



THEOLOGY CORNER

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Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“Who is to Blame for our Sins?”

The question “Who is to blame for sin?” comes from a series of questions that I have received over the course of the past couple of months. Where did sin come from? Are we totally at fault for our sins? Could any aspect of our sinful actions be the result of mental illness? In order to provide for a balanced answer to these questions, we have to first consider the definition of the term “sin.” The Catechism of the Catholic Church says:

“Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity. It has been defined as “an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law. Sin is an offense against God: “Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight.” (Ps. 51:4). Sin sets itself against God’s love for us and turns our hearts away from it. Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become “like gods,” knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus “love of oneself even to contempt of God.” (CCC, 1849-1850)

Where did sin come from? The first sin came out of disobedience. Adam and Eve were created in grace and lived in a world that was in order and harmony. Their emotions were perfectly subordinated to their reason, and they enjoyed a great peace in the garden without conflict or moral struggle. But they disobeyed God and that set things in disorder. This is when the problem of sin began. Some key things to point out in the above definition is that: sin is an offense against God, and consequently, it is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience, it wounds our nature, and most importantly for the question at hand, it is *disobedience*. This means that in order for an action to be specified as a sin, there must be some level of culpability in our action — that is, we must be at fault for something. Sinful actions are further specified as either mortal sins or venial sins. One of the major distinctions between a sin that is mortal and a sin that is venial is whether or not an evil action was done with “full knowledge and complete consent” (CCC, 1862). For example, if a Catholic misses Mass on Sunday with full knowledge that doing so is a sin, and with a full intention to miss Mass despite this very fact, then he or she is in mortal sin (i.e., charity has been cut off and this person is no longer in a state of grace). On the other hand, if a person misses Mass and was not aware that Sunday Mass attendance is obligatory as a precept of the Church, then the sin is only venial, or perhaps not even a sin at all. The most important principle to remember when identifying whether something is a sin or not, is to determine whether the action was *voluntary*. This makes perfect sense if we revisit a statement from the Catechism’s definition of sin, “it is...a revolt against God through the will.” We have to *choose* to commit an action that is against the will of God and thereby remove ourselves from his grace.

You may still be wondering, if a person misses Mass without a knowledge that Mass attendance is a requirement, then how can it still be considered even a venial sin if he or she did not *intentionally* disobey a law of God? Remember, if there is a sin present, then it would be because of something voluntary. Even if a Catholic did not know that Sunday Mass attendance is required, it is very likely that he or she does know that it is the right thing to do, but prefers something else to God, and therefore the action or lack of action (e.g., missing Mass) is a “failure in genuine love for God” — in which case it could be a venial sin, which does not destroy charity altogether, as mortal sin does, but it weakens charity and “manifests a disordered affection for created goods” (CCC, 1863). In other words, in most cases, there is at least some level of knowledge and consent that would render an action sinful.

Using these principles, we can now more adequately address the question about mental illness. The question can be rephrased as: Are your actions considered sins, or are you just sick? This question is usually asked regarding those who suffer from addiction. Recovery programs typically will include messages like, “Nobody chooses to become an addict, but anyone can choose to work through your recovery.” The reason why they say this is because from a psychological sense, addiction is considered a maladaptive coping mechanism which is often the response to some form of trauma. That is to say, becoming addicted to something is often due to some outside influence. In the spiritual order, the case is similar because it is the devil who influences us to become attached to things in a disproportionate way so that we place God below those things. Setting aside legitimate biological mental illness, and focusing more with sociologically caused mental illness, it would be a mistake to leave sin out of the picture. Sin is real and social sin is the underlying cause of most, if not all, sociologically caused mental illness. Prescription drugs may ease some of the symptoms, but you cannot simply treat the symptoms, you have to treat the cause!

The sins of others in our lives can definitely condition us to act a certain way, but this demands for an even greater commitment to drawing close to Jesus. There will always be negative external influences both material and spiritual. It is up to us to remain keenly aware of these influences and fight the good fight, dealing with the issues head on rather than running the other direction. Come face to face with your own sin, acknowledge it, take responsibility for it, and turn to Christ the healer so that you can work towards spiritual recovery. You may be disposed to sin because of an unhealthy upbringing, because of an abusive relationship, or because of some other disordered lifestyle, but nobody can force your will. Coming to terms with the reality of sin and surrendering to our Lord is the only way to truly turn things around. The fact of the matter is that we can't do it on our own. That's why we must rely on God and on his Church to lead us to freedom from sin. Sin is truly an ugly thing, but the good news is that Christ came to renew all things in him as he conquers sin and continues to act in our lives at every moment that by the Spirit, he may "renew the face of the earth." (Ps. 104:30). The problem is that when we ignore sin, make light of it, or push off all responsibility, then we close ourselves off from the work of the Spirit and thereby cease to become a contributor to bringing about the kingdom of God on earth.

Many Christians commonly use the phrase, "Hate the sin but love the sinner." A whole lot of emphasis is usually given to the "love the sinner" part, but do you take the "hate the sin" part seriously? Until we all truly develop a hatred for sin, we will remain stagnant in our spiritual lives and continue to struggle in our work lives, and ever more so in our home lives as parents, spouses, sons, daughters, or friends. As Adam blamed Eve for his sin, we also have this same tendency. That is because sin clouds the mind so that we cannot see the truth clearly. Sin also weakens the heart so that we cannot love as we should. The direct answer to the question of this article is that each and every one of us are responsible for our own sins. We can't control the sins of others, we can only control our own sins by breaking the habit of sin beginning with going to confession! The communion lines are long at Mass, but the confession lines are quite short. Why is this? There is no other explanation besides the fact that people are becoming less and less concerned with the problem of sin. Christ is calling you to action. Will you respond? You should, because your soul depends on it.