

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

(Catechism nn. 976-987)

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Later in the Catechism in the section on 'Life in Christ' sin is defined as

'an offence against reason, truth and right conscience. It is a failure in genuine love for God and neighbour caused by a perverse attachment to certain things perceived as good. It wounds human nature and injures human solidarity'(n. 1849).

The Greek word most commonly translated as 'sin' is '*hamartia*' ('missing the mark'). Homer uses it when a javelin is thrown but fails to hit its target. He uses it also when a speaker does plenty of talking, but misses the point of the debate. When we sin, we miss the mark; we fail to act in a properly human way; we are inattentive when we should be attentive; we fail to search for meaning; we fail to be reasonable; we fail to be responsible; we fail to be loving. God is gracing us to be in love, but we reject love. God is gracing us to live in communion with God and so with creation, but we choose to act in a way that is out of touch with our own heart, out of touch with God, and so out of touch with reality.

We are made to be in love. When we reject the love offered to us, and when we fail to love others from the heart, we are sinning.

The Biblical tradition is rich in images for sin. Psalm 78, for example, speaks of 'missing the mark'(verses 17 and 32). It also speaks of being 'rebellious'(verses 8, 17, 40, 56), being 'disobedient' (verse 10), being 'stubborn'(verse 8), being 'unbelieving'(verses 8, 22, 32 and 37), being 'untrusting'(verse 22), having a 'heart that wavers'(verses 8 and 37), 'putting God to the test'(verses 18, 41 and 56), being 'untruthful'(verse 36), 'unfaithful'(verse 57), 'grieving God'(verse 40), 'provoking God'(verses 41 and 52), and 'speaking out against God'(verse 19).

In the Newer Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews, speaks many times of 'missing the mark'. It also speaks of being 'rebellious'(1:9), 'disobedient'(2:2), 'drifting'(2:1), 'enslaved'(2:15), 'deceived'(3:13), having a 'hardened heart'(3:8), 'embittered'(3:16), lacking reverence towards what is sacred (9:13).

This is not the place to attempt an exhaustive list of sins. We will have more to say in Book Three of our Companion when we comment on sin as affecting our living as Jesus' disciples. Our focus here is on the wonder of God's grace that makes it possible for us to break free from sin.

In the Second Letter of Peter we read a description of the life led by us when we are trapped in sin:

'They are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm; for them the deepest darkness has been reserved. For they speak bombastic nonsense, and with licentious desires of the flesh they entice people who have just escaped from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them. For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first'(2Peter 2:17-20).

Speaking of the human condition prior to the encounter with Jesus (The 'I' stands for Everyman/Everywoman), Paul writes in his Letter to the communities in Rome:

'I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. When I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my body another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my body ... With my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin'(Romans 7:14-25).

The Forgiveness of sins

Paul assures us that sin can be forgiven thanks to the grace of God that comes to us through Jesus:

'It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in drunken carousing, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires'(Romans 13:11-14).

To live a moral life it is necessary that we turn from a life of sin to a life of virtue. The Catechism quotes Pope John-Paul II, who writes in his encyclical *The Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and the world (Dominum et Vivificantem, n 31)*:

'Conversion requires "exposing sin"(John 16:8 – showing sin up for what it is). It includes the interior judgment of conscience, and this, being a proof of the action of the Spirit of truth in our innermost being, becomes at the same time the start of a new grant of grace and love: "Receive the Holy Spirit." Thus in this exposing of sin we receive a double gift: the gift of the truth of conscience and the gift of the certainty of redemption. The Spirit of truth is the Consoler.'

The Catechism (n. 976) states:

'The Apostles' Creed associates faith in the forgiveness of sin not only with faith in the Holy Spirit but also with faith in the Church and in the communion of saints.'

It was when the risen glorified Jesus gave the fullness of the Holy Spirit to his disciples (to the Church) that he forgave their sins and gave them the power and the commission to forgive sins:

'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'(John 20:22-23).

Sacraments of Forgiveness

He had already taught his disciples to pray to God:

‘Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us’(Matthew 6:12).

Now he gives his disciples the fullness of the Spirit, a share in his intimate communion with his Father. It is this gift that makes it possible for us to be forgiven and to forgive.

We will reflect further on forgiveness and reconciliation when we examine the sacraments of Baptism, Reconciliation and Eucharist in Book Two of this Companion to the Catechism. Suffice here to say that Baptism (Catechism n. 977-979) celebrates our communion with Jesus and with his Body, the Church. No longer trapped in the sin we are free to ‘walk in newness of life’(Romans 6:4). If a person has committed personal sins prior to baptism these are forgiven, purified by Jesus’ love. Sins committed after Baptism are forgiven through the sacrament of Reconciliation (Catechism n. 980). We are required, of course, to attempt to undo the harm our sin has caused. However, this is not always possible. We are assured of God’s unconditional love and enabled to see beyond our sin and give our forgiven selves to others in love. The sins of daily life that do not break our communion with God are forgiven in the sacrament of the Eucharist, through our communion with Jesus. After all, only love has the power to heal. In the Eucharist Jesus gives himself to us in love, a love that makes forgiveness happen.

The Catechism quotes Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine (n. 983):

‘The Lord wills that his disciples possess a tremendous power: that his lowly servants accomplish in his name all that he did when he was on earth’ (St Ambrose).

‘Were there no forgiveness of sins in the Church, there would be no hope of life to come or eternal liberation. Let us thank God who has given his Church such a gift’ (St Augustine).