

A WORD ABOUT CONTRITION

When we pray the Act of Contrition, at least the “old version” I was taught as a child, we used the phrase “O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee.” How is it that we “offend” God?

Often, I think, there is a mental picture we have, that our sins’ offending God make God angry with us and (almost!) eager to punish us. It leads us to regard punishment as our “just desserts” in the sense that God is just waiting to dole them out to us.

But there is another take on this phrase that seems important. It is more the kind of “offending” that causes God, if you will, to cry over us as a Father (or Mother) would when their child’s behavior turns toward the self-destructive. Can’t we all imagine our parents telling us, “Don’t do [X] because you’ll be sorry,” and we can’t wait to do [X]? It might be something eminently practical, like don’t leave the front yard because we live on a major street and you might be hit by a car. We “escape” anyway, and even though we might not actually be hit, our parents’ response, a combination of fear and sorrow, is the result of our offending them. In short, we have hurt them.

This is doubly the case if we happened to really be hit by a car. We are in hospital (perhaps in ICU), with our parents frantic about our condition. “Why didn’t they listen to us?” they think? “What more could we have done for them to make them listen?” they think.

Here is the vision of God offended that might be of use to us: God crying over our injuries which were virtually self-inflicted because we would not listen. God’s being “offended” has nothing to do with somehow slighting the Divine Majesty; it has everything to do with putting at terrible risk one who is deeply loved.

Next time you examine your conscience, don’t consider so much whether what you have done “violates God’s dignity” so much as whether it violates your eternal health, for which God loved you so much that Jesus Christ suffered, died and rose for you. In the words of Baptist pastor and writer Calvin Miller, “Let all people here now know/There is no depth He would not go/To love.” Knowing that truth, would it not make a difference in how we act? Would we still be willing to put at risk a life that is so cherished by our God that it would cause tears to fall? Would that not cause tears also to fall—from our eyes?