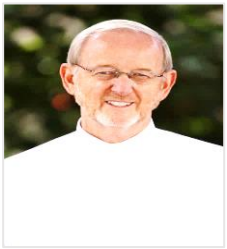
A WORD FROM THE PASTOR



Third Sunday of Advent
December 11, 2011 B

Reflections on Sin and Guilt as we prepare for our Advent Penance Service

In the April 2005 issue of *U.S. Catholic,* Jim Forest had a very thoughtful article entitled *Omission of Sin,* an excerpt from his book *Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness* (Orbis Books). Forest writes:

Thousands of essays and books in recent decades have dealt with human failings under various labels without once using the one-syllable, three-letter word that has more bite than any of its synonyms: sin. Actions traditionally regarded as sinful have instead been seen as natural stages in the process of growing up, a result of bad parenting, a consequence of mental illness, an inevitable response to unjust social conditions, pathological behavior brought on by addiction, or even as "experiments in being."

But what if I am more than a robot programmed by my past or my society or my economic status and actually can take a certain amount of credit—or blame—for my actions and inactions?

Have I not done things I am deeply ashamed of, would not do again if I could go back in time, and would prefer no one know about? What makes me so reluctant to call those actions "sins"? Is the word really out of date? Or is the problem that it has too sharp an edge?

The Hebrew verb chata, "to sin," like the Greek word hamartia, literally means straying off the path, getting lost, missing the mark. Sin—going off course—can be intentional or unintentional.

"You shoot an arrow, but it misses the target," a rabbi friend once explained to me. "Maybe it hits someone's backside, someone you didn't even know was there. You didn't mean it, but it's not a sin. Or maybe you knew he was there—he was what you were aiming at. Then it's not a matter of poor aim but of hitting his backside intentionally. Now that's a sin!"

The Jewish approach to sin tends to be concrete. The author of the Book of Proverbs lists seven things God hates: ***"Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family"*** *(6:17-19).*

As in so many other lists of sins, pride is given first place. ***"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall"*** *is another insight in Proverbs (16:18). In the Garden of Eden, Satan seeks to animate pride in his dialogue with Eve. Eat the forbidden fruit, he tells her, and "you will be like God."*

Pride is regarding oneself as godlike. In one of the stories preserved from early desert monasticism, a younger brother asks an elder, "What shall I do? I am tortured by pride."

The elder responds, "You are right to be proud. Was it not you who made heaven and earth?" With those few words, the brother was cured of pride.

The craving to be ahead of others, to be more valued than others, to be more highly rewarded than others, to be able to keep others in a state of fear, the inability to admit mistakes or apologize—these are among the symptoms of pride. Pride opens the way for countless other sins: deceit, lies, theft, violence, and all those other actions that destroy community with God and with those around us.

Guilty as charged

For the person who has committed a serious sin there are two vivid signs: the hope that what I did may never become known and a gnawing sense of guilt. At least this is the case before the conscience becomes completely numb, as patterns of sin become the structure of my life to the extent that hell, far from being a possible next-life experience, is where I find myself in this life.

In the film The Pawnbroker, Rod Steiger, in a desperate action to break free of numbness, slammed a nail-like spindle through his hand so he could finally feel something, even if it meant agonizing pain—a small crucifixion.

It's a striking fact about our basic human architecture that we want certain actions to remain secret, not because of modesty but because there is an unarguable sense of having violated a law more basic than that in any law book—the "law written on our hearts" that St. Paul refers to (Rom. 2:15). ***It isn't simply that we fear punishment. It's that we don't want to be thought of by others as a person who commits such deeds.***

One of the main obstacles to going to Confession is dismay that someone else will know what I want no one to know.

Guilt is not quite the same thing.

Guilt is one of the themes of Walker Percy's Love in the Ruins. The central figure of the novel is Dr. Thomas

More, a descendant of St. Thomas More, though the latest More is hanging onto his faith by a frayed thread. He isn't likely to die a martyr for the faith.

Dr. More is both a physician and a patient at a Louisiana mental hospital. From time to time he meets with his colleague Max, a psychologist eager to cure More of his guilt about an adulterous affair.

Max says to More, "I understand. Then, since it is 'sinful,' guilt feelings follow even though it is a pleasure."

"No, they don't follow."

"Then what worries you, if you don't feel guilty?"

"That's what worries me: not feeling guilty."

"Why does that worry you?"

"Because if I felt guilty, I could get rid of it."

"How?"

"By the sacrament of penance."

"I'm trying to see it as you see it."

"I know you are."

***Percy's novel reminds us that one of the oddest things about the age we live in is that we are made to feel guilty about feeling guilty**. Dr. Thomas More is fighting against that. He may not yet experience guilt for his sins, but at least he knows that a sure symptom of moral death is not feeling guilty.*

Dr. Thomas More—a modern man who can't quite buy the ideology that there are no sins and there is nothing to feel guilty about—is battling to recover a sense of guilt, which in turn will provide the essential foothold for contrition, which in turn can motivate confession and repentance. Without guilt there is no remorse; without remorse there is no possibility of becoming free of habitual sins.

Cut off from love

Yet there are forms of guilt that are dead-end streets. If I feel guilty that I have not managed to become the ideal person I occasionally want to be or that I imagine others want me to be, then it is guilt that has no divine reference point. It is simply me contemplating me with the eye of an irritated theater critic. Christianity is not centered on performance, laws, principles or the achievement of flawless behavior, but on Christ himself and participation in God's transforming love.

When Christ says, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48), he is talking not about the perfection of a student who always gets the highest test scores or a child who manages not to step on any of the sidewalk's cracks, but of being whole, being in a state of communion, participating in God's love.

This is a condition of being that is suggested wordlessly by St. Andrei Rublev's icon of the Holy Trinity: those three angelic figures silently inclined toward each other around a chalice on a small altar. They symbolize the Holy Trinity: the communion that exists within God, not a closed communion restricted to themselves alone but an open communion of love in which we are not only invited but intended to participate.

A blessed guilt is the pain we feel when we realize we have cut ourselves off from that divine communion that radiates all creation. It is impossible not to stand on what Thomas Merton called "the hidden ground of love" but easy not to be aware of the hidden ground of love or even to resent it.

Like Dr. Thomas More, we may find ourselves hardly able to experience the guilt we know intellectually that we ought to feel not only for what we did—or failed to do—but for having fallen out of communion with God.

"Guilt," comments my Romanian friend Loana Novac, "is a sense of fearful responsibility after realizing we have taken the wrong step and behold its painful consequences. In my experience, unfortunately, not many people can tolerate this insight. My hunch is that many people these days experience less and less love, less and less strengthening support from their families and communities. As life gets more harried and we become more afflicted, the burden of guilt increases while our courage to embrace repentance—to look ourselves straight in the mirror and face the destructive consequences of our blindness and wrong choices—decreases."

Ripples of sin

It's a common delusion that one's sins are private or affect only a few other people. To think our sins, however hidden don't affect others, is like imagining that a stone thrown into the water won't generate ripples.

As Orthodox theologian Bishop Kallistos Ware has observed: "There are no entirely private sins. All sins are sins against my neighbor, as well as against God and against myself. Even my most secret thoughts are, in fact, making it more difficult for those around me to follow Christ."

This is a topic Garrison Keillor addressed in one of his Lake Wobegon stories. A friend—Keillor calls him Jim Nordberg—writes a letter in which he recounts how close he came to committing adultery. Nordberg describes himself waiting in front of his home for a colleague he works with to pick him up, a woman who seems to find him much more interesting and handsome than his wife does. They plan to drive to a professional conference in Chicago, though the conference isn't really what attracts Nordberg to this event. He knows what lies he has told others to disguise what he is doing. Yet his conscience hasn't stopped troubling him.

Sitting under a spruce tree, gazing up and down the street at all his neighbor's houses, he is suddenly struck by how much the quality of life in each house depends on the integrity of life next door, even if everyone takes everyone else for granted.

"This street has been good for my flesh and blood," he says to himself. He is honest enough to realize that what he is doing could bring about the collapse of his marriage and wonders if in 5 or 10 years his new partner might not tire of him and find someone to take his place. It occurs to him that adultery is not much different from horse trading.

Again he contemplates his neighborhood: "As I sat on the lawn looking down the street, I saw that we all depend on each other. I saw that although I thought my sins could be secret, they are no more secret than an earthquake. All these houses and all these families—my infidelity would somehow shake them. It will pollute the drinking water. It will make noxious gases come out of the ventilators in the elementary school.

"When we scream in senseless anger, blocks away a little girl we do not know spills a bowl of gravy all over a white tablecloth. If I go to Chicago with this woman who is not my wife, somehow the school patrol will forget to guard the intersection and someone's child will be injured. A sixth-grade teacher will think, 'What the hell,' and eliminate South America from geography. Our minister will decide, 'What the hell—I'm not going to give that sermon on the poor.' Somehow my adultery will cause the man in the grocery store to say, 'To hell with the Health Department. This sausage was good yesterday—it certainly can't be any worse today.' "

By the end of the letter it's clear that Nordberg has decided not to go to that conference in Chicago after all—a decision that was a moment of grace not only for him, his wife, and his children but for many others who would have been injured by his adultery.

"We depend on each other," Keillor says, "more than we can ever know."

Far from being hidden, each sin is another crack in the world.

Turn away from sin

One of the most widely used prayers, the Jesus Prayer, is only one sentence long: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Short as it is, many people drawn to it are put off by the last two words. Those who teach the prayer are often asked, "But must I call myself a sinner?" In fact that ending isn't essential, but our difficulty using it reveals a lot. What makes me so reluctant to speak of myself in such plain words? Don't I do a pretty good job of hiding rather than revealing Christ in my life? Am I not a sinner? Admitting that I am provides a starting point.

There are only two possible responses to sin: to justify it or to repent. Between these two there is no middle ground.

Justification may be verbal, but mainly it takes the form of repetition: I do again and again the same thing as a way of demonstrating to myself and others that it's not really a sin but rather something normal or human or necessary or even good.

"After the first blush of sin comes indifference," wrote Henry David Thoreau. There is an even sharper Jewish proverb: "Commit a sin twice, and it will not seem a crime."

Repentance, on the other hand, is the recognition that I cannot live any more as I have been living because in living that way I wall myself apart from others and from God. Repentance is a change in direction. Repentance is the door of communion. It is also a sine qua non of forgiveness. Absolution is impossible where there is no repentance. Repentance is a mountain worth climbing.

As St. John Chrysostom said 16 centuries ago in Antioch: "Repentance opens the heavens, takes us to Paradise, overcomes the devil. Have you sinned? Do not despair! If you sin every day, then offer repentance every day! When there are rotten parts in old houses, we replace the parts with new ones, and we do not stop caring for the houses. In the same way, you should reason for yourself: If today you have defiled yourself with sin, immediately clean yourself with repentance."

Six ways to distinguish right from wrong

If you are trying to decide whether a certain course of action is morally right or wrong, the following six questions should be helpful.

1. The Common Sense Test. Are you being foolish? How would you judge someone else if he/she did the same thing?

2. The Sportsmanship Test. Are you playing fair? How would you feel if someone did this to you? If it is not right for anyone, it is probably not right for you.

3. The Best Self-Test. In this case, are you trying to be the best you can be? Will this help you be a better person?

4. The Publicity Test. If everybody knew what you were doing, would you still do it?

5. The Most Admired Person Test. Would the person you admire most do it? If you told that person about it, would you feel proud or ashamed?

6. The Foresight Test. What can possibly go wrong? Could you live with those consequences?

Have a blessed week,