

RCIA CLASS 7B – HUMAN SIN AND GOD'S MERCY

I. Human nature, as with all the universe, was made good, but is fallen.

A. As Genesis 1 emphasizes, God made all things, including humanity good. See also Wis. 11:23-26.

1. Men and women were made to be in the image and likeness of God, of all things in the material realm, the most like God. See Gen. 1; Ps. 8:5-9.

2. There was at creation original justice, which involved, among other things, a harmony of nature with humanity, an ease at prayer and friendship with God, the ability to do what is right easily, and a body not subject to death and decay.

B. The Fall of Man marred that original justice and introduced disorder into the world and into human nature.

1. The world became fallen and rebelled at least in part against humanity and became disordered. See Gen. 3:17-19; Rom. 8:19-21.

2. Worse than that, the sin of Adam and Eve introduced original sin into human nature. Original sin is that break from God that in turn causes us to be flawed and act in a manner that is flawed. See, e.g., Psalm 14:1-3. Among the effects of original sin are:

a. Concupiscence, i.e. the difficulty in doing what is right, which is largely due to the fact that passions and desire are no longer fully under control. See, e.g., Rom. 7:14-25.

b. On a related point, there is a difficulty at prayer. In general, we no longer sense God as present to us as Adam and Eve did. See, e.g., Rom. 8:26; Catechism 2725.

c. There is also a darkness of intellect, a difficulty of thinking clearly especially about primary things, that comes from the separation from God.

d. Furthermore, due to the separation from God and the flaws introduced into the natural realm, the human body became subject to death and decay. God allowed this death and decay both to warn humanity about the need to repent and to place a limit on the evils

people could do. See Gen. 3:22.

- e. Supernatural death, the inability to be with God in heaven, was the worst consequence of sin. The subjection to physical death and decay is but a symbol, warning us of this deeper flaw. See Rom. 5:12-24; Cf. Luke 15:11-32.

C. Personal sin, also called actual sin, are sins we commit personally.

1. A sin is a word, deed, thought or desire contrary to the eternal law of God. Sins upset the order that God established and thus offends against the love of God, whether intentionally or not. See Catechism 1849-50.

2. One should distinguish between evil, sin and blameworthy sin, although the former categories include the latter.

a. An evil is the absence of any good that ought to be there, whether there is moral fault or not. Thus, for example sickness, homelessness, and the like are evils even though there may be no sin attached.

b. A sin is any action, thought, word or desire contrary to God's will and thus disordered, regardless of whether the one committing the act is blameworthy. Thus, for example, a desire for evil is sinful even if the person is blameless because he feels it involuntarily. Likewise, if a person commits perjury for what he considers a good cause, his action is a sin, even though he may be blameless if his society has taught him that doing so is acceptable. Original sin is thus sin even though it is not blameworthy.

c. A sin is blameworthy if a person commits it freely and either knows it is wrong or should know that it is wrong. Judging culpability in individual cases is sometimes difficult.

- There are also degrees of guilt when, for example, a person acts under great fear but still freely, or with ignorance that is partially his fault.

3. All sin draws us from God, and upsets the order of ourselves, society and the world. Every sin committed continues the disorder caused by original sin.

4. Although we can struggle against sins and (with the merits of Christ) help overcome their effect, we cannot cure our own sins or those of another except through Christ.
 - a. Because we are tainted with sin, all of our efforts to overcome sin them must be imperfect and thus not able to bring about full purity. Even overcoming the effects of sin is a bit like cleaning with a dirty towel. Cf. Is. 64:4-5.
 - b. Even our best efforts cannot get to the root of sin; it is too deeply buried. Cf. Ps. 14:3. As a result, all of the efforts of the world to rid itself of sin have fallen short, even those of the ancient country of Israel, who received God's law.
 - c. Furthermore, we can only give to God what He has already given to us, and thus cannot really make up the debt owed by sin. See Matt. 18:21-35.

D. We may not be personally guilty of original sin, but it does damage our nature. And we are guilty of actual sins committed on our own accord. Both then and now, we are in need of God's mercy, both as individuals and as members of the human race.

II. From the very beginning, God promised a redemption, a promise that would be fulfilled in Jesus.

A. Right after the fall, before the punishments were given to Adam and Eve, God already promised one who would crush the serpent's head. Gen. 3:15.

B. In the days before Abraham, God established a special relationship with a few people as a first promise of the restoration of all of humanity. See, e.g. Gen. 5:24, 8:22-9:17, 14:18-20; Heb. 11:1-7.

C. God began forming the Chosen People with the call to Abraham, through whom God promised a people, a land and blessings for all

nations. See, e.g., Gen. 12:2-3. The relationship with God came first, and the law would then be given. See Rom. 4.

D. After freeing the Chosen People from slavery in Egypt, God gave them the law at Mount Sinai, and then continued developing the law through the prophets during Israel's history. Even to other peoples God gave the natural law, indicating them in the depths of their hearts what was right and wrong. See Rom. 1:18-23.

E. However, the Chosen People could never seem to keep the revealed law, nor anyone else the natural law. Thus, the law paradoxically produced more sin, but that sin made it clear that another solution was needed. See Rom. 3:9-20, 5:12-13, 7:13.

F. Even in the Old Testament, there was a promise of God's cleansing power, although the precise means was not as clear. See, e.g., Ps. 51; Is. 1:18-19; Ez. 36:25-32; Zech. 13:1-1.

- As Pope John Paul II pointed out in his encyclical letter Dives in Misericordia (Rich in Mercy), the Old Testament mostly used two words to describe God's mercy. One word was hesed, which reflects God's fighting determination to make His covenant work, despite all human sinfulness, and to defeat the dominance of sin and death. The other word is rahamin, the term for a mother's unconditional love of her children, the seeing of goodness in the child despite all the flaws. These terms, one masculine and the other feminine, one more objective and one more subjective, give a sense of how God's mercy works.

III. It is the love shown through Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the Cross that saves us from sin and death.

A. One can speculate about whether we could have been saved by another means, but it was most fitting for salvation to come through Jesus Christ's death upon the Cross for several reasons. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Part III, question 46, article 3.

1. God's love for us was shown in the greatest possible fashion by suffering for us in this ignominious way. The sacrifice of Christ did not increase God's love for us, but showed it to us in the most powerful way.

2. This sacrifice hopefully inspires us to whatever sacrifices are needed for our own salvation and that of others. See 1 Peter 2:21.

3. There was a great balancing, insofar as the condemnation of man came through human sins, and so salvation was to come through a perfect human act. See Rom. 5:15-21. And the triumph of Christ was all the greater precisely because the devil seemed to have triumphed before it. The worse the seeming defeat, the greater the victory. Precisely because of the crucifixion, Jesus received greater

glory. See, e.g., John 3:14; Heb. 5:8-9.

4. Jesus gave a greater dignity to humanity by achieving salvation in a sense from within, so that we were saved by one like us. And, in all suffering, we are joined more to Jesus. All innocent human suffering receives its final meaning by union with Christ.

5. The suffering of Jesus shows us the evil of sin. What the crucifixion and death of Christ did to His body and emotions, sin does to our souls. Jesus in a sense, therefore, became the image of sin for us that we may see its destructive power.

B. Forgiveness of sins comes above all else through Christ, but he exercises that power through the Church.

1. After His resurrection, Jesus gave the Apostles the power to forgive sins. See John 20:23; see also Matt. 16:19, 18:18. When the Spirit was poured forth upon them at Pentecost, they would then both proclaim the truth to the nations, and administer the sacraments to confer God's grace. See, e.g., Acts 2:1-41, 8:4-17; James 5:13-16.

2. The sacrament of Baptism brings one cleansing from original sin, and any personal sins committed thus far. The physical water is a symbol that truly confers the cleansing and sanctifying power of God. See John 3:5; Catechism 1262-74.

3. After Baptism, the Sacrament of Confession confers forgiveness of actual sins. See John 20:21-22. It is essential for Catholics to confess mortal sins, i.e. those grave enough to break the friendship with God, and helpful for other sins. See Catechism 1456-58, 1856

4. If received worthily, the Eucharist also gives cleansing from venial (less than mortal) sins and strengthens one against future sins. See Catechism 1394, 1436.

5. If Confession is unavailable, Anointing of the Sick also confers forgiveness of sins. See James 5:14-15; Catechism 1520.

6. Furthermore, acts of prayer, penance and charity, when joined to Christ, work to overcome sins. See 1 Pet. 4:8; James 5:20.

IV. While it is Jesus who frees us from sin, we must accept that freedom and live it out in practice.

A. Far from neglecting the moral law because God will forgive us, we are called to a deeper sanctity, knowing the price that has been

paid for our salvation. As Pope John Paul II pointed out in Dives in Misericordia, paragraph 157, "In no passage of the gospel message does forgiveness, or mercy as its source, mean indulgence toward evil, toward scandal, toward injury or insult."

1. If we truly place our faith in Christ, we will respond by trying at least to do His will. Accepting Christ of its own accord will lead one to want to do what is right. See, e.g., James 1:22-27, 2:14-17. If one truly lives in accord with the Holy Spirit that life will of its nature produce fruits of good works. See, e.g., Gal. 5:19-23.

2. We face a choice between the freedom of the children of God and slavery to sin. To choose sin and not repent of it is to choose that slavery to sin. See, e.g., John 8:34; Rom. 6:16-17.

3. If one does not act upon faith, the faith itself will eventually collapse because of the inconsistency. See Matt. 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49.

B. Furthermore, if one is a citizen of the realm of grace, that membership implies that one will show forth that grace to others, by witness and by forgiveness.

1. The calling is, not only to live in friendship with God, but to bring salvation to the world, in part by showing God's goodness through our good deeds. See, e.g., Matt. 5:13-48.

2. There is a balance in that we accept the principle of forgiveness by showing forgiveness ourselves. See, e.g., Matt. 6:14-15, 18:21-35; James 3:13. But, as with God's forgiveness of us, that forgiveness does not simply mean leaving another person in sin, but rather acting to overcome the effect of sin in their lives. See, e.g., Matt. 5:6-7, 18:15-20.

C. God offers forgiveness to all people. However, each person makes the choice of whether to accept it and live in His light, or choose the darkness away from God. See John 3:16-20.

D. In addition to accepting the grace of God offered through Christ, we also act and pray to help overcome the effects of sin. The words of Christ and the Catechism especially recommend prayer, fasting and other sacrifices, and almsgiving and other forms of generosity. See Matt. 6:1-18; Catechism 1434; see also Tobit 12:8.