

Please distinguish between temptation and sin. We sometimes think, "If I loved Jesus, I would never think thoughts like this," and therefore we *feel guilty* about being tempted, even though we never *consent* to the temptation.

Sin, like love, is in the will, not in feelings. I am not a good person because I have good feelings; I am not a bad person because I have bad feelings. Sometimes good people feel very bad; sometimes bad people feel very good.

Jesus absolves you from all of your sins. His absolution is not limited by my imperfect judgment or my limited virtues. It is He who says, "I absolve you from your sins." This fact applies not only to tonight's confession, but to all the times that you have confessed your sins in the past. *All* of your sins are forgiven. They are *all* washed away by the Lamb of God, Who shed His life's blood for us.

It often happens that the *feeling* of guilt remains--or comes back like a ghost to haunt us--even after we have confessed our sins and done penance. Here, too, the enemy persuades us with a false argument: "If you had any faith, even as small as a mustard seed, you would not feel like this; therefore, your feelings of guilt mean that you are not a faithful Christian."

Feeling guilty about forgiven sins is a sign of our fallen condition, in which we do not have perfect mastery over our emotions or our thoughts. Whenever you feel guilty about old sins, seize the opportunity to make an act of faith, hope, and love in the perfect mercy of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Remind ("re-mind") yourself of the reality of Jesus' death and resurrection. Soak yourself in His merciful love. Make an act of spiritual communion, however brief, and remember how much Jesus enjoys forgiving sinners--how much He enjoys giving His love to those who do not deserve His love. It is a consolation when we feel forgiven and desolation when we don't--but our feelings are often wrong.

Perfectionism breeds depression. God is perfect love, and He intends to make us perfect in love. We are all destined to be saints. We need to uphold the ideal of sanctity without letting the enemy use it against us. God loves imperfect people perfectly. God loves us as we are *right now*. We cannot increase His love for us by anything we do. We are not required to become perfect by our own unaided willpower, as if God would only love us when we no longer need His mercy. Jesus died for *sinners*. If we realize that we have fallen short of the glory of God, that means we are 100% qualified to receive God's forgiveness and healing. Jesus said, "I have come for sinners, not for saints; I have come for the sick, not for the healthy." We should not imagine our imperfections as insurmountable barriers to God's love, but growth opportunities.

Please do not suppose that I am condemning you for being perfectionistic. Perfectionism is a torment, a burden, a tendency, a temptation, or a personality trait, not a sin. We can't shame ourselves into loving God. We can't convert ourselves by beating ourselves up. When we realize that we've fallen into the trap of perfectionism, we should simply imitate St. Peter when he was beginning to sink, and cry out, "Lord, save me!" We need to focus on Jesus, not ourselves.

Confess your sins, not those of your husband, children, parents, family members, friends, or others. It is true that we are surrounded by people who sin. I am not denying that. But the healing focus in Confession is on our own wrongdoing, shortcomings, defects of character, and sins. There is a time and place to deal with those who trespass against us, but this is not that time or place. Say, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do," and leave them in God's hands.

Please think about a penance that you would like to do to atone for your sins. What is your favorite way to pray? What spiritual activity have you found most consoling? What penance in the past has helped you the most to feel close to God and capable of loving others?

Make Mary's style of prayer your own. Learn from her example. See how much God loves *you* personally. You may say of yourself what she said of herself:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God, *my* savior.
For He has looked upon His handmaid's lowliness;
behold, from now on will all ages call *me* blessed.
The Almighty has done great things *for me*,
and holy is His name.

None of us have Mary's graces. We have our own. No one else can take your place in God's heart. He made you to love Him with a unique and personal love. Everything that God did in the whole history of salvation, from the time of Adam and Eve down to the present, He did *for you*. You are the most beautiful "you" in the world. He calls you by a name known only to Himself, and He dwells within you as your Creator and Redeemer every moment of every day. He acts as if you were His only daughter, sister, and spouse, because *you are the only one of you in the whole world*.

We don't have the power to love each other with this kind of love. We are finite. When we gaze with love on one person, we do so to the exclusion of all others. We are like God, but God is *not* like us. God is outside of time. He is all-knowing and all-powerful. He can give us His full and undivided attention, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year. He does not grow tired, even when we need to rest. He never becomes impatient or irritable. We cannot exhaust His love.

With cake and ice cream, the portion we take deprives someone else of a portion. God is infinite. He can lavish us with "infinitely more than we can ask or imagine," and still have infinitely more to share with all of His other children.

Acts of faith, hope, and love can take the form of affirmations.

We can use such short statements or prayers to help act against moods and inclinations that tempt us to choose unbelief, despair, and self.

I developed some affirmations for myself years ago. I've rewritten them here for women. I suggest these as a starting point; add, subtract, edit to your heart's content. The goal is to develop an unassailable standpoint stocked with truths that do not change with our feelings, moods, or circumstances. When we are surrounded with difficulties, we can take refuge in these truths.

I am a woman of God.

I am a woman of faith.

I am full of grace.

I am a masterpiece of grace.

I am God's handiwork.

I am a child of God.

I am a daughter of the Father.

I am a sister of Jesus.

I am a spouse of the Holy Spirit.

I am beautiful because I am loved.

I am beautiful as I am because I am loved as I am.

I am beautiful now because I am loved now.

God loves me totally.

God loves me now.

Virtues

Virtue is always a "mean between extremes." In pursuing the life of virtue, we can become unbalanced by excess or by deficiency of the good we wish to do. (*This is different from the commandments, which specify evils to be avoided entirely: murder, adultery, stealing, and lying.*) Virtues are gained and strengthened by practice. No one else can choose virtuous behavior for us.

Flip Side	Positive Values	Seven Deadly Sins
Depression, Despair, Suicide	<i>Self-esteem, faith, hope</i>	Pride
Dissolution	<i>Productivity, generosity</i>	Greed
Apathy, Frigidity, Impotence	<i>Intimacy, love</i>	Lust
Victim Mentality, Passive Aggression	<i>Self-defense, Assertiveness</i>	Anger (i.e., rage)
Anorexia	<i>Survival, conviviality</i>	Gluttony
Antipathy, Isolation	<i>Admiration, reverence</i>	Envy
Obsessive-compulsion	<i>Rest</i>	Sloth

Too Little:	Four Cardinal Virtues	Too Much:
Imprudence	Prudence (practical wisdom)	Over-caution
Unscrupulous behavior	Justice (equal rights, due process)	Scrupulosity
Self-indulgence	Temperance (moderation)	Puritanism/Jansenism
Cowardice	Fortitude (courage)	Presumption, arrogance, rage
Too Little:	Supernatural Virtues	Too Much:
Pelagianism, skepticism	Faith	Fideism
Despair	Hope	Presumption
Apathy, narcissism, hatred	Love	Smothering, co-dependency ...

Priesthood of the faithful: offering ourselves to the Father in union with our High Priest

"O my Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer you all of my prayers, works, joys, and sufferings of this day for all of the intentions of Your Sacred Heart: for the salvation of souls, for the reparation of sin, for the reunion of all Christians, for the release of souls from Purgatory, and for the Pope and for his intentions."

Serenity Prayer (Reinhold Niebuhr)

God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference,

Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace;

Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it;

Trusting that He will make all things right
If I surrender to His will;

That I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with Him forever in the next.

Feelings are meant to be felt: RRA/A

Recognize the feeling.
Reflect on what it is saying.
Accept the feeling.
Act with or against the feeling (Latin, *agere contra*).

Identify dead end streets--then avoid them!

Doing the same old thing, hoping for a different result, is a form of insanity.

1. What is *my part* in it?
2. What am *I* willing to do differently?

God is God; I am not God

- "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10).
- **Three Cs of ACOA:** "I did not cause him, I cannot cure him, I cannot control him."
- Clinging to sick people is sick. Let go and let God. There are many times when being helpful isn't helpful. Some men see unsolicited advice as criticism. Nagging rarely produces the desired effect.

Forgiveness Prayer (Fr. Robert Degrandis)

- Forgive God. God, of course, can't sin--but we may need to acknowledge and let go of our resentments about His action or inaction in our lives.
- Forgive yourself. God does.
- Forgive those close to you. Jesus commands us to forgive others as He has forgiven us.
- Forgive public enemies. We are allowed to judge that others' actions are objectively evil; we are not allowed to conclude that they are out of the reach of God's mercy.

Good guilt / bad guilt

The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin so that we can repent of it and be healed. True contrition for our sins deepens our awareness of the mercy and love of God, and fills us with confidence that we are moving in the right direction. The enemy draws our attention to our sins, inadequacies, character defects, and shortcomings in order to flood our hearts with feelings of hopelessness and despair, seducing us to focus on ourselves instead of on Jesus, our love and our life.

Assertiveness vs. Aggression

- "Be angry, but sin not" (Eph 4:26). God gives us feelings of anger to motivate us to act decisively against intruders.
- Cold anger is anger; passive aggression is aggression.
- When we assert our rights, we must grant the same rights to others--otherwise, they are not rights but wrongs.
- If you find that you have reached the last straw, it means that you have been "gunnysacking," i.e., collecting one small irritation after another into one monstrous stack. It is better to deal with one straw at a time.
- All of our feelings are related to images. Anger is based on a perception that evil is being done to us or to those whom we love. Sometimes this is true, and we need to act against the aggressor; sometimes our perception is based on unrealistic expectations, and we need to change our point of view; sometimes we need to create better boundaries between us and those who hurt us; sometimes we can only identify the aggressor as an enemy whom God wants us to forgive and for whom God wants us to intercede.

Notes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: comments and emphasis added in italics.

The Morality of the Passions

- 1762 The human person is ordered to beatitude by his deliberate acts: the passions or feelings he experiences can dispose him to it and contribute to it. [*Sin, like love, is a decision. It is an act of the will, not a passion.*]

I. Passions

- 1763 The term "passions" belongs to the Christian patrimony. Feelings or passions are emotions or movements of the sensitive appetite that *incline us to act or not to act* in regard to something felt or *imagined* to be good or evil.
- 1764 The passions are natural components of the human psyche; they form the passageway and ensure the connection between the life of the senses and the life of the mind. Our Lord called man's heart the source from which the passions spring.
- 1765 There are many passions. The most fundamental passion is love, aroused by the attraction of the good. Love causes a desire for the absent good and the hope of obtaining it; this movement finds completion in the *pleasure and joy of the good possessed*. The apprehension of evil causes *hatred, aversion, and fear* of the impending evil; this movement ends in *sadness* at some present evil, or in the *anger* that resists it.
- 1766 "*To love is to will the good of another.*" All other affections have their source in this first movement of the human heart toward the good. Only the good can be loved. Passions "are evil if love is evil and good if it is good."

II. Passions and Moral Life

- 1767 In themselves passions are neither good nor evil. They are morally qualified only to the extent that they effectively engage reason and will. Passions are said to be voluntary, "either because they are commanded by the will or because the will does not place obstacles in their way." *It belongs to the perfection of the moral or human good that the passions be governed by reason. [This principle means that we don't let feelings lead us astray. We evaluate what our heart is telling us, then decide whether to act with that feeling or against it. This does NOT mean that we can choose to feel good when we want to feel good or that our bad feelings are our fault.]*
- 1768 *Strong feelings are not decisive for the morality or the holiness of persons*; they are simply the inexhaustible reservoir of *images and affections* in which the moral life is expressed. Passions are morally good when they contribute to a good action, evil in the opposite case. The upright will orders the movements of the senses it appropriates to the good and to beatitude; an evil will succumbs to disordered passions and exacerbates them. Emotions and feelings can be *taken up into the virtues or perverted by the vices*.
- 1769 In the Christian life, the Holy Spirit himself accomplishes his work by mobilizing the whole being, with all its sorrows, fears and sadness, as is visible in the Lord's agony and passion. In Christ human feelings are able to reach their consummation in charity and divine beatitude.
- 1770 Moral perfection consists in man's being moved to the good not by his will alone, but also by his sensitive appetite, as in the words of the psalm: "My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God."

In Brief

- 1771 The term "passions" refers to the affections or the feelings. By his emotions man *intuits the good and suspects evil*.
- 1772 The principal passions are love and hatred, desire and fear, joy, sadness, and anger.
- 1773 In the passions, as movements of the sensitive appetite, *there is neither moral good nor evil*. But insofar as they engage reason and will, there is moral good or evil in them. [*We are responsible for what we choose, not for what we feel.*]
- 1774 Emotions and feelings can be *taken up in the virtues or perverted by the vices*.
- 1775 The perfection of the moral good consists in man's being moved to the good not only by his will but also by his "heart."

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God loves us because He is perfect. He does not wait to love us until we become perfect. We grow in His love by accepting His love for us just as we are now. We become virtuous by practicing virtue. Just as we learned how to walk by walking poorly, and how to speak by speaking poorly, we learn how to love by loving poorly. God is tender-hearted, and He rejoices in every step we take in the right direction. In thinking about the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, it is not all-or-nothing; it is a matter of more-or-less. As they say in AA, "we claim progress, not perfection."

- 1831 The seven **gifts of the Holy Spirit** are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. They belong in their fullness to Christ, Son of David. They complete and perfect the virtues of those who receive them. They make the faithful docile in readily obeying divine inspirations.
- 1832 "The **fruits of the Spirit** are perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory. The tradition of the Church lists twelve of them: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity' (Gal 5:22-23).

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True humility consists in seeing the greatness of God: "What wonders He has done *for me*." Counterfeit humility is self-centered. It is a merciless self-hatred that blocks us from seeing how much God loves us as we are, here and now. Real humility appreciates and praises God's glory. False humility cuts us off from the light of Christ.