

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

VICES - SIN

(Catechism nn. 1846-1876)

Sin

Having reflected on virtue, the Catechism turns to its opposite: vice (n. 1846-1876). It defines sin 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).

We have already spoken on sin when reflecting on the article of the Creed that states our belief in the ‘Forgiveness of Sin’ (see Chapter 16). There we spoke of the nuances in the Greek word *harmartia*., We also spoke of the rich vocabulary of sin as found, for example, in Psalm 78 and in the Letter to the Hebrews.

There is a long tradition that lists seven ‘capital’ sins (from the Latin *caput* meaning ‘head’): pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth. Sin is imagined as springing from one or other of these seven sources. Seven is clearly a symbolic number, and there is a certain arbitrariness in the seven vices included in the list. They are noted, however, in the Catechism (n. 1866), and merit our reflection. We refer the reader back to Chapter 20 on Baptism in which we listed the seven vices and gave a brief definition of each.

This is not the place to attempt an exhaustive list of sins. We will limit our reflections to two passages from the Newer Testament that list a number of key vices. The first text is from Jesus; the second from Paul.

Mark 7:21-23

Mark has Jesus say:

‘It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person’(Mark 7:21-23).

The list begins with ‘fornication’(Greek: *porneia*): a word covering a whole range of morally irresponsible behaviour in matters of sexuality. Jesus puts it first because love is central to his teaching, and the way we relate sexually is central to who we are and to the way we express or fail to express love.

The next three (theft, murder, adultery) are taken straight from the Ten Commandments and will be treated later.

‘Avarice’ refers to ways of indulging greed by grasping at what one does not have just so as to have more. Notable among the things that we seek to grasp are power, prestige, possessions or pleasure. Jesus warns us:

‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of avarice; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions’(Luke 12:15).

Paul speaks of avarice as a form of idolatry (see Colossians 3:5). In his farewell letter to the churches in the East, he warns:

‘You must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy (avaricious) to practice every kind of impurity. That is not the way you learned Christ!’ (Ephesians 4:17-20).

Jesus warns us, in general terms, against ‘wickedness’.

He goes on to speak of ‘deceit’, underlining the central importance of truth.

He warns against ‘licentiousness’, which can be defined as the vice of unrestrained gratifying of sensual desire. The following, from the Second Letter of Peter is pertinent:

‘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).

We might also reflect on Paul’s words to the Romans:

‘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 reveling and drunkenness, 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).

Jesus completes his list of vices with ‘envy (literally: ‘the evil eye’), slander, pride and folly’, and concludes: ‘all these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’

Paul warns Timothy:

‘People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power’ (2Timothy 3:2-5).

Galatians 5:19-21

Let us reflect now on a list of vices given by Paul in his Letter to the Galatians. He calls them ‘works of the flesh’ (in contradistinction to what he calls ‘fruits of the Spirit’):

‘fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God’ (Galatians 5:19-21).

Paul offers this conventional list as typical of the way we behave when we are enslaved by desires that have not been purified by the Spirit of Jesus.

Like Jesus, Paul begins with sins against sexual love. Being a Christian means living in a certain way. It concerns the truth of who we are as persons. It is not surprising, therefore, that Paul moves immediately to speak of sexuality, for where else do all the dimensions of being human meet more intimately and more mysteriously than in our identity as man or woman? It is traditional Jewish and Christian wisdom that sexual relationships are meant to be sacraments in which we encounter the divine at the heart of another person cherished in love. There are divinely mysterious depths in every person. Sexual experience invites us into this mystery in which two people enjoy, encourage, heal, forgive and create each other in loving trust. There is a restlessness and a mysterious yearning at the heart of sexuality, for we know that we are not sufficient of ourselves. We need the other; we long to be in communion with the other. It is common human wisdom, born of experience, that when we give expression to our sexual desire we should do so in a way that recognises the sacredness and the dignity of our own person and of the other. Paul speaks of sexual behaviour which ignores all delicacy, by-passes love, and uses, even abuses, another person in a selfish attempt to assert one's own power or gratify one's own misdirected passion.

Paul goes on to list 'impurity': the pollution of our physical environment bears no comparison with the harm caused when we pollute the mind and heart.

He speaks next of licentiousness: a vice already noted in Mark 7:22.

He goes on to list 'idolatry', the vice of worshipping false gods. For Paul, this is worshipping any god other than the God revealed by Jesus.

Linked with this is the vice of 'sorcery'. Rather than accepting human limitations and the mystery of our own being and of the world of which we are part, rather than placing trust in a loving God, we seek false assurances from people who claim to know the future or to be able to control spirits.

'Enmities' and 'strife' are found where people are defined by race, or by any other quality other than their being made in the image of God.

'Jealousy' (Greek: *zēlos*) is a form of 'zeal' motivated by self-interest. We hold on to what we have so tightly that we treat people as objects and are unwilling to share with others when love requires it.

Paul lists 'anger' (one of the capital sins, see Chapter 20).

He adds 'selfishness, dissensions, factions, and envy.' The many different ways in which 'selfishness' (Greek: *eritheia*) finds expression lead to 'dissensions', and create 'factions'. We are 'envious' when we are unhappy with the prosperity of others, or the freedom they have in Christ. Being dissatisfied with who we are or with what we have, we want what others have. Paul completes the list with 'drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.'

We are reminded of the following from the Second Letter of Peter:

‘The Lord knows how to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment – especially those who indulge their flesh in depraved lust, and who despise authority ... These people are like irrational animals, mere creatures of instinct ... They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation while they feast with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed’(2Peter 2:9-14).

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 members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members ... 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).

Mortal and Venial Sin

In his First Letter, John writes:

‘All wrongdoing is sin, but there is a sin that is not mortal’(1John 5:17).

This obviously implies that there is sin that is mortal (from the Latin ‘*mors*’, meaning ‘death’). Mortal sin kills the soul, for it breaks our communion with God and so with the community.

The Catechism sets out three conditions for a sin to be mortal (n. 1857). Firstly, what we do must be very serious. Secondly, we must have full knowledge of what we are doing and its seriousness. Thirdly, we must give full consent to it. Responsibility is diminished by ignorance (though of course we have an obligation to become informed about what we are doing and its consequences). Responsibility can also be diminished by passion, by external pressures and by pathological disorders. For this reason the Catechism wisely reminds us (n. 1861):

‘Although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offence, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God.’

This also applies to judgment of ourselves.

Sin that is not mortal is traditionally described as ‘venial’(from the Latin ‘*venia*’, meaning ‘pardon’). Obviously every sin can be pardoned. Sins that are not mortal are more readily pardonable, because they do not cut off our communion with God.

Conversion

Venial sins, however, are in no sense trivial. They weaken our love-communion with God. They manifest a disordered attachment to creatures. They impede our progress in the exercise of virtue and in living a moral life, and they have effects that make our behaviour to some extent dysfunctional.

The Catechism (n. 1863) quotes with approval a statement made by Saint Augustine in his commentary on John's Letters (1.6):

‘While we are in the flesh, we cannot help but have some light sins. But do not think lightly of these sins which we are wont to call ‘light’: if you take them for light when you weigh them, tremble when you count them! A number of light objects makes a great mass; a number of drops fills a river; a number of grains makes a heap. What, then, is our hope? Above all, confession.’

The Catechism goes on to state (n. 1865):

‘Sin creates a proclivity to sin. It engenders vice by repetition of the same acts. This results in perverse inclinations that cloud conscience and corrupt the practical judgment of good and evil.’

It adds a warning (n. 1868):

‘We have a responsibility for sins committed by others when we cooperate in them by participating directly and willingly in them, by ordering, advising, praising, or approving them, by not disclosing or hindering them when we have an obligation to do so, or by protecting those who do evil.’

Conversion and the Gift of the Holy Spirit

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.’