening of good works,⁵ Aquinas points to Ezekiel 18

for a biblical treatment of death and life in relation to sin and penance: “If a righteous person turns away from his righteousness. . . none of the righteous deeds that he did shall be remembered” (v. 24, NJPS). This image of shaping what God remembers of our lives points to the long-term relationship with him that faith and virtue entail, and gives us hope for healing that bond: “And if a wicked person turns back from the wickedness that he practiced and does what is just and right, such a person shall save his life” (Ez 18:27). Understood as the restoration of a long-term relationship with God, repentance is the repossession of former deeds, and thus the restoration of the continuity of one’s very person. That is, penance makes virtue possible, by making consistency and continuity possible.

In Aquinas’ approach,⁶ there emerges a kind of “thingness” of good works, which exist tangibly within the bigger picture of our spiritual lives and possess a certain potency. In other words, when we do good, those deeds are still real even after we do wrong—they continue to abide in God’s eyes, but sin makes them lose their salvific potential. Repentance “revivifies” or reactivates, if you will, that potential. Returning to Ezekiel 18, we find a concluding call to repentance: “Repent and turn back from your transgressions; let them not be a stumbling block of guilt for you. Cast away all the transgressions by which you have offended, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit, that you may not die . . . For it is not My desire that anyone shall die—declares the LORD God. Repent, therefore, and live!” (vv. 30–32). Here, the language of renewal—i.e. “a new heart”—is reflected in Aquinas’ own language of revivification of charity, and we also encounter in Ezekiel God’s willingness to consider what good we have managed to do as truly substantial and enduring.

Ezekiel reminds us that the stakes at hand are high, to say the least, for our good works and virtue in this life will have a great impact on how we fare in the next

(see also, e.g., Jn 5:28–29; Rom 2:5–8). (What a great relief, then, that repentance is such a key player! It's not without good reason that reconciliation figures prominently in the Church's Last Rites). And in a more immediate, everyday context, thinking more deeply about how our relationship with God works in difficult times can only leave us better equipped to be in relationship with others. This connection between our vertical and horizontal relationships is a constituent part of the prayer the Lord himself taught us—to “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us”; it must then be a dynamic of our spiritual lives worth grasping more fully.

In closing, the power of penance reaches into both past and future. Thinking about the role of repentance also makes us realize the importance of continuity and the building of a character over a lifetime. A Catholic discussion of virtue would be remiss without some kind of reflection on the role of penance, especially considering the gift of sacramental Reconciliation to which we can always turn. Perhaps especially in our culture of perfectionism today, it is imperative to understand that God does not expect us to “win” at virtue like at a game of spiritually athletic heroism. We will trip, we will fall flat on our faces, over and over again; but when we do, the Cross both brings compassionate mercy and assures us of God's victory over sin. When we repent, that real remorse is enough to win God's forgiveness and grace, as undeserving as we may feel of those gifts. And it isn't a superficial, merely formal forgiveness (the kind we may ourselves extend): instead, the conversion we experience through penance enters deeply into the narratives that we have been writing with our life choices and changes their direction and tone, giving us tangible hope in eternal union with our Father. Indeed, Benedict XVI writes:

To repent [or convert] is to change direction in the journey of life: not, however, by means of a small

adjustment, but with a true and proper about turn. . . . We aim for the high standard of Christian living, we entrust ourselves to the living and personal Gospel which is Jesus Christ. He is our final goal and the profound meaning of conversion, he is the path on which all are called to walk through life, letting themselves be illumined by his light and sustained by his power which moves our steps. In this way conversion expresses his most splendid and fascinating Face: it is not a mere moral decision that rectifies our conduct in life, but rather a choice of faith that wholly involves us in close communion with the real and living Person of Jesus.⁷



NOTES

1 For the purposes of this piece, I will be using “penance” and “repentance” interchangeably, given that Aquinas' use of “poenitentia” in the primary text has been widely translated into English as one or the other.

2 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [hereafter ST] III, 85, 1.

3 ST III, 85, 2, obj. 3.

4 cf. ST III, 89, 5.

5 ST III, 89, 4, sed contra.

6 See especially ST III, 89, 5.

7 Benedict XVI, General Audience, Ash Wednesday (17 February 2010).



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