



SIN & REPENTANCE TWO SPIRITUAL REALITIES MOST OF US DO NOT WANT TO THINK ABOUT OR FACE

On the Second Sunday of Advent every year we meet the fiery preacher, John the Baptist. He is out in the desert dressed in weird clothes and preaching a strong message of *repentance* from *sin*.

All of us are very familiar with the terms “sin” and “repentance” and yet our understanding of these concepts may be quite inadequate or misinformed. Recently, I reread a small book called *The Way of Repentance* by Irma Zaleski, a former university professor who now lives at Madonna House in Combermere, Ontario. *Madonna House* is a community of lay people and religious who live a simple life. They pray, work on a farm and reach out to the poor in their area. Rereading Irma’s book got me thinking a lot about sin and repentance. Between now and Christmas, there will be several opportunities for those interested to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In this column I will share with you some reflections on sin and repentance. ***Our parish communal Penance service will be on Tuesday, Dec. 18 at 4PM and 7 PM.*** One of the things that helps us to make fruitful use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is *prayerful preparation*. One of the main reasons why this sacrament makes little or no difference in many people’s lives is that they come to the sacrament with little or no preparation.

Sin—What is it?

Many Catholics are confused about sin and have been ever since Vatican II. Before Vatican II morality was a very black and white issue. We were clear on what was and wasn’t sin. Today, many are not sure. For example, before Vatican II, missing Mass for no good reason was considered a mortal sin, no ifs, ands or buts. (It is still a *grave sin* to miss Mass on Sunday - see Catechism #2181.) One didn’t go to Holy Communion until one had confessed. Today, many Catholics will miss not only one Mass but lots of Masses for no good reason and not feel any need to go to confession. They may not even confess omission of Mass directly to God. What’s going on here? Other people will come to me and say: “its several years since my last confession. I can’t think of any sins I have committed.” I’m tempted to say “let’s start your cause for canonization”. Others will confess that they are very scrupulous about sexual sins e.g. “impure thoughts” and may have little or no conscience about much more

important sins like insensitivity to the poor, the taking of another’s good name, pride, coldness towards one’s spouse. Still others of us may simply not want to face our sins because we may not be particularly sorry for them or because we don’t want to look at the dark or ‘less nice’ side of who we are. Instead, we want to stay “positive” and “upbeat”.

So What is Sin?

The late Pope John Paul and some Early Fathers of the church sometimes refer to sin as the ‘mystery of iniquity’ because sin is a mysterious, destructive force or reality. When we realize that sin is like a *spiritual cancer* that can diminish or even destroy our relationship with God why would we not take it very serious just as we take serious a physical ailment that threatens our physical life? St. Paul pondered the *mystery of sin* in a celebrated passage in Romans 7:14-25 Paul wonders about his own behavior. He writes:

***I cannot understand my own behavior.
I fail to carry out the things I want to do and
I find myself doing the very things I hate
What a wretched man am I!***

I am sure all of us can identify with Paul. At times we say: “Why did we do that? That’s not me.” Or “Why didn’t I reach out to so and so?” Paul blames the ‘sin force’ in us. The destructive force of sin at work in us causes us to do stuff we hate to do and omit doing good things we would like to do.

Sin as described in Genesis

One of the best descriptions of sin and its consequences can be found in Genesis chapter 3. (If you have access to a Bible while reading this column, you might want to open it to Genesis 3). In the opening chapters of Genesis, Adam and Eve ‘live in Paradise’. They live in harmony with God, with each other, creation and with themselves. All is peaceful and ‘rosy in the garden’. Then enters Satan. Satan, depicted as a cunning serpent, slowly but surely tempts Adam and Eve to turn their backs on God, to lose their *trust* in him. As a result of allowing Satan to seduce and deceive them, Adam and Eve experienced the three *consequences of sin*:

- Their *relationship with God is ruptured*. Rather than coming to meet God when he comes looking for them in the garden, they *hide* from him (3:8). When we do wrong we are often ashamed and feel like hiding our face from God.

- Sin *also ruptures the relationship between Adam and Eve*. Rather than take responsibility for their sin, they get into the 'blaming game'. Eve blames Satan for her sin and Adam blames Eve. (3:12-13)
- Sin *also steals their inner peace*. Prior to their sin they are naked and unafraid. They are free to be vulnerable and trusting. After they sin they cover themselves up (the first "cover up" story). They hide from God and they no longer trust each other. Covering themselves up is a symbol of their shame and dis-ease with who they are.

So sin has some far reaching effects. It diminishes our relationship with God, others and self. Disharmony replaces peace and harmony. Sin leaves us spiritually wounded or spiritually dead if the sin or pattern of sin is serious enough. Some people today are spiritually dead. They have little or no sense of right or wrong.

In her book on *Repentance*, Irma Zaleski sees our first parent's sin as a loss of trust in God. She writes:

The essence of our parents "fall" was not that they broke a specific commandment, but that they failed to trust God. Having experienced God's friendship and love, surrounded as they were by the beauty and goodness of his creation, they listened to the voice of the Adversary, who accused God of jealousy and deception: of forbidding them to reach for the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil in order to protect his own power!

It is hard for us to understand how Adam and Eve could have done that, how they could have chosen to believe the devil rather than God. But they did, and in this lies the mystery of human freedom. Because of that choice, sin entered the world and the unity of all things was broken. Our first parents became estranged from God, from each other and from the rest of creation; they became fragmented in themselves and afraid. Because they had lost trust in God's love, they did not ask for his forgiveness, but hid from him, blamed each other for their sin and were banished from Paradise.

"They lost their trust in God." In the journey of life doesn't this happen to all of us at times. In a retreat I did a few years ago I did an exercise, which asked me to write down the things I think God likes and dislikes about me. When I was finished with the exercise, I discovered (to my surprise) that the thing God, most likely, dislikes about me (or grieves about) is my lack of trust in him. Trust is so key to any relationship. Its absence hurts or kills the relationship.

One truth we must never forget when it comes to sin is that *no sin* of ours could ever stop God from loving us. God's job description is to love us unconditionally, no strings attached. Of course, that does not mean that he is not

disappointed or grieved by our sin. Of course, he is. Jesus wept over Jerusalem because of her refusal to receive him. (Matt 23:37-39). While his love is always there our sin can blind us to his love and cause us not to believe in it. When someone says "how could God love me with all my sins", we can assume that sin and Satan has a strong hold over that person.

The ugliness of sin and why we often are unaware of it.

We might ask: Why are we or others often numb to the ugliness of sin? It's an important question. We might ask:

- Why can church going Catholics believe it is okay to be racist or hold very negative thoughts and feelings towards certain groups of people, e.g. Blacks, Muslims, gays and lesbians, undocumented immigrants? What blinds such people to that sin in their lives?
- Why are some people very blind to the sin of materialism and consumerism? They accumulate more and more stuff or raise their standard of living so much that they are in a very poor position to give to their church or the poor.
- Why might some of us be very blind to the fact that it is okay never or very rarely share a portion of our time and talent helping others.
- Why can people say and do nasty things to others and feel little or no need to confess such unchristian behavior?
- Why can people hold onto hurts for decades and not even be willing to pray for the grace to forgive?
- Why can people cheat or lie in business or behave in very unethical ways and feel little or no remorse or guilt not to speak about repentance or contrition?
- Why can many Catholic miss Mass on a regular basis and believe it is no big deal?

I could go on and on, but I think you get the point. We have been experiencing in our church and society for some time a clear loss of the sense of sin, a clear blindness to or denial of sin.

Thirty or so year ago, a famous psychologist, Dr. Carl Menninger wrote a book called *Whatever Became of Sin?* In this book Menninger, who was not a Christian, bemoaned the loss of the sense of sin in his clients (and colleagues). **Menninger noticed that as long as his patients refused to take responsibility for their sin and wrongdoing they remained sick.** But once they started to take responsibility they started to get better. Dr. Menninger also bemoaned the fact that so many of his colleagues were trying to be so "caring" to their clients that they failed to help them to take responsibility for their wrong doing. Instead they placed the blame for their dysfunctional behavior on their childhood and society.

So why the blindness to what is clearly sinful?

So why are we so often blind to the spiritual cancer we call sin? I am not sure. Your guess may be as good as mine. Here are a few possibilities.

- The presence of sin in us darkens our minds and senses to its evil nature. For example, the alcoholic is often blind to the destructive nature of drink in his/her life. The greedy person says to himself “I worked very hard for my money. It’s nobody’s business how I spend it.” They are blinded to their responsibility to the poor. So the presence of sin itself in us can blind us to its ugly and destructive nature.
- Genesis 3:6 tells us that sin is frequently “pleasing to the eyes” (it’s sensuous attraction) and “desirable for the knowledge it can give” (it’s intellectual attraction). For example, sexual sins have a very attractive side to them. They are desirable for the pleasure that they can give us. When the devil tempts us, he presents sin as something very attractive and desirable. Hence our difficulty seeing its ugly side.
- Our lack of a felt sense of God’s infinite love and goodness may blind us to the ugly nature of sin. Peter knew how much Jesus loved him. Hence, when he realized what he had done after he denied Christ he ‘wept bitterly’. He realized he had offended love. After we have hurt or failed someone who loves us very much and someone we also love we are usually deeply sorry. The more we are blessed with a deep sense of God’s goodness and love the more we will feel deeply sorry for our sins.
- Lack of preaching and teaching on sin. Perhaps all too many of us priests are so into preaching on God’s love and mercy that we fail to preach and teach on sin, God’s justice and hell, beliefs that are also in the Bible.
- The influence of a secular culture. We live in a culture and society that says its ok to kill your unborn child for *any* reason, it’s ok to have state-sponsored executions, a society that resents any attempts to control people’s access to guns, a culture that uses sex to sell, a society that is becoming more and coarser.

Whether we like it or not this pervasive secular environment influences our attitudes and behaviors in ways that we are not often aware of. Our secular culture makes it easy for us to rationalize wrongdoing. It becomes easy for us to say “everyone is doing it”.

Before moving unto repentance a final word or suggestion. I think it would be wise for us to occasionally pray for the grace to see the true ugliness of sin. “*Lord open the eyes of my heart to glimpse even in a small way my sin as you see it. Never let me be comfortable 'being in bed with the enemy'*”. Another way for us *not* to lose touch with the ugliness of sin is to periodically meditate on the passion

and sufferings of Christ. After all it was the sins of humanity that caused his cruel death. In Isaiah 53:5-7 (the first reading on Good Friday) we hear these words: “*He was pierced through for our faults, crushed for our sins, God, burdened him with the sins of all of us.*” By meditating on the passion of Christ, we will surely grow in our awareness of the ugly and destructive nature of sin.

The Grace of Repentance.

Repentance is not to be confused with remorse. Judas was remorseful for his sin of betrayal of Jesus and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the High Priest. But, he wasn’t truly sorry for offending Jesus. Peter was truly sorry for his sin, as was David in the Old Testament. Psalm 51 is his act of contrition.

Our sorrow can be *perfect* or *imperfect*. We may be sorry because we are afraid of going to hell. (imperfect contrition) Or we may be sorry out of a deep sense of offending God (like Peter). God accepts both types of sorrow. True sorrow and repentance should be accompanied by a ‘*firm purpose of amendment*’. If we have cheated or stolen stuff, we need to make restitution as best we can. If we can’t return stuff stolen at a store we need to make a donation to charity and resolve, with the help of God’s grace to avoid this sin in the future.

Sometimes we may feel little or no sense of sorrow for our sins. In fact, if we were really honest we may have to say to God. “*O my God, I am sorry that I am not sorry for this particular sin. In fact, I kind of enjoyed bringing so and so down an inch or two. I enjoyed my little act of revenge. I enjoyed that sexually explicit movie.*” If this is our situation we need to pray for the grace to be repentant realizing of course that repentance is not a *feeling* but an act of the will. It would be nice to be blessed with the gift of tears for our sins, but less is sufficient. If we can say the following, I am sure God will be pleased with us. “*Lord, while I did sort of enjoy that sin, I realize it was wrong. It goes against your teaching and I am sorry.*”

Sometimes, we may find it very hard to pray the following part of the act of contrition: “*and I firmly resolve not to sin anymore.*” All of us know that we will sin again. We especially know that we will most likely commit certain sins over and over. But, hopefully we can sincerely say: “*Lord I want to avoid this sin in the future. Please grant me the grace to do so.*” Irma Zaleski writes:

Repentance-conversion of the heart-does not mean being filled and tormented by guilt. Instead, it means being ready to admit our responsibility for our actions and our need for forgiveness, and having a firm desire to change our life: to turn away from ourselves in prayer and in love. Repentance means, above all, a constant, patient, growing in love. It means our willingness to open ourselves to the work of the spirit in us and to embrace fully the gift of our salvation.

I believe the most important piece of the above quote is: *“our willingness to open ourselves to the work of the Spirit. . .”* We can say all kinds of prayers, attend all kinds of seminars and read all kinds of books, but if we are not committed to *growing in openness and responsiveness to the Spirit*, what is the point of it all. The evil spirit may seduce us into sin time and time again but God’s Holy Spirit is always calling us out of sin into walking in his ways. For the Holy Spirit to have his way with us, we must be someone who seeks to live his/her life in openness to the Holy Spirit. To do this we must seek to live life reflectively. One simple way to do this is through the following threefold exercise:

Name any time when we felt the Spirit nudging me in a particular way? How responsive were we to the Spirit’s nudging? Can we recognize times when we experienced the evil spirit tempting us to do wrong? If so, were we able to resist Satan’s temptation?

- Then take a moment to thank God for the times we were responsive to his nudging and thank him for the times we said ‘no’ to the evil spirit.
- Then ask God’s forgiveness for the times we did not respond positively to the Holy Spirit’s promptings and/or the times you gave into Satan’s temptation and ate the ‘forbidden fruit’.

The above simple exercise prayerfully carried out will help us a lot to live our lives with greater openness and responsiveness to the Holy Spirit.

Reflection Questions

- Do you think Catholics today have lost their sense of sin? If so, how come?
- Do you have a strong sense of the ugliness of sin? If not, why not? If so, what has helped you to see sin for what it is?
- What does repentance mean to you? What do you do when you are not particularly sorry for some sin?
- What can you do to live a life that is more attentive and responsive to the Holy Spirit.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr Aaron". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.