

Catholic

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Understanding Sin Today

When we sin, we fail ourselves and God. In order to rise above it, we must open ourselves to the presence of redeeming love.

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Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been quite some time since my last confession. Sound familiar? The above confession reflects an understanding of the moral life and sin that prevailed among Roman Catholics for centuries. But lately in our culture, many changes have been occurring in the way we think about morality and sin. These changes have resulted in part from new ways of understanding what it means to be human. They also come from rediscovering old ideas that the Bible and Jesus taught about how we ought to relate to God and to one another.

SIN AS CRIME

There was a time when Catholics thought that living morally was mostly a matter of obeying the law—the divine law or the commandments of God, the ecclesial (Church) laws, or the natural laws expressed in the moral teaching of the Church.

Sin was like a crime, a transgression of the law. It was akin to breaking the speed limit on the highway. The law is what made an action sinful. Where there was no clear-cut law (no speed limit), there was no question of sin (go as fast as you want).

Catholic theology has since come to realize that the legal model for understanding the moral life and sin is deficient. For one thing, the demands of being a faithful follower of Jesus, of living according to the vision and values of the gospel, stretch

us further than what can be prescribed by law.

But laws cannot possibly cover all the decisions that we have to make.

The legal model of the moral life too easily makes moral living a matter of repeating the same old behaviors even though we—and our world—have changed. The legal model also tends to focus too much on the actions that we do as being sinful or not. Did I miss Mass? Did I cheat on an exam or on my taxes? Did I disobey my parents?

Laws by themselves don't address the important realities of the heart, such as our attitudes, intentions, and ways of seeing things. Jesus reminds us that what comes from the heart is what makes one sinful.

SIN'S NEW LOOK

A new look at the moral life has been informed by the biblical renewal in the Church and by some philosophical shifts within the Church and within our society.

For example, the biblical renewal has given us covenant, heart, and conversion—not law—as our primary moral concepts. Responsibility has replaced obligation as the primary characteristic of the moral life. Shifts in philosophy have emphasized the dignity of persons and the value of sharing life in society. Together, these shifts in theology and philosophy support a relational model of the moral life. The relational model emphasizes personal responsibility for protecting the bonds of peace and justice that sustain human relationships.

Contemporary theology admits that sin is very much with us and touches us more deeply than we realize. Greed, violence, corruption, poverty, hunger, sexism, and oppression are too prevalent to ignore.

Sin is just as basic a term in our Christian vocabulary today as it has been in the past. Its root sense means to be disconnected from God through the failure to love. In sin, we simply don't bother about anyone outside ourselves. Sin is first a matter of a selfish heart—a refusal to care—before it shows itself in actions. Because loving God and loving our neighbor are all tied together, sin will always be expressed in and through our relationships.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that just as the least of our acts done in charity has some benefit for all, so every sin causes some harm. The *Catechism* quotes Scripture to make this point: "None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself" (Romans 14:7); "If [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy" (1 Corinthians 12:26). In this solidarity with all people, says the *Catechism*, "living or dead, which is founded on the communion of saints, the least of our acts done in charity redounds to the profit of all. Every sin harms this communion" (953).

ORIGINAL SIN DIDN'T GO AWAY

In an age when evils on a massive scale frequently make the news (wars, ethnic genocide, bombings, terrorism), theologians are trying to revive the doctrine of original sin. This doctrine tells us that there is more evil in the world than that which we cause ourselves.

Original sin is the face of sin that we recognize as the condition of evil into which we are all born. It is a condition of being human that makes us feel as if our freedom were bound by chains from the very beginning. We feel the effects of this evil in the pull toward selfishness, which alienates us from our deeper selves, from others, and from God. Because of original sin, we will always know struggle and tragedy as part of life.

While the power of original sin pulls us in the direction of selfishness and aloofness, the power of grace moves us to be for others and to live mutually dependent on one another.

In order to rise above the power of evil, we need to open ourselves to the presence of redeeming love. This love comes to us through others witnessing



to justice, truth, and peace. While the presence of original sin may make responsible moral living a truly demanding task, the presence of redeeming love makes it possible. This is the sense of St. Paul's conviction that while sin abounds, grace abounds even more (Romans 5:20).

SOCIAL SIN—A LIFE OF ITS OWN

Catholics have tended to focus exclusively on personal (actual) sin: lying, cheating, missing Mass. We have not paid sufficient attention to social structures and customs that hold such sinful practices in place. We are changing, however. One clear example of a rising social consciousness can be seen in Pope John Paul II's 1995 Letter to Women. Here he publicly acknowledges sexism as a social sin and then apologizes to women for the ways the Church has complied in denigrating women, misrepresenting them, reducing them to servitude, and marginalizing them from society.

Social sin describes human-made structures when they offend human dignity by causing people to suffer oppression, exploitation, or marginalization. These include educational systems, housing policies, tax structures, immigration policies, health-care systems, employment policies, a market economy. Once established, social structures and customs seem to take on a life of their own. The social sin of racism, for example, has continued and still continues long after slavery was abolished.

The evil of sinful social structures abounds in all forms of discrimination, racism, and sexism; in the exploitation of migrant workers; in the illiteracy and homelessness of the poor; in the lack of basic health care for all; in the manipulation of consumers by the manufacturing practices, advertising, pricing policies, and packaging of goods.

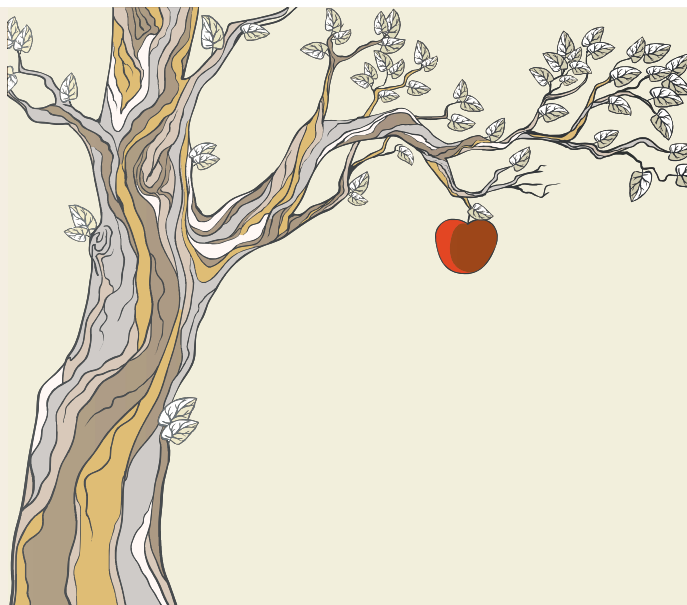
The moral teachings of the prophets (see Isaiah 58:6–8) and of Jesus (see the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5–7) tell us that faith and piety without active commitment to justice are not what God wants.

ACTUAL SIN—WE ALL KNOW IT

Another face of sin is personal sin. Our traditional way of distinguishing the degrees of gravity of personal sins is to call them *mortal* and *venial* sins.

Mortal Sin. Mortal sin is a serious break in a relationship of love with God, neighbor, world, and self. It happens when we refuse to live in a positive, life-giving way. Mortal sin involves a moral evil done by a person who is supremely selfish and committed to making evil and not goodness the characteristic mark of his or her life.

No one can ever know for sure just by looking from the sidelines whether a particular act of malice is a mortal sin or not. We need to know more about the person's knowledge, freedom, and fundamental disposition before God. We must refrain from judging others as being in mortal sin, even though we know their acts are permeated with evil.



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TWO MODELS OF SIN

LEGAL MODEL

Law-oriented

Minimalist

Act-centered

What am I *doing*?

RELATIONAL MODEL

Value-oriented

Quality of relationships

Conversion

Who am I *becoming*?

GOD IS MERCIFUL

We talk about sin differently today because the relational model of the moral life has replaced the legal model. One thing that hasn't changed, though, is our concept of God's love and mercy.

We do not believe that God wants us to be weighed down with a distorted sense of guilt and responsibility. Rather, we believe that we are called to participate more fully in the creative power of God calling us to reconciliation, to reconnect with our best selves, with others, with the world, and with God.

The sacrament of penance and reconciliation is an opportunity and invitation to heal the brokenness in our lives and to set relationships right.

DIG DEEPER

How has sin damaged your relationship with God and with others?

In what ways do you rise above sin?

How can we use the examples of Jesus to avoid the occasion of sin?



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"If [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it;
if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy"

1 CORINTHIANS 12:26

"None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself."

ROMANS 14:7

That is why the Church has never taught that anyone is, in fact, in hell. At the same time, the Church acknowledges that we all have the *capacity* to cut ourselves off from the source of life that is God, which is a good description of hell.

Venial Sin. If mortal sin radically reverses one's positive relationship to God, the habit of unloving acts can corrode that relationship. This is why we must take venial sins seriously. Venial sins can weigh us down with the anchor of bad habits.

Venial sin often enters our lives when we fail to show care for others. People can easily become submerged in self-interest. Perhaps we speak sharply to another, revel in our piece of gossip, or exercise a power play over another that keeps us secure and in control. While these acts of selfish arrogance do not radically

turn us away from God, they are inconsistent with our basic commitment to be for life and for love. They are venial sins.

Contemporary notions of sin emphasize the gospel's call to conversion in and through the web of life's relationships. The more clearly we can recognize God's presence and love in these relationships, the more clearly we can recognize our venial sins, and the more seriously we can take them. Without recognizing our sinfulness, we cannot grow in converting to the demands of love.

Richard M. Gula, SS, writes on issues of moral theology, spirituality, and medical ethics.

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