

our hearts fully, we need to have the proper disposition to receive his immeasurable gift. **We need humility.** This is revealed to us by the psalmist's repudiation of the traditional belief that purely external actions, like the Temple sacrifices, can effect God's benevolence:

**“For in sacrifice you take no delight, burnt offerings from me you would refuse”**



In expressing this view, the psalmist reflects the prophetic tradition (Hosea 6:6, Amos 5:22).

What really matters to God is our inner disposition. As well as our sinfulness, we need to recognise our nothingness before God, and come before him in true humility, emptied of self, so that he can do with us whatever he wills:

**“My sacrifice a contrite spirit, a humbled contrite heart you will not spurn”**

It is also the realisation that we can do nothing for ourselves without his grace:

**“Do not thrust me away from your presence, nor deprive me of your holy spirit”**

## **Our Responsibility Towards Others**

Psalm 51 is also special in recognising the responsibility that someone who truly loves God has for going beyond him/herself, to proclaim the goodness and mercy of God to others and to ring out his praises to them:

**“Give me again the joy of your help, with a spirit of fervour sustain me, that I may teach transgressors your ways and sinners may return to you .. O Lord open my lips and my mouth shall declare your praise”**

## **Our Catholic Faith Prayer and Spirituality 2010-2011**

### 10. Psalm 51– Recognising Our Sinfulness and Dependence on God



1. What kind of person do you think wrote Psalm 51?
2. What do you understand by the ‘Covenant of the Heart’?
3. Does the Psalm's repudiation of the value of traditional sacrifices have any direct relevance for us?

## An Inspiring Penitential Psalm

**Psalm 51** is a particularly wonderful Psalm. It reflects a mature and wise person who has grown to realise his/her sinfulness and need for forgiveness. It shows someone who has grown to understand God deeply, and who expresses a desire as a dutiful servant to proclaim God's goodness to others, to pass on his/her experiences about what God really wants and the right attitude required to please him.

This psalm is really a mirror image of the attitude all devout people must have when praying to God - it is recognising our essential nothingness before him whose love alone makes us of value.

### We Are Born Sinners And Have an Inclination to Sin

It is significant that this psalm begins by reflecting on God's mercy, and shows an immense trust in God's love despite acknowledging a sinful state. Its significance for us is that **no sin** is too great for God to forgive:

**“Have mercy on me, O God, in your kindness. In your great compassion blot out my offences”**

However, it is also significant that the psalm recognises that we are somehow born in a state of sin, not personal sin, of course, but a state that is nevertheless imperfect in terms of our relationship with God. In this it reflects what we have come to know as Original Sin:

**“O see, in guilt I was born, a sinner was I conceived”**

However, during our lives we all commit sins, sins **that are** personal to us:

**“My offences truly I know them, my sin is always before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, what is evil in your sight I have done”**



The psalmist knows that the effect of sin is so drastic that it can only be overcome by God's love and mercy. God's love is shown at its greatest when he forgives sin:

**“That you may be justified when you give sentence, and be without reproach when you judge.. From my sins turn away your face, and blot out all my guilt”**



### The Covenant of the Heart

There is a particular wisdom in the psalm in that it moves away from the traditional Covenant images into that of the new Covenant of the Heart, the Covenant foretold by the prophet Jeremiah, one where God promises to penetrate each individual with true knowledge of who he is and what he requires:

**“I will make a new Covenant, not like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them out of Egypt .. No, this time I shall plant my Law, writing it in their hearts, then I shall be their God and they my people .. I shall forgive their guilt”** (Jer.31:31-34).

The psalmist recognises that we only become who God wants us to be when **he** penetrates our heart

**“Indeed you love truth in the heart, then in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom .. a pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me”**



This Covenant is never fully realised in the Old Testament. Only with the Incarnation are the conditions perfected for this great gift. **We** are the beneficiaries of it, especially when we receive Our Lord Jesus in the **Eucharist** - it is then that God can penetrate our hearts to the greatest degree.

Yet, the psalmist teaches us still more. Before God can penetrate