

The Social Dimension of Sin and Grace

By Fr. Sebastian MacDonald

Most of us work out our standing before God in a very personal manner: God and me. How do I appear in God's sight?

This is appropriate, as far as it goes. But it does not go far enough. We may say in reply: surely it does. Do not the 10 commandments make it clear that the pact I have with God is simply in terms of Him and me?

No, they don't. At least, not commandments 4-10. They all involve someone else, beside God and me, in determining my status before God. And Mt. 25 makes it clear that, when we stand before the judgment seat of God, every one of the issues about which God tests me is relational: someone else is involved.

So Jesus relied on the example of a vine with its branches (Jn 15.5) to spell this out more at length. In the process, He amplified the relational factor in my conduct: many branches comprise the well-being of the vine: not just one branch (myself) constitutes the vine.

Our Christian faith is social. The Catholic Church especially is organic, a compost or a composite involving many elements. "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Mt 18.20) This mind-set goes back to the Garden of Eden: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers..." (Gen 3.15). All of us together, not just as individuals, are caught up in God's designs. A graphic instance of this facing each of us is original sin, a religious liability that is also social, bedeviling every person, but involving no personal responsibility on the part of anyone.

The Chosen People, for a long while, were keenly aware of the benefits and liabilities accruing to them, precisely as a people, rather than as individuals. All were beneficiaries of God's promises (Rom 9.4), and all suffered from others' misconduct (Ez. 18), at least until the prophet Ezekiel pointed out how each person is also to bear responsibility for his/her own failures—a needed corrective to an overly corporate view of being accountable for the deeds of one's ancestors.

The faith enlightening us about all of this has a corporate source in Abraham, "our father in faith" (1st Eucharistic Prayer), not "my" father in faith. So at mass we say, in our Profession of Faith: "WE believe in one God...", not "I believe in one God...". And a bit further on we proclaim: "For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven...for our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate...", in the plural, not the singular.

St. Paul used corporate symbols to describe our standing before God: we are a body with many parts (1 Cor 12.12), a building with several sections (1 Cor 3.10). He didn't

accentuate just the eye, or the ear, or the tongue: it's not the individual parts but the whole that counts.

Today we appeal to the socialization process to describe similar situations, as the words of Vatican II suggest: "Socialization, as it is called, is not without its dangers, but it brings with it many advantages for the strengthening and betterment of human qualities and for the protection of human rights." (The Church in the Modern World, n. 25).

So we appreciate that our path through life is not a private affair. At times our examination of conscience prior to confession/reconciliation has led us to move beyond just the "I" factor in confessing our sins, and to get to their source, which we frequently identified as the "occasions of sin". Yes, I got drunk, but it always happens in the tavern. Yes, I lost my temper, but it always happens during the evening rush hour. Yes, I stole some things, but it inevitably occurs in the Dollar Store. The sin is not explained solely in terms of me.

Of course, there are occasions of good as well as occasions of evil, such as: yes, I pray daily, but only because my family says grace before evening meal. Yes, I donate to the poor, but mainly because I belong to the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Yes, I help the children with their homework, because I'm a member of the PTA.

And, closely aligned with these occasions of good and evil surrounding me are situations of example, whether good or bad, that we people exert on one another, as an additional contribution of Catholic practice instructing us about our standing before God. I give good example to others in the office by never gossiping about my fellow-workers. Or, I give bad example at home by using foul language before the children. These too exemplify good and evil in their social dimensions, with this difference between an "occasion" and an "example": the former has a structural aspect about it, while the latter is more of an inter-personal affair.

Sin and grace are personal; and they are social. And they are structural. That is, there are certain institutional situations surrounding me, apart from which I probably wouldn't do the good, or the evil, I do. An example is the church: if I wasn't part of the church, chances are that I would do a lot less good than I do; because of the influence church membership brings to bear on me. Or, in another example, if I didn't drive a car, I wouldn't be contributing, as much as I do, to the evil of polluting the atmosphere.¹

These are institutions in my life (church, automobile) that tend to channel my behavior; they're just there, and they influence me. Of course, I could leave the church, or walk to work, and disrupt the influences for good and bad "they" exert on me. But, it's not that easy; these "institutions" have become part of my way of life.

¹ An editorial in the NY Times for Dec. 20, 2006, recognizes the role of systems or structures in the Abu Ghraib jail in Iraq: "This is a system that was created and operated outside American law and American standards of decency. Except for the few low-ranking soldiers periodically punished for abusing prisoners,

Pope John Paul II had something to say about structural influences in our life, for both good and bad, taking his cue from Vatican II above. He spoke of social sin (On Reconciliation and Penance, n.16, On Social Concerns, n. 35)) in several ways, one of which was: “The term social can be applied to sins of commission or omission—on the part of political, economic or trade union leaders, who though in a position to do so, do not work diligently and wisely for the improvement and transformation of society...”. And he also spoke of the upside of social action (the graced aspect of it): “...that solidarity which on the religious level is developed in the profound and magnificent mystery of the communion of saints, thanks to which it has been possible to say that ‘every soul that rises above itself raises up the world.’”

We note the use of his favorite word here: “solidarity”, a relatively new word in our lexicon of virtues, identifying the social dimension of our lives together, as it emerges in such solid, substantial ways as politics, economics and labor. And since every virtue has its corresponding vice, there would have to be something like “fragmentation” that presents itself for us to confess.

The Pope, admittedly, had some misgivings about using terms like structural/social sins, to the extent they implied that “the devil made me do it”, that is, to the extent I appeal to these factors to exonerate myself of responsibility for what I do, or fail to do, as, for instance, I voted for that candidate because I’m a Democrat, or, I supported that piece of legislation because I’m a Republican. Or I belong to management, and so I opposed this initiative, or I’m an active labor union member, so I dragged my feet on this project.

But, while acknowledging these influences, I can still maintain my integrity in withstanding evil forces or my honesty in acknowledging the good impetus behind my conduct.

A great institutional force for grace and goodness in my life is the church and her sacraments, such as the sacrament of reconciliation with its communal forms of penance, so effectively conveying the social aspects of sin and grace involved in this ecclesial institution.. This, along with the other sacraments, constitutes a religious practice that manifests, in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, the bearing of religion (in general) on justice matters, whether they be social or not. Religion is a feature of justice because it helps us render a debt of recognition to God. Religion functions so as to underpin all the “debts” we incur in life, starting with God, but extending to others. It is a social structure involving various practices, to which, since Vatican II, Catholics have referred as liturgy. A person who is liturgically attuned is one who responds to the sense of justice toward God welling up within him or her by engaging in such religious practices as the sacraments, the heart of religious worship. The Greek origin of the word “liturgy” means “a public work on behalf of God”. As a public work, it is a social contrivance channeling grace to us. It also carries over into our other social relationships.

Without such religious help, of course, I can conceivably trudge through life by dint of my own personal resources, but not as a happy camper. For those relying on the memory of the Passion before the goods and evils of life, there is an outstanding structure, the

crucifix, to point us in the right direction: “Lord, by your cross and resurrection you have set US free. You are the Savior of the WORLD.” (4th Eucharistic acclamation at mass.) And we now appreciate the “crucified” not only in terms of the historical Jesus’ death on the cross, but also in terms of the corporate or mystical Jesus’ sufferings on the cross today, those to whom we refer as THE CRUCIFIED OF THE WORLD TODAY.

(examples of structural situations affecting, but not controlling, us for good or evil):

- atmosphere of fear and terror in post 9/11 America;
- illegal immigration into the US from Mexico after NAFTA;
- Catholic practice of gaining indulgences out of solidarity with the souls in purgatory;
- impact of the availability of fire arms in the US;
- practice of red lining by realtors, mortgage lenders;
- women’s reduced pay/promotion scale in industry;
- human respect/public opinion, weighing down upon us as we set our course of action
- all-consuming desire for profit/thirst for power (John Paul II).