

# How To Control Your Anger

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If you are angry, let it be without sin. (Ephesians 4:26) The sun must not go down on your wrath; do not give the devil a chance to work on you. (Ephesians 5:26-27)

## INTRODUCTION

Long before a child has gone to school and learned to read and write, he has learned much about anger. No doubt he has seen parents displaying anger toward each other and to other adults. At times this adult anger has been directed toward the child himself. The young child has seen expressions of anger among his playmates. Most likely he has also demonstrated his childhood ability to become very angry in certain situations. A newly ordained priest will have to spend only a short time in the confessional before he realizes how universal a problem anger really is. Brothers and sisters confess angrily fighting with one another. Husbands and wives release feelings of anger toward the person they should love the most. Beyond the family there are displays of anger throughout the community and in the business world. Neighbours can't get along. Employers are angered by their workers. Employees become upset with their employers. Anger is one of the biggest problems in daily living. It harms not only the angry person himself but it inflicts pain on many others as well. There are few vices that are more widespread yet are so readily excused and defended. People can think of a hundred reasons to get angry and hundreds more to justify the anger they have shown. Anger crops up everywhere. Husband and wife find themselves expressing impatience and anger toward each other. Parents react angrily toward their children and brothers and sisters toward one another. Anger then reaches outside the home to include relatives, neighbours, and fellow-workers. Just as a person grows in size and image, so too does one's anger grow. An angry little boy grows up to find himself with a man-sized anger. Anger never remains at the same level. It grows. Unchecked, anger can begin to rule a person completely.

From the start it should be noted that there is an important distinction to be made between feelings of anger and sins of anger. Every human being in the world, except perhaps the rare few who are so temperamentally pliable and unassertive that they want peace at all costs, will at some time feel impatient with others or be tempted to a bitter or angry retort or be carried away by interior feelings of resentment toward someone. Such feelings are not sinful if they are kept from appearing in one's external conduct in any way or from becoming a deliberate desire that the other person be hurt in some way as a result of one's anger. To avoid sins of anger takes a great deal of self-discipline and the help of God's grace.

The sin of anger is chiefly a sin of expression; a person manifests ill will toward another person. It can be momentary or it can last a lifetime. It could even be a sin if the anger were not expressed but just remained a firm desire. There is a sharp distinction to be made between the sin of anger and reasonable, forceful attempts to correct others who are subject to one's authority. Recall the proper anger of Christ as he made a whip and chased the moneychangers out of the temple turning over their stands and tables (See John 2:13-17). Remember also the strong words of Jesus when Peter

was showing his pride and his ignorance as Jesus spoke of his own death. (See Mark 9:33 where Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan.") Anger is actually defined as the disordered desire to correct or punish someone. It may be disordered because the correction or punishment administered is clearly motivated by passion or fury. It could also be wrong if the methods used (mental cruelty, cursing, physical abuse, violence, etc.) are sinful in themselves and capable of doing more harm than good. The duty of correcting others is carried out only when reason, not passion, motivates the action. The words and actions used must be designed to help and not hurt the person being corrected.

Once these initial distinctions have been made about the problem of anger, several forms of anger can be noted. They include thoughts, words, and actions. Most of them are slight faults. Even in anger, people do not often intend to seriously hurt the one who has provoked them. Yet there are cases where the anger is either so intense or so prolonged that it can be quite a serious matter. The fact that many of these faults of anger are not serious should not lessen the desire to overcome them. If these simple faults go unchecked, they are sure to grow and could lead to serious sins. It is offences like these that destroy the peace and harmony of the home, that strain relationships with relatives, that disrupt the smooth runnings of a business, and that divide the local community. The following pages will consider various ways in which anger is expressed and the remedies to be applied. Self-examination questions are provided. Let these become the means by which you will resolve to conquer your own personal tendencies to anger.

## 1. ANGRY WORDS

The most common form of anger is that of harsh, loud, strident, intemperate words. Question yourself as to whether you may be guilty in any of the following things:

- a. Do I find myself raising my voice to anything from a shout to a scream when I feel upset or unnerved by something that is said or done to hurt my feelings?
- b. Do I catch myself saying harsh and bitter things without pausing to think of the meaning of what I am saying, then afterward regretting what I said? "I hate you." "I wish I were dead." "I wish you had never been born."
- c. Do I use profanity or vulgar and obscene words when I am angry, obviously wanting to shock and hurt those who cross me?
- d. Do I make accusations against others that I know I have no right to make when I feel resentful against them?

There is only one remedy for the intemperate language one is tempted to use in anger. That remedy is silence. One has to learn the art of saying nothing at all when one knows that anything said will hurt another in some way. A mother tempted to anger against her children should train herself to keep silence for 30 seconds when she feels on the verge of screaming at them, and in that time she should say a little prayer for patience. Then she may give orders and correct the children, and she will do so reasonably and effectively.

## 2. SARCASTIC WORDS

Anger does not always take the form of loud and violent language. Sometimes it speaks quietly, but its quiet is that of a knife cutting into the very heart of another. Sarcasm is the weapon that anger often uses in these cases. See whether you have used it.

- a. Do I speak with scornful exaggeration of the virtues of my wife or husband or children when I am angry at one of them? “Of course you know it all.” “Of course you can do no wrong.” “Of course you’re perfect and never commit a fault.”
- b. Do I refer sarcastically to what other people have and what I might have if I were not tied down to this home when my anger boils over? “What a fool I was for not marrying somebody else!” “Other wives (or husbands) have something to say in their own homes; but I’m just a servant without getting paid for it.”
- c. Do I belittle the actions of another person whose efforts are better than mine? His success has made me angry and so I must strike back and cut down his achievements. “That’s a good job but with all those years of experience you should be able to do better than that.” “You think that’s good. If I had your talents I’d really be able to go places.”

Sarcasm is very often motivated by pride. Someone is better than we are and we are angered to see them get ahead of us. In our anger we attempt to cut them down and build ourselves up. To avoid sarcasm we need humility and honesty. We must accept ourselves as we are and not become angered by those who are better.

### 3. VIOLENT ACTIONS

The tendency of unrestrained anger is to hurt the person who has aroused the anger. In some people the tendency has been so little restrained that it seeks to hurt not only by words but by actions. Violence is one of the worst forms that anger can take and may, if serious injury is attempted or done to another, constitute a serious sin. Search your soul for this weakness.

- a. When angry at my children, do I strike them in a fury of passion that reveals a willingness to hurt them severely?
- b. Have I ever used cruel and inhuman instruments of punishment in my anger, which could easily do serious or lasting damage?
- c. Have I ever left marks — bruises, cuts, disfigurements — on another as a result of attacking that person in my anger?
- d. Do I throw things, kick things, break things, in giving way to my anger, thus destroying valuable property besides trying to hurt the person who aroused my anger?

A person who permits anger to be displayed in the form of violent actions against another person reveals himself as a person with very little self-control. For a violent person to change he must adopt a rigorous program of self-discipline. He will have to use all his strength to keep himself under control rather than allowing this force to be turned against another person in an angry display of violent action.

### 4. QUARRELLING

Anger leads not only to sudden and momentary outbursts of harsh and cutting language and violent deeds; it is also responsible for protracted quarrels. We mean quarrels, not in the sense of fistfights or physical encounters, but in the sense of angry altercations that may go on for long periods of time. Husbands and wives, as well as brothers and sisters, may find themselves addicted to quarrelling. This can also be a problem at work, in school, or wherever people gather to talk. Here are some questions to ask yourselves.

- a. If somebody states that I am wrong in holding a certain opinion, do I argue long and loud, less concerned with truth than with browbeating the one who disagrees with me?
- b. If I am gently (or even harshly) corrected for something I have done or said, do I go into a tantrum of self-defence and accusation against the one who corrected me, until we are both shouting about the faults we dislike in each other?
- c. Do I start quarrels by saying things that I know are certain to arouse the ire of another, with the result that we usually end up in a torrent of counter-charges?

Common sense, combined with just a bit of fraternal charity, should enable one to avoid quarrelling. Common sense reveals that angry quarrelling is about the most useless thing we can engage in. A good, honest, intellectual discussion with someone is profitable, even though it grows warm at times. Quarrelling always centres around personalities, and its arguments are inspired by passion and pride rather than reason. It never convinces anybody of anything, and only leaves lingering bitterness in its wake. Charity demands that a person try to say nothing that will aggravate another, and that, if unwittingly he has said something that has that effect, he withdraw from the argument immediately. It takes two to quarrel; one is enough to stop a quarrel.

## 5. NAGGING

Anger can explode, and anger can simmer and sputter for days or weeks, even sometimes for years. The nagger is the person whose anger takes the form of constant complaining, repeated statements of his (or her) grievances, ever-recurring expressions of spite and resentment. The chronic complainer, the person who is never satisfied, would also fit into this category. When nagging and complaining enter into a household, peace and comfort fly out the window. Some people do not know that they are naggers, but they will know it if they honestly answer these questions.

- a. Do I have one particular grievance (e.g., against my husband, that “he does not make enough money,” or against my wife, that “she spends too much money”) to which I give expression in petulant or accusing language at least once every day?
- b. Whenever the least bit of difference, an argument, or misunderstanding arises do I find that I inevitably bring up a long past fault or mistake of the other, which I have mentioned at least a thousand times before?
- c. Do I find that I rarely go through one full day without complaining to my wife (or husband) about something that I don’t like in her (or him)?

Nagging is one of the infallible signs of self-pity and a lack of that wholesome generosity of spirit that alone makes full forgiveness of the shortcomings of another possible. Naggers defend themselves on the ground that anybody would complain who had to bear the terrible things inflicted on them by another. They are right in that anybody with as small and pinched a spirit as theirs, and as great a devotion to their own superiority, would always find some-thing to complain about. To get out of that class of small souls, the nagger needs to learn the spirit of humility, gratitude, and forgiveness.

## 6. POUTING

Anger can express itself through silence. The silence that anger sometimes adopts as an offensive weapon is not to be confused with the silence that should be employed to keep oneself from violent expressions of anger. A person who is often tempted to hasty and intemperate speech can cure that

defect only by learning to be silent when the fury of anger is upon him. Angry silence takes the form of pouting. It is a silence that bristles, that charges an atmosphere with tension. It is usually a prolonged silence that refuses to take part even in the most trivial conversation. Introspective, sensitive, and moody persons find themselves especially tempted to show their anger in this way, as the following questions will reveal.

- a. I have been hurt or angered by someone. I know that harsh words would be an ineffective response. Do I therefore show my anger by withdrawing into a shell and refusing to say anything for a period of time?
- b. Have I at times lapsed into an aggrieved silence over some fancied injury, only to find out afterward that the one who provoked my anger was utterly unaware of what it was that upset me?
- c. When angry at someone, do I make him (or her) feel it by showing absolutely no interest in anything, not even in things that are ordinarily my favourite topics or activities?
- d. If accused of pouting, do I adopt an attitude of woebegone sadness, and answer every attempt to shake me out of it with “I don’t care” or “Just leave me alone”?

There is little hope that the “pouter” will overcome his bad habit unless he faces the fact that his temperament inclines him to take offence where none is intended and then, hopeless of making others repent in any other way, to lapse into an unmistakably aggrieved or angry silence. Such persons can remain free from the fault of angry silence only when they learn to make allowances both for the shortcomings of others and for their own touchy sensitiveness.

## 7. IRRITABILITY

Irritability is the flaw of character whereby people permit themselves to be unpleasant, curt, and ill-mannered with others for no other reason than that they do not happen to be feeling just right. Irritability manifests itself when nothing has been said or done that could possibly be taken as an offence. When a person is in an irritable mood, it is impossible to say anything to him that will not occasion grumbling and unkindness. Everyone is exposed to the irritability of others from time to time, and every such experience should make one more determined not to permit this fault to appear in one’s own conduct. Ask yourself these questions and see if you show signs of irritability.

- a. When someone asks you an innocent question, is your response unnecessarily sharp, mean, or critical of the questioner?
- b. As a parent, an employer, or a person in authority do you speak harshly to those for whom you are responsible, even when they are doing everything correctly?
- c. When a little mistake is made or when a person somehow bothers or disturbs you in some small matter, do you respond in a way that is totally out of proportion to the action that has taken place?

Irritable people make many smooth excuses for their weakness. Some say that it is due to their nerves, which are in bad shape. Others attribute it to high blood pressure or low blood pressure or insomnia or indigestion. Still others say that their unpleasantness with those around them is due to the fact that they have so many worries and responsibilities that they cannot be expected to show a consideration toward the feelings of other people. All such excuses are just that — excuses. Irritability signifies a lack of personal control and an inability to subject one’s feelings to the demands of charity. There is no reason for a person to display signs of irritability. Like any other form of anger, it must be brought under control and not allowed to grow. So, stop making excuses.

One who is often cross and unpleasant with others for no apparent reason needs to come face to face with the fact that he is thinking too much of himself. The irritable person forgets that the other person has feelings, too, and does not like to be shouted at or abused for no reason at all.

## 8. TAKING REVENGE

With some people, anger expresses itself in attempts to take revenge on the one who occasioned it. There is a wide variety of ways in which this may be done, from attempts to do grave bodily harm to the person, to scheming attempts to make the person suffer some form of retribution. Many will find themselves subject to seeking revenge in one of the following forms, some of which can be serious sins.

- a. If someone angers me, do I seek revenge by running that person down in my conversation with others, revealing his secret faults, perhaps even exaggerating them and lying about them?
- b. After a quarrel with my spouse do I speak uncharitably about him (or her) to my children or my own blood relatives?
- c. Do I try to alienate the friends of someone with whom I am angry, by making that person appear to be unworthy of their friendship or trust?
- d. Do I attempt to take revenge on my spouse when I have been angered, by refusing to fulfill the duties of marriage or to carry on with my essential tasks?
- e. Do I try to take revenge on a person who, I think, has injured me, by spoiling his chances for advancement or recognition?

One who invariably seeks to take revenge against another has an exaggerated or wrong sense of justice, and no regard for Christian charity at all. Christ dramatically insisted not only that his followers are not to strike back at those who injure them but that when they are struck on one cheek, they should turn and offer the other (See Matthew 5:38-39). This was one of his forceful ways of saying that revenge is sinful. So, develop true Christian charity.

## 9. HATRED

Hatred is the final, fixed, and spiritually fatal outcome of undisciplined anger. Hatred is persevering bad will. It is the deliberate crystallizing of one's anger into a state of total dislike. Hatred is not to be confused with involuntary dislike or antipathy for a certain person. Everybody experiences this feeling at times but it is not sinful when it is successfully concealed. Hatred is not involuntary. It is a will act whereby one, both internally and externally, surrenders to acts of enmity toward another. These questions reveal the presence of hatred in a person.

- a. Do I find myself deliberately fostering the desire to hurt, or to see hurt seriously, the one who has injured me?
- b. Do I deliberately rejoice in the serious misfortunes that befall my enemy, and wish they would be multiplied? Do I even want him to be condemned to hell?
- c. When I pray, do I deliberately try to exclude my enemy in my prayers which I know I am bound to say for all men? Worse, do I ask God to send great problems and misfortunes into the life of this person?

d. Do I show my hatred by refusing even to say hello to my enemy, either when we meet alone or in the presence of others? Does this go on for a considerable period of time?

One who has fallen into hatred of another must be made mindful of the fact that deliberately to hate a fellow human being is similar to hating God who is present within that person. He is inviting God's condemnation on himself. Every time he says the Our Father, he asks God to forgive his trespasses as he forgives others. He asks God's pardon only in the measure he is willing to forgive those who have wronged him. No matter how great the injury or injustice received, the offending person still must be forgiven. The remedy for overcoming hatred is to pray the Lord's Prayer and really mean it.

## CONCLUSION

It should now be clear that anger can be expressed in many forms. It can be spoken in angry or sarcastic words. Nagging or quarrelling are especially divisive forms of anger. It can be expressed in a mood like irritability or in the silence of pouting. It can also be physically demonstrated through violent actions. Revenge and hatred are often the most extreme forms of anger. To allow oneself to exhibit any of these forms of anger is bad. It is a sign of a flaw in one's character and personality. More devastating than the effects on the person himself are the evil effects that anger can have on other people. Anger destroys harmony in the home. It can endanger peace in a neighbourhood, a city, country, or even in the world. Angry people cause problems wherever they go — on the job, in a meeting, or at a party. Anger is also a stumbling block on the road to Christian perfection. For some people it is just a small obstacle. For others it is a major stumbling block. Either way a person must work diligently each day and in every human situation to remedy this great problem of anger. With hard work and the ever-present assistance of God's grace, this problem can be remedied. Unnecessary and unreasonable anger can be stopped. (Our thanks to the Provincial, St. Louis Province of the Redemptorist Fathers for the reproduction of this pamphlet.)

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