

## **SIN? WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT?**

### **SHIFTS OF EMPHASIS**

#### **Intent of these notes:**

- ✓ *Some thoughts to clarify what sin is, and what is not.*
- ✓ *Useful for retreats, recollection, catechism and moral instructions classes :*
- ✓ *Today, more than on former days, we view sin, repentance and forgiveness in a more personalized way.*

#### **We base these jottings on the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15/11-32)**

#### **By entering into a fantasy dialogue with the Prodigal, we try to explore a more personal and human understating of sin and repentance.**

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said: "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." So, he got up and went back to his father.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son"

But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

“Your brother has come,” he replied, “and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.”

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered to his father, “Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

### **First Shift of Emphasis**

#### **From a mechanical and physical view of sin to a more moralistic and interiorized view**

#### **First Dialogue**

**Questioner:** What did you do by running away from home and disowning your Father?  
**Prodigal:** I sinned.  
**Question:** What do you mean by sin? What is sin?  
**Prod:** Sin is a spot, a stain, and a blot I my heart. I stained my soul.  
**Quest;** What have you to do to set things right, to make up for your sins?  
**Prod:** I have to wash my heart by repentance. I have to clean my soul by going to the temple to do penance and offer some sacrifice.

#### **In that mechanical and physical view, sin would be considered as:**

- ✓ A sort of material spot, a blot, a physical reality that spoils the beauty of our soul, and dirties our hearts.
- ✓ You may call to mind some of the ideas in vogue, years ago, about sin at First Communion Classes and in primary school days.
- ✓ Venial sins would be small stains in our souls, mortal sins would be such big stains that completely ruin and disfigure our souls.
- ✓ In order to be good again, we had to have our souls washed cleaned through Confession or any other penitential rites, rituals and exercises.
- ✓ Confession and forgiveness would be a sort of device whereby our hearts and souls are cleansed - sort of laundry work.
- ✓ It is true that there are some biblical expressions such as:
  - “He washed away our sins”,
  - “Washed clean by the blood of Christ” etc.

- ✓ Note, however, that such expressions are not to be taken literally but figuratively and metaphorically.
- ✓ Though, such expressions are suitable to explain matters to children and simple people - who grasp better the 'concrete' and tangible - one should not limit himself to them only.

### **In that view, sin would be just stain in man's heart, not a moral evil**

- ✓ Sin is not a thing. It is nothing material that can be put on the soul and again taken away from by repentance.
- ✓ Sin is an evil and a perverted personal condition, a wrong attitude of our minds and hearts towards God, self and others.
- ✓ Actually speaking, sin is not found in 'things' or in 'material actions', but in the dispositions of the heart.
- ✓ Sin is an attitude of not caring, of being cold, indifferent and even hostile to God, self and others.
- ✓ Read the text of Mt 15. 10-20 where Jesus speaks to the Pharisees about "The things that make a person unclean". **It is out from the heart that evil comes.**
- ✓ By looking solely at the materiality of the action, there is no way to ascertain whether a person sinned or not, or whether he sinned mortally or venially. First, we have to know the disposition of his heart.
- ✓ The question so often asked in confession: "Have I committed a sin? Is it mortal? Is it venial sin?" cannot be answered in the abstract. It has to be answered in the context of one's conscience and intentionality.
- ✓ Repentance and forgiveness imply the desire, the readiness, and the will to turn to God and henceforth to do whatever pleases Him.
- ✓ Confession and penance demand a change of heart, not a washing away of sins

## **Second Shift of Emphasis**

### **From a Legalistic and over-Juridical View of Sin towards a More Personalized and Relational One.**

#### **Second Dialogue**

**Questioner:** By turning away from home, and deserting your father, what did you do?

**Prodigal:** I sinned

**Quest:** What do you mean by sin? What is sin?

**Prod:** Sin is breaking a law, a commandment of God. In my case I broke the fourth commandment "*Honor your Father and Mother*"

**Quest:** What have you to do now to put things right?

**Prod:** I have to make amendments. I have to do penance. I'll have to undergo whatever penalty or punishment the law prescribes.

**In that view, sin would be just the breaking of God's law, not paying heed to a lawfully constituted norm or precept.**

- ✓ In Jewish thought, the 'law of God', the Torah was considered supreme,
- ✓ The "Law of God" in a way had been 'objectified'. It stood somehow between God and man.
- ✓ Man could not reach God except through keeping the law, and he could not be forgiven by God unless the law was satisfied.
- ✓ Once the 'law' was broken it had to be repaired,
- ✓ Sin could not be forgiven unless a penalty and a satisfaction was performed.
- ✓ Jesus fought, tooth and nail, against such legalistic and pharisaic conception of sin and forgiveness in our dealings with God.
- ✓ Jesus taught that God is love and forgiveness. God's forgiveness is a free gift. We cannot merit it by keeping the law, or by satisfying the law through punishment.
- ✓ Unfortunately, in thought and practice, many of those legalistic views crept in. our Christian way of viewing sin, repentance and forgiveness.
- ✓ Our relationship with God was, very much, cast in juridical moulds.
- ✓ For many, sin meant a breaking of God's law. Mortal sin would be a very serious breakage of God's law, deserving eternal death. Venial sin was a less serious breakage, deserving only a lesser penalty in purgatory.
- ✓ In order to be forgiven we had to make amendments and penance,
- ✓ Confession became a sort of 'tribunal', a court of law, where we had to be judged and given a proper and proportionate penance or penalty to make up for breaking God's law.
- ✓ Unfortunately, much of this way of thinking persists still in the minds of many pious persons, especially those of the older generation.

**Fortunately, a more Personalistic and Relational View of Sin is taught today.**

- ✓ Sin is not just breaking God's law, but breaking God's heart.
- ✓ Sin means spurning God's love, refusing to be loved by God.
- ✓ In a juridical relationship there is little thought of love, or friendship.
- ✓ Juridical entities by themselves are impersonal, cold and unloving,
- ✓ If sin would just be a 'breaking of God's law', the personal aspect of God's love would be missing. God would not be a God of love, but a God of justice.
- ✓ In his forgiving us, there would not be the gratuity of a gift, but the hard-earned merit of satisfaction. We would fall into a crass pharisaic mentality.
- ✓ Sin is not a 'juridical entity' or rather a 'juridical fiction', but a deliberate spurning of God's love, a willful estrangement from God.
- ✓ Venial sin is not just a small breakage of God's law, but a willful displeasing of a God who is so loving. Venial sin is not a trifle to be easily dismissed
- ✓ Venial sin is the cooling off of our personal relationship with God. In a true sense is a lessening of our love for God. It paves the way to mortal sin.
- ✓ Mortal sin is a complete breaking away from God's love, an intentional decision to spurn God's love.

- ✓ Mortal sin actually is not an action, but a wrong decision, a state of mind, a refusal to accept God's love.
- ✓ Serious sinful actions are the signs of the 'sinfulness' that is in the human heart. (Lk. 6. 43-45)
- ✓ Repentance is a desire, a will to re-establish our relationship with our loving Father. It is a return, a comeback home.
- ✓ At confession, we acknowledge our unfaithfulness to God. We express our sorrow for having broken away from God and freely and gladly we accept back God's love freely given to us with a resolve henceforth to be faithful to Him
- ✓ The most important condition to be reconciled with God is our trusting acceptance of his forgiving love.

**Conclusion:** In the past in our views about sin and forgiveness, there was a heavy stress on juridical words and expressions. We have to keep in mind that the mysteries of God's love and forgiveness cannot adequately be expressed in human language and much less, when that language is cast into legal and juridical terms and expressions.

### **Third Shift of Emphasis:**

**From a Pessimistic View of Human Nature to a More Optimistic and Redeemed one.  
From Sin as Human "Wickedness" to Human "Weakness".**

#### **Third Dialogue:**

**Questioner:** By disowning your father and leaving home what did you do?

**Prodigal:** I sinned.

**Quest:** What is sin? Why did you sin?

**Prod:** Sin is human wickedness and malice. I sinned out of perversion and ill will.

**Quest:** What have you to do to be forgiven and to put things straight?

**Prod:** I have to become good again. I have to change my evil ways. I have to curb my low and corrupt nature. I have to pull myself together.

**In the past, this view of sin, we overstressed the malice and corruption of human nature. We took it for granted that**

- ✓ We sin because we are wicked.
- ✓ We sinned because we are bad and malicious.
- ✓ Sin is born out of malice and ill-intention.
- ✓ To be forgiven we have, we have to strive to change our nature..
- ✓ We need "will-power" to curb our evil nature and crush our wickedness.
- ✓ We have to keep trying till we succeed.
- ✓ In order to be forgiven we have to improve ourselves and produce results.
- ✓ We show our sorrow by the way we correct our faults.

**However, as St. Paul tell us, we are not essentially wicked and corrupt, but weak.**

*(Read and ponder Romans 7.14-25) The conflict in man.*

- ✓ I am sure that the prodigal, in his heart of hearts, loved his Father, yet he was weak.
- ✓ He wanted to experience freedom, pleasures and joys.
- ✓ His weakness took the better of him.
- ✓ We are not perverted but 'spiritually and morally sick'. We cannot heal ourselves.
- ✓ We are in need not only of God's forgiveness but also of God's healing grace.
- ✓ We cannot become good on our own. On our own steam – so to say- we cannot curb our impulses and become spiritually and morally whole.
- ✓ It is through God's grace that we can be good and faithful to him.
- ✓ All forgiveness and justification is a gift of God.
- ✓ We only change for the better when we wholeheartedly accept God's forgiving and healing love!
- ✓ In other words, by God accepting us, 'weak' as we are, and by our welcoming God's acceptance, slowly we become strong and healthy, we are transformed.
- ✓ The sinners in the Gospel' narratives, who became saints, became whole by accepting God's love and forgiveness. Mary Magdalene, Zaccheus, Mathew, the Samaritan, Woman at the well, the Woman caught in adultery, etc.
- ✓ The sacrament of Reconciliation is both a healing and forgiving process that transforms us through
  - Our humble acceptance of God's love and forgiveness
  - Together with our humble acceptance of our weakness and falls.
- ✓ We have to approach the sacrament of Reconciliation
  - Not with fear, but with love,
  - Not with a feeling of self sufficiency, but with humility,
  - Not trusting in our own strength, but in God's 'power and his unconditional healing love.

**Fourth Shift of Emphasis:**

**From an Individualistic and Self-centered Approach to Sin towards a More Social and Communitarian One.**

**Fourth Dialogue:**

**Questioner:** What have you done by rejecting your father's love and running away from home?

**Prodigal:** I have wronged my father. I have broken his heart. I have disowned him. I have sinned against him.

**Quest:** What have you to do to be forgiven and reconciled?

**Prod:** I have to go to my father, ask him for forgiveness and tell him that I am sorry for offending him

**Quest:** After he forgives you, is there any other thing you have to do?

**Prod:** No! I hurt him. I asked his pardon. He pardoned me. That's all. What else do you expect me to do?

**This view of sin, forgets the social dimension of sin. By sinning, The Prodigal did not only wrong his father but also his Mother, his Brothers and Sisters, his entire family.**

- ✓ The Prodigal, primarily wronged his Father, but he wronged also his mother, his older brother and all the members of his family. He broke away from them all.
- ✓ In order to be forgiven and be reinstated in his former position as a member of his family, he had to straighten up his relationship not only with his father, but also with his elder brother, his mother and other family members.

**By sinning we do not only wrong God. We wrong also The Church, the family of God's Children**

- ✓ Sin cannot be viewed only as an offense against God.
- ✓ Sin, repentance and forgiveness are not only personal events between God and the sinner.
- ✓ By sin we hurt God, our sisters and our brothers too.
- ✓ We are social beings; we form one single human family. When we sin we break away from God and from others; in a true sense, from all men and women
- ✓ As Christians in particular, by sinning:
  - We hurt the whole Christian family.
  - We lower the standards of the Mystical Body,
  - We spoil the good name and reputation of its members..
- ✓ Sin has not only a '**vertical dimension**' – God and me- but also a "'**horizontal dimension**' – me and my brothers and sisters.
- ✓ Full reconciliation demands reconciliation both with God and with one another.
- ✓ So, in order to be fully forgiven and reconciled, we have to ask pardon not only from God alone but also from others.
- ✓ At Mass we say:
  - '**I confess to Almighty God and**
  - **to you my Brothers and Sisters' that I have sinned**".
- ✓ The social and communitarian aspect of sin explains why, after committing a serious sin, to be fully reconciled, we should secure the pardon of the Community through the sacrament of confession.

### **CONCLUSION:**

**By way of conclusion, we may fantasize a final dialogue with the Prodigal and ask him to give us the final answer about what sin is.**

- Questioner:** What did you do when you broke away from your father and ran away from home?
- Prodigal:** I committed a sin.
- Quest:** Can you tell us what sin is?

**Prod:** I broke away from my father, and also from my mother and brother and all the members of my family. I spurned their love. I wronged them and hurt them deeply.

**Quest:** Why did you do like that?

**Prod:** To tell the truth, I loved my parents and my family, but temptation, the lure of the world, got the better of me. I chose the wrong things in preference to them all.

**Quest:** How did you get reconciled to them?

**Prod:** I felt sorry for what I did.

- I confessed, I owned up to them the wrongs I did.
- I trusted in their love and forgiveness.
- I asked them for pardon
- And joyfully accepted being welcome again as a son and a full fledged member of the family.

**Quest:** What did you learn from the whole incident? What was the outcome of your sin?

**Prod:** I learnt;

- Of the ‘unconditional’ love of my Dad and my family members.
- By experiencing their implicit love and forgiveness, now I am able to love them more than before.
- I have been healed’. I grew stronger.
- I am sure that with their help and encouragement, I will sin no more.

**Quest:** What penance, what penalty they asked you so that they might forgive you and take you back home with them?

**Prod:** No penance, no penalty.

Being away from their love was a most painful experience.

My Dad’s unconditional love and forgiveness his greatest gift to me.

My mum’s kindness and the affection of the members of my family made me happy and whole.

I know that I am not worthy of their love. I did not merit it.

They gave it to me freely. Gratefully and joyfully I accepted it

### FINAL PRAYER:

Pray for the graces mentioned below.

- That you may believe in God’s unconditional love and forgiveness.
- That you may be healed of your spiritual weakness and illness.
- That you may feel truly sorry - not guilty -for your sins.
- That you may be reconciled not only with God but also with your brothers and sisters.



- **That you may accept and rejoice over your Heavenly Father's, your Mother's, brothers and sisters' welcoming love.**
- **That your past sins may help you grow in the love of God and of your brothers and sisters.**