



“Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

JOHN 20:23

Regret vs. Repentance in Catholic Teaching

What “regret” usually means

- **Ordinary sorrow** – a feeling of disappointment or pain because something undesirable has happened (e.g., losing a job, hurting a friend).
- **Limited focus** – the emotion is often directed at the *consequences* of an act rather than at the *offence* committed against God.
- **No moral conversion** – regret alone does not necessarily include a resolve to change one’s behavior or a turning-away from sin.

2. Catholic “repentance” (metanoia)

a. Core definition

*“The movement of return to God, called **conversion and repentance**, entails sorrow for and abhorrence of sins committed, and the firm purpose of sinning no more in the future”.*

The Catechism further clarifies that interior repentance is “a **radical re-orientation of our whole life**, 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”.

b. Elements of true repentance

Element	Catholic description	Source
Contrition (sorrow of the soul)	“A sorrow of mind, and a detestation for sin committed, with the purpose of not sinning for the future”.	Council of Trent, 14th Session
Hatred of sin (detestation)	“A sorrow of soul and a hatred of sin committed, with a firm purpose of not sinning in the future”.	Catholic Encyclopedia, <i>Contrition</i>
Firm purpose of amendment (resolution to change)	“A sorrow of the soul and a detestation of sin ... with a determination of not sinning in the future”.	Denzinger, <i>Enchiridion Symbolorum</i>
Hope in God’s mercy	“Conversion... is nourished by hope in God’s mercy”.	Catechism
External expression (penance)	“Doing penance means ... to re-establish the balance and harmony broken by sin, to change direction even at the cost of sacrifice”.	<i>Reconciliatio et Paenitentia</i> 26

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c. Types of contrition

- **Perfect contrition** – motivated by love of God; can reconcile the sinner even before receiving the sacrament, though the desire for the sacrament is still present.
- **Imperfect (or attritional) contrition** – motivated by fear of punishment; still necessary for the sacrament of confession.

3. Why regret is not enough

1. **Missing “detestation of sin”** – Regret may feel sorrow for loss, but it does not necessarily contain the hatred of the *act* that the Church calls contrition.
2. **Lacks firm purpose of amendment** – Without a decisive resolve to avoid future sin, sorrow remains a temporary feeling rather than a true conversion.
3. **No orientation toward God’s mercy** – True repentance is rooted in hope for divine forgiveness; simple regret can be self-centered.
4. **No sacramental dimension** – Repentance ordinarily leads to the sacrament of Reconciliation, where the sinner confesses and receives absolution. Regret alone does not entail this step.

4. Practical implications for the faithful

Situation	Regret (insufficient)	Repentance (adequate)
After a moral fault	"I feel bad that I got caught."	"I am sorry before God for having offended Him, I hate that sin, and I resolve to avoid it, asking for His mercy and the grace of confession."
When grieving a loss	"I regret losing my job."	"I pray for the grace to accept God's providence, examine any sin that may have contributed, and turn anew to Him."
In the confessional	"I'm sorry for the consequences of my actions."	"I express contrition, confess the sin, receive absolution, and fulfill the penance given."

5. Summary

- **Regret** is an emotional response to negative outcomes; it may lack the *detestation of sin*, *firm purpose of amendment*, and *hope in God's mercy* that the Church requires for true repentance.
- **Repentance (metanoia)**, as defined by the Catechism, the Council of Trent, and the teachings of Pope John Paul II, is a **whole-hearted conversion** that includes genuine contrition, a hatred of sin, a decisive resolve to change, and a trust in divine mercy, often expressed through the sacrament of Reconciliation.
- For Catholics, the path from mere regret to authentic repentance is essential for the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of communion with God.