

VI CLAVIUM EX ATTRITO FIT CONTRITUS

In St. Thomas' theology of the sacrament of penance, the ultimate disposition of a penitent for the infusion of sanctifying grace is contrition perfected by charity. On this point modern penitential theology has in the main parted company with the Angelic Doctor. It rather holds as sufficient for justification in the sacrament a repentance that is not perfected or motivated by charity, whether before or after the absolution.¹ St. Thomas, however, does not require that a penitent should have contrition (as opposed to attrition) before he actually receives absolution, though he held, together with the common view of his time, that such is the normal case. It may happen, he taught, that a penitent comes to confession who is not contrite yet, but only attrite. In such a case, he explains, if the penitent places no obstacle in the way, he obtains the grace of contrition in the very reception of the sacrament.² In other words, as the common Scholastic adage formulates it, *vi clavium ex attrito fit contritus*. According to St. Thomas, this means that the repentance which, before the infusion of sanctifying grace by means of the absolution, was only attrition because it was not perfected by charity, now at the moment of justification makes room for a repentance that is an act of the infused virtue of penance formed or perfected by charity. This is moreover implied in his concept of repentance and contrition: in a man who is in a state of grace every repentance is contrition.³

A QUESTION

Does this change-over from attrition to contrition take place as it were automatically? Or does it require on the part of the penitent a new and conscious act? This is the question which apparently we left unanswered in an earlier treatment of St. Thomas' doctrine on attrition and contrition.⁴ It may require further elucidation. The present note intends as far as possible to fill this gap.

The change-over from attrition to contrition does not per se appear in a penitent's consciousness; it takes place on the ontological level of his spiritual and supernatural reality, which is not directly the object of our awareness.⁵ To this point exponents of St. Thomas' doctrine agree. But this is precisely

¹ Cf. "Two Concepts of Attrition and Contrition," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 11 (1950) 3-33, especially 17, 18, 21. A review of this was given by H. Dondaine, O.P., in a "Bulletin critique" on the theology of penance, *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 36 (1952) 669-74.

² "Quandoque contingit . . . quod aliqui non perfecte contriti, virtute clavium gratiam contritionis consequantur" (*Quodlib.* 4, a. 10.) Other texts of St Thomas with commentary in M. Flick, S.J., *L'attimo della giustificazione secondo S. Tomaso* (Rome, 1947) pp. 177-81.

³ "Omnis dolor de peccato in habente gratiam est contritio" (*Verit.*, q. 28, a. 8).

⁴ Cf. "Two Concepts," p. 18.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

what creates the difficulty. According to St. Thomas, infusion of sanctifying grace in an adult penitent (the question of the justification of an infant does not come into consideration when we treat of penance) requires a free act on his part. No justification happens without an act of the penitent sinner's free will by which he moves towards God (by faith) and against sin (by repentance).⁶ Justification is not completed without the penitent making use of his free will.⁷ Can this free act of his remain unnoticed? Its necessity for justification would apparently mean that, when a penitent who was attrite before and becomes contrite at the moment of the absolution thanks to the grace and charity which he then receives, a change takes place in him which should reveal itself somehow. To a free act of his which was only attrition succeeds another act, contrition this time. This new act is specifically different from the previous act of repentance, since, according to St. Thomas, every act of an infused virtue differs specifically from a similar act of the corresponding acquired virtue.⁸ Attrition, which a penitent elicits with the help of actual grace only, is an act of the acquired virtue of penance, supernaturalized by actual grace. Contrition, on the other hand, is an act of the infused virtue of penance. Two specifically different acts follow one on another in a temporal succession. Can such a change pass unnoticed and fail to reveal itself to a penitent's consciousness?⁹ And should we then not rather say that per se the change-over from attrition to contrition at the moment and by virtue of the absolution and the infusion of sanctifying grace will reveal itself in the consciousness? And yet, even if it did, it may be granted at once that this awareness would not do away with the essential uncertainty of our state of grace or of charity, because of the absence of a sure psychological criterion of charity.

The way out of the difficulty does not lie in "making any concession to the Scotist idea of information without animation,"¹⁰ in denying that the infu-

⁶ *Sum. theol.* 1, 2, q. 113, a. 6.

⁷ "In adultis iustificatio non completur nisi usu liberi arbitrii" (*Verit.*, q. 28, a. 3).

⁸ *Sum. theol.* 1, 2, q. 63, a. 4.

⁹ Cf. H. Dondaine, "L'avènement de la charité dans un coeur adulte ne peut donc pas être sans retentissement dans son acte: on ne change pas de fin sans acte personnel" (*art. cit.*, p. 672). The first part of this statement is perfectly correct; the objection mentioned in our text, if anything, enhances the necessary resonance of charity in a penitent's act of sorrow: his new act of repentance is not only an effect but also, under a different aspect, a condition for the entrance of charity in his soul. The second part, however, does not seem directly to apply to the case of the change-over from attrition to contrition. For is this change for the penitent a change of goal? Do attrition and contrition not rather differ, from the point of view of the end they are after, as ineffective and effective desire of the same (supernatural) end? Attrition is not a natural act, but sustained by actual grace.

¹⁰ Cf. Fr. Dondaine's criticism of our former treatment of this question, *art. cit.*, p. 672. We may possibly have failed to stress or bring out the connection between the ontological

sion of charity in a penitent's soul changes his repentance essentially and specifically. St. Thomas' teaching on the point is too explicit: every repentance in one who is in a state of grace is contrition perfected by charity, while in one who is not in a state of grace repentance cannot be but attrition, not perfected by charity. But contrition, being an act of the infused virtue of penance (and this virtue is not present in a soul that is not in a state of grace), is specifically different from attrition. And so we must not only say that the repentance of a penitent who *vi clavium ex attrito fit contritus* is intrinsically affected and changed by the charity that enters his soul; we must say that on one act which did not spring from an infused virtue follows another, ontologically and specifically different from the former. It would therefore be less accurate to say that his attrition becomes contrition; the ancient adage rightly says, *ex attrito fit contritus*. One act is not changed into another, but the penitent who at first was attrite now becomes contrite. But both of these acts of his are free and human acts. They should, of their nature, be conscious. Could, then, the change-over we are considering pass unnoticed at all?

Let it be said again that, supposing even there were per se some psychological awareness of the change-over, this would not go against any doctrinal requirement. On St. Thomas' own teaching, the eventual awareness could not amount to a certainty, because in the present case the act of love of God which a penitent would perceive in himself when he becomes contrite after justification, and which would be the eventual psychological manifestation of the entrance of charity in his soul, is not, to the extent that it is perceptible, a sufficient sign of charity, on account of the similarity which exists between natural and supernatural love of God (in their psychological appearance).¹¹ Nor would the eventual psychological change entail that the motivation of a penitent's repentance has been modified and perfected by the mere fact of his receiving absolution; that his motives for being sorry for his sins are no longer imperfect and interested but have become perfect and disinterested. Such a change is rightly denied by modern theologians when they oppose their own axiom, *vi clavium ex attrito non fit contritus*,¹² to the ancient theology. The psychological change, if change there is, would not affect the motives of repentance. In St. Thomas' view, the motives are not

and psychological levels of repentance: justification plays, in different ways, on both of them. Thus we may have given occasion to conceive the two either as cut off from each other or merely parallel—"coupure," "simple parallélisme." If so, we wish here to make good this neglect.

¹¹ *Verit.*, q. 10, a. 10, ad 1.

¹² Cf. "Two Concepts," p. 3 f.

the determining and discriminating factor of a repentance; the difference between attrition and contrition lies elsewhere, namely, in the objective information by charity or its absence. But the ontological animation of an act of repentance by charity can coexist with a motivation which is the same, as far as its psychological expression goes, as the motivation of a repentance still unformed by charity. St. Thomas' proof for this is implied in his teaching that the *signa contritionis* can already exist in a penitent who is not yet contrite.¹³

AN ANSWER

The reason, then, for saying that the change-over from attrition to contrition is per se not a change in the psychological awareness of one's repentance is hinted at in the text just referred to. In St. Thomas' position, for a penitent to be justified by virtue of the absolution, it is necessary that he should have, before absolution, such repentance as, considered psychologically, is sufficient to be the conscious expression of contrition.¹⁴ That is what is involved in the *signa contritionis* which he requires for confession. Why is it that St. Thomas demands these signs of contrition in a penitent before allowing a priest to absolve him? Would it be for any other reason except that experience shows—and modern theologians never tire repeating—that a penitent does not per se notice a change in his consciousness when he is absolved and receives sanctifying grace? If before confession and absolution he sees in his soul the signs of contrition, namely, sorrow for his past sins and resolve not to sin again, he can be justified by the absolution and, as far as his psychological awareness is concerned, not notice any change in himself. It would only be in a case when the signs of contrition are still absent that a psychological change would first have to take place in a penitent before the priest is allowed to absolve him (since he cannot absolve one who is not repentant). But this change would be previous to the absolution, and not be affected by it. If, however, a penitent shows signs of contrition, even though actually he be not contrite but only attrite, his psychological awareness is such that no change needs to take place in it when he becomes contrite; the signs or the manifestation of contrition are there already. The change-over, therefore, per se passes unnoticed.

This does not mean, however, that there is mere parallelism and no continuity or connection between the psychological and ontological levels in the case of repentance and justification—as for the spiritual or supernatural life in general. The very phrase of St. Thomas, *signa contritionis*, hints at a

¹³ *De forma absolutionis*, c. 2, 7^o.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, and c. 3, 8^o; cf. *Sum theol.* 3, q. 80, a. 4, ad 5; *Quodlib.* 4, a. 10.

connection. The *signa* refer to the psychological awareness, while contrition, in St. Thomas' idea, signifies the objective presence of charity which perfects repentance. Contrition, therefore—St. Thomas takes for granted—naturally inclines to show signs of its presence. At the same time, however, his teaching shows that he conceives the possibility of a discrepancy and a break of continuity between the two. The signs of contrition should per se be what they are; they should reveal the presence of contrition; but it may happen—at times (*quandoque*), according to St. Thomas—that they do not do so. In such a case—and today theologians incline to think that it is not rare—there is a break of continuity between the psychological manifestation of contrition and its ontological reality: the first exists without the second.

St. Thomas does not explain the reason for this possible discrepancy. His standpoint in studying repentance and justification is primarily ontological, and only in the second place psychological. He accordingly does not stop to analyze the psychological manifestations in a man's consciousness of what happens on the ontological level. We may, however, point to his teaching on the possible presence of a fear motive even in a penitent who is contrite. We need not repeat here in detail which sort of fear it is that, according to St. Thomas, can coexist with charity as principle of contrition, and which kind of fear cannot do so.¹⁵ Suffice it to recall that the servile fear which today we call *simpliciter servilis* can exist both with and without charity, that is, enter the motivation either of contrition or of attrition.¹⁶ In the case of this fear, then, the psychological motivation of repentance fails to reveal its ontological perfection or imperfection. Psychology and ontology are then not in perfect continuity with each other.

The deeper reason for this discrepancy between the psychology and ontology is, according to St. Thomas' teaching on justification and repentance, that the infusion of grace as such does not lie within the range of our consciousness. Because of the very nature of grace, God's action in the soul is both immanent and transcendent. It is in us but beyond our awareness. It is a purely spiritual and supernatural event. But our normal human awareness is never without dependence on some sensitive image or substratum. We have no intuition of the spirituality of our souls, let alone of the action of the Spirit whose expression in the soul is the reality of grace. Of its very nature, therefore, the infusion of grace escapes our awareness; it is neither conscious nor even in the subconscious or unconscious; it is of another dimension than what can normally be object of our consciousness. If, then, the difference between attrition and contrition, in St. Thomas' mind, lies in their being formed or not formed by charity, and the infusion of charity and grace of its

¹⁵ Cf. "Two Concepts," p. 16.

¹⁶ Cf. *Sum theol.* 2, 2, q. 19, a. 6.

nature lies outside the field of our psychology, it follows of necessity that, the latter event which determines the change-over from attrition to contrition being unnoticed, and necessarily so, the change-over itself will not be conscious.

A DIFFICULTY

Yet for all this apparently sound reasoning—in St. Thomas' doctrine there would seem to be no possible escape from this conclusion—it is hard not to remain somewhat baffled and intrigued. How is it possible that contrition which is an *actus humanus*, a free act without which man cannot be justified (he must accept grace to receive it), and which apparently cannot be free unless a man knows what it is about, thus remains hidden from his consciousness? Is it not of necessity a conscious act, and conscious precisely in so far as it is different from the act of attrition that precedes? The change-over from attrition to contrition has been called by an author whose authority in the matter is beyond question, "a psychological renewal"; "it is a psychological fact, because every human act is so."¹⁷ How can this psychological renewal escape one's awareness?

In the context of St. Thomas' doctrine, we may answer that a penitent sinner whose repentance is sincere will no doubt experience a psychological renewal—normally, at any rate. His renouncement of sin and return to God is his own doing, sustained evidently and helped by God's grace. But since it lies in the nature of the thing that he cannot know for certain when his repentance becomes contrition (when, namely, grace and charity are infused), he is not able to say whether this happens before absolution or only at the moment that he is absolved. The penitent, therefore, cannot know either when the psychological renewal entailed in his reconciliation with God is complete. In his psychology there is a continuity between his beginning and still incomplete repentance which gradually grows more perfect, and the same repentance when it reaches completion, that is, when it is an actual effective renouncement of sin prompted by the love of God. Even this love of God begins by being imperfect and grows then to higher perfection, a gradual growth which follows man's natural psychology. In St. Thomas' mind, as in that of his contemporaries, attrition is only a stage—which indeed may take a long time—in the process by which a sinner's repentance grows into contrition; it is *accessus ad contritionem*.¹⁸ When actually his repentance has become contrition, the penitent will no doubt be aware of the change from his non-repentant state to his present state of repentance;

¹⁷ Cf. P. De Vooght, "A propos de la causalité du sacrement de pénitence," *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* 7 (1930) 668 f.; cf. "Two Concepts," p. 26 f., n. 91.

¹⁸ Cf. "Two Concepts," p. 20.

he will existentially "live" his renouncement of sin and return to God. He may know and believe, as it is in fact, that this return was not possible without grace and that, therefore, he must at some moment or other have received grace that sanctified him. If all goes well, he can be morally certain of it. But because precisely on the psychological level there is a gradual approach to that perfection of repentance which is contrition, there is no possibility for him of pointing out the exact moment when he reaches it. His direct awareness does not warn him of that moment. The transition being gradual, no clear-cut differentiation between his still imperfect attrition and his perfect contrition needs to appear. And so, for all their essential and specific difference in their objective and ontological reality, attrition and contrition, understood in St. Thomas' terminology, are to each other in an uninterrupted line of psychological continuity. Both attrition and contrition are human acts and psychological facts, but the passage from one to the other, which is a gift of God's grace, need not and per se does not reveal itself to the consciousness.

We may here further call in a distinction proposed of late by H. Schillebeeckx, O.P.,¹⁹ between the basic psychology of a man's dispositions and the empirical experience he makes of them:

Grace intervenes in the human situation in a manner more profound than human psychology experiences. Already on the natural plane our conscious psychology fails to reveal perfectly the deeper realities of the soul. Were one to pretend that, for lack of empiric awareness of a basic change of soul, this change did not take place but is simply made good by the sacrament, this would seem to us to disregard the immanence of transcendent grace and to betray a too empirical conception of a psychological fact; such a fact can lie more deeply than what our empirical awareness can bring up before the forum of our consciousness. A repentance that is objectively formed by sanctifying grace and yet keeps a psychologically imperfect motivation reaches a level sufficient to be called, theologically speaking, perfect contrition.²⁰

According to this idea, we have to conceive as it were a third level of reality that spans on the one hand the discontinuity which exists ontologically between attrition and contrition and constitutes a change-over from an act of an acquired virtue to an act of an infused virtue, and on the other the apparent continuity in the psychological awareness of repentance which gradually grows from attrition to contrition and reveals no conscious change-over from the one to the other. That level is psychological, yet it lies beyond

¹⁹ H. Schillebeeckx, O.P., *De Sacramentele Heilseconomie* (Antwerp, 1952) pp. 595-603.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 597 f.

our empirical awareness. On that level also the change-over from attrition to contrition involves discontinuity as it does ontologically: two specifically different acts succeed one to another. Yet this change escapes our experience. Such basic changes of attitude happen also on the natural plane. A man's real dispositions are rarely, if ever, fully expressed in his conscious activity. They may remain hidden, at times purposely, at other times unwittingly. Depth psychology today proclaims this fact. A similar thing happens when *vi clavium ex attrito fit contritus*. The penitent's empirical repentance need not betray any change; on the deeper psychological level, however, the change has happened. This explanation is another way of confirming De Vooght's statement that the change-over from attrition to contrition is a psychological renewal.²¹ Yet this is not the more fundamental reason why the ontological change from attrition to contrition escapes our awareness. The supernatural event as such is no object of psychology, even when it entails a psychological fact. The latter, according to Schillebeeckx, itself shows two different levels: a deeper one which reflects more truthfully the ontological reality of the change but is not necessarily conscious, or rather not so; and a more superficial one, the empirical level which can be different from the former, and a fortiori from the ontological reality.

CONCLUSION

It should be clear by now what the change-over from attrition to contrition entails both on the psychological and on the ontological level; also what is the necessary and sufficient attrition for a penitent to be justified by the absolution, namely, such a voluntary disposition of repentance as allows the ontological change-over from attrition to contrition, when grace and charity are infused, without necessitating a corresponding change in the consciousness. St. Thomas expressed this disposition by the phrase, *signa contritionis*. We may transpose and complete his idea by saying that it is a desire of contrition. This desire is present when a penitent is sorry for his sins and detests them "as much as he can."²² And this is perhaps not different from saying, "as much as he should."²³ Then only, it would seem, does it

²¹ Cf. above, n. 15.

²² Cf. "Two Concepts," p. 32.

²³ The substitution of "as much as he should" for "as much as he can," suggested by Fr. Dondaine, *art. cit.*, p. 674 (if this phrase means anything more or less than the other), would seem to be less acceptable. It cannot, obviously, mean anything more, for a penitent cannot be required to do more than he is able to do with the help of grace of the moment. But if it means less, then it would not, it would seem, come up to what St. Thomas requires, "signa contritionis." The reference to 4, d. 17, q. 2, a. 3, qa. 3, does not seem to the point nor to require the phrase, "simplement autant qu'il faut vu la gravité de la faute."

exclude all *obex* or *fictio* whose absence St. Thomas demands for the possible change-over from attrition to contrition in the sacrament.²⁴ Not unless a penitent shows signs of contrition or really desires contrition is he disposed to allow the absolution to work in him the ontological change required for justification, that is, is he disposed to accept grace.

This effort towards contrition, on the part of the penitent, evidently concerns the practical guidance of the penitent, not directly the mysterious happening which takes place in justification, namely, the infusion of sanctifying grace; that is, it regards the penitent's psychology, not the ontological reality which escapes his conscious act.²⁵ At this point the motivation of his repentance naturally plays a necessary role. It will, moreover, easily be sufficient to allow the ontological change from attrition to contrition if, showing what St. Thomas called the signs of attrition, it comes up to the demands which modern theologians make for attrition on the strength of the teaching of the Council of Trent.²⁶

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²⁴ Cf., e.g., 4, d. 17, q. 3, a. 4, qa. 1: "confessio etiam potest esse in eo qui non est contritus. . . . Et quamvis tunc non percipiat absolutionis fructum, tamen recedente fictione percipere incipiet." The distinction between the "fictio" which regards the reception of the sacrament, and that in view of the infusion of sacramental grace, pointed out by Fr. Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, p. 588, need not detain us here. For our present question, the "fictio" which concerns the infusion of sacramental grace of necessity presupposes that with regard to the reception of the sacrament.

²⁵ Fr. Dondaine, *art. cit.*, p. 673, distinguishes the two aspects of "mystère" and "conduite de l'action," rather than the ontological and psychological levels. Perhaps this expresses more accurately the actual way in which St. Thomas views the whole question. He does not explicitly distinguish between ontological reality and psychological fact—how could he have done so in the ideological setting of his time? Yet is this a sufficient reason for us to overlook or not to explicitate the distinction? Cf. Fr. Schillebeeckx's remark on Fr. Dondaine's study, *L'Attrition suffisante* (Paris, 1943), *op. cit.*, p. 584, n. 120. But we may well ask: is there, apart from the above-mentioned nuance in St. Thomas' outlook, a real difference between the two ways of distinguishing, objectively speaking? Is the "mystery" not necessarily on the ontological level, and the practical guidance on the psychological one?

²⁶ Cf. P. Galtier, *De paenitentia* (3rd ed.; Rome, 1950) n. 97; *DB*, n. 898.