

## A Sense of Sin

We've all seen the adverts on television warning of the danger of limescale building up inside the likes of washing machines and dish washers with the risk of them breaking down and our kitchens flooding. We are encouraged to use some sort of de-scaler on a regular basis to stop this happening and to help keep our domestic appliances running smoothly. This provides a nice little parable for the possible state of our spiritual lives.

*Sin speaks to the sinner in the depths of his heart.  
There is no fear of God before his eyes.  
He so flatters himself in his mind  
that he knows not his guilt. (Psalm 35)*

It was Pope John Paul II who, back in 1995, expressed his concern that we seemed to have lost the sense of sin. To have a sense of sin in the first place we also have to have a sense of right and wrong and be willing to admit and accept our mistakes and failings and the error of our ways. We use the word *contrition*: “sincere remorse for wrongdoing” “repentance for sin”. At the height of the recent banking crisis and the MPs’ expenses scandal, only very reluctantly were apologies eventually offered by some, and even then it was hard to know whether the individuals concerned were actually sorry for what they had done or for the fact that they’d been caught. You can’t be truly sorry unless you accept that what you have done was wrong and with that realisation and acceptance must come contrition.

I think something of what Pope John Paul was saying has to do with people resenting being told what they can and can’t do and therefore, perhaps worse still, deciding for themselves what is right and wrong. This is going on in society all the time in terms of personal moral behaviour as well as the more wide-ranging law of the land. There is a very real risk of the moral breakdown of our society, not to mention a degree of anarchy, unless the law is respected and people are held to account for their actions. The police and the courts are a visible reminder to us of the consequences of ignoring or breaking the law. Is it, perhaps, because God isn’t quite as visible that we think we can push the boundaries of his law with impunity? Let’s take a look at one or two examples.

The first would be the demise of mortal sin.

As kids I think we were given a disproportionate understanding of mortal sin because it was never really explained to us that it had to involve serious matter (and what did that mean to a child?) and our free choice to go ahead and do whatever it was knowing that it was seriously sinful. By the same token certain things had the tag of being mortally sinful automatically attached to them, such

as breaking the commandments of God or not keeping the precepts of the Church (which I'll come back to in a moment). In recent years poor catechesis has watered down the seriousness (even the existence) of mortal sin in a misguided effort to be politically correct and not offend people. It doesn't seem to matter that, as a result, at least two generations no longer know when they may be offending God.

**O**ne of the precepts of the Church is the obligation to celebrate Mass on Sundays and holydays.<sup>1</sup> To deliberately choose not to do so is a mortal sin. As I've said before, being obliged to go to Mass to avoid committing a sin is a pretty sad reason when the eucharist should be so important to us that we should want to be there by choice - and whenever we can, not just on Sundays. Be that as it may, and like it or not, it is still a mortal sin to deliberately miss Mass on a Sunday or holyday ("of obligation") and we don't have the authority to decide otherwise, whether for ourselves or for our children. They, our children, should be being taught both in school and at home what is involved in being (what it means to be) a practising Catholic. If they grow up learning that certain aspects of the faith are not important to their parents, then it will not be important to them and so the non-practice (and the not-knowing) begins.

**W**hen it comes to Sunday Mass, we don't have to say "no" to other activities and plans whether for ourselves or our children, but our commitment to God ought to be a priority when we are making those other plans. With the availability in most parishes, or in a neighbouring church, of both Saturday Vigil and Sunday Masses, making the time we should for God ought to be possible in addition to whatever else we have planned. The bottom line, however, is that when we don't - and deliberately - it is seriously sinful and must be taken care of in confession, as we'll discuss in a moment.

**W**hile what I've said may not sit too well with some, being Church teaching it can't simply be brushed under the carpet. I frequently return to the words of Pope St Gregory when he condemned the silence of pastors on matters of faith and doctrine. If we, as teachers of the faith, say nothing, then the people can hardly be blamed for assuming that a particular practice (or lack of it) must be acceptable, otherwise somebody would say something wouldn't they? Well, sadly, not necessarily. The temptation for a priest can be to settle for a quiet life, keeping his head down below the parapet, rather than risk stirring up the waters even when they need to be stirred. But what use is that (and what use is he - a "dumb shepherd" as Pope Gregory says - to the people for whom he has spiritual and pastoral responsibility?

**A** second example would be our empty confessionals.

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<sup>1</sup> And that's because "The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice...a testimony of belonging and of being faithful to Christ and his Church." (para's 2181 & 2182 in the Catechism)

Of particular concern is the fact that people don't seem to know anymore that a mortal sin can only be taken care of through the sacrament of reconciliation. So, for example, it is, as we've said, a mortal sin to deliberately miss Mass on Sunday or a holyday and a person in a state of mortal sin may not receive holy communion until they have been to confession. Despite the numbers that are self-evidently missing from Mass on weekday holydays (even allowing for the fact that some may be going to Mass elsewhere because of work commitments), and those who seem to pick-and-choose the Sunday Masses they'll attend, almost without exception no one is bringing such sins to confession and yet everyone is still going to communion. This can be very worrying from a priest's point of view because clearly some very important Church teaching has gone astray somewhere along the line and it's a situation that can't simply be ignored - people deserve better than that from their priests.

In more general terms the empty confessional continues to be a concern given the fact that entire congregations are coming forward at Mass to receive communion and yet only a handful will be at confession on a regular basis. Many children's first confessions become their last because these days they are dependent on parents not only to bring them to church, but also to remind them of the importance of regular confession and neither one is happening. The sacrament doesn't just offer absolution from serious sins, but is the opportunity for a spiritual "health check" on a regular basis, to have any and all sins - however serious or otherwise - taken care of, and to receive the help and strength of the graces of the sacrament, graces none of us should consider we can do without. And yet confessionals everywhere are empty. Are that many of us saints already or was Pope John Paul correct and we are indeed losing our sense of sin?

St John wrote (1Jn 1 v 8-9):

If we say we have no sin in us, we are deceiving ourselves and refusing to admit the truth; but if we acknowledge our sins, then God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and purify us from everything that is wrong. It's a little like the situation of an alcoholic - they have to be able to admit that they have a problem before they can be helped. Most of us, I'm sure, wouldn't for a moment pretend that we don't commit sin, but at the same time we can't decide for ourselves what constitutes sin and its degree of seriousness and therefore, in consequence, how much we do or don't need God's forgiveness or grace. We can't set ourselves up as arbiters of God's law (nor even of Church law: we haven't that authority). Rather we need to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6 v 8) which, by definition, infers (in John the Baptist's words) that *He must grow greater and I must grow smaller* (Jn 3 v 30).

If, however, we become hardened to our faults and sins, if we start deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong, what we will do and what we won't do, then, little by little, the spiritual limescale begins to build up, but we don't notice it happening nor do we feel its effects, until one day we suddenly find ourselves out of our depth, up to our neck in water. As a preventive measure we need the regular cleansing power (the *Calgon*, the *Cillit Bang*) of God's grace - and the additive of a little humility - to flush out the system before we get hardened to the build-up of sin and its destructive effects.

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