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Life without God

"Sin is the principal enemy of our happiness, but it has little power over God's mercy." A new article in the series "Light of Faith."

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The Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church begins with this question: "What is God's plan for man?" And it gives this answer: "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life."[1]

That is, God created us to be happy, and the path to achieve this is to be with Him (cf. *Mk* 3:13), to share in his blessed life. All the teachings of Jesus are aimed at fostering this joy: *These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full (Jn 15:11)*. God the Father, like all the fathers in this world, wants his children to be happy.

God's plan, our yearning for the fullness of love, is engraved in the most intimate part of our being. We seek, desire and pursue happiness in all that we do, and especially in all our desires and loves. Aristotle already realized this twenty-three centuries ago. In the first chapter of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he wrote that all men agree that happiness is the supreme good, in view of which we choose all other goods (health, success, honor, money, pleasures, etc.).[2]

Reality

In theory, everyone knows this and says: “What I want is to be happy.” And yet something seems to have gone wrong, since people often fail to attain happiness. Perhaps we have had the experience of looking at the faces of the people around us while traveling by train or bus, and we have seen faces marked by sadness, worry and pain. “Men die and are not happy,” a twentieth century writer, an atheist, observed pessimistically. And so we may have sometimes asked ourselves: “Lord, what’s going on here?”

The plan for Creation included our happiness, but something has gone wrong. We do not always manage to be happy, and often, perhaps because of that, we do not make others happy either. Moreover, not infrequently we can cause those around us to suffer, acting in an unkind and even

cruel way. We often have to say: “Lord, have mercy on your people! Lord, forgive us for so much cruelty!”^[3] as Pope Francis prayed during his visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau on World Youth Day in 2016. Later that evening, addressing the crowd from the window of the Archbishop’s residence, he added: “How much pain! How much cruelty! Is it possible that we human beings, who have been created in God’s image, are capable of doing these things?”

What has happened? Why are so many people unhappy? Why do certain things that promise so much happiness—friendship, family bonds, social relationships, created goods—sometimes become a source of so much dissatisfaction, bitterness and sadness? How is it possible that we are capable of causing so much harm? The answer to these painful

questions is summed up in one word: sin.

The enemy of happiness

The word for “sin” in Latin is *peccatum*, which means “crime, fault or guilty action.” In Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word used for “sin” is *hamartia*, which means “failing to reach the goal,” “missing the mark,” and which was used especially for the warrior who missed the target with his spear. Finally, in Hebrew the common word for “sin” is *jattá’th*, which means “to err” in the sense of not hitting the center of the target or reaching the exact goal or objective.

So the first sense of sin is that of missing the target. We shoot an arrow aimed at happiness, but we miss. In this sense, sin is an error, a tragic mistake, and at the same time a deception. We seek happiness where it is not to be found (such as in

fame or power); we stumble on our way to it (for example, by accumulating superfluous goods that blind our heart to the needs of others); or, even worse, we confuse our longing for happiness with another kind of love (as in the case of an unfaithful love). But always underlying any sin is the search for a good—real or apparent—that we think will make us happy. We will never understand sin as long as we fail to recognize the unfulfilled longing for happiness that leads to it. Our Lord warned us: *For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness (Mk 7:21-22).*

Sometimes, an intense desire for something sinful stems from a lack of real love in a person's life, which leads to unrest and sadness, and to the attempt to try to resolve it in this

mistaken way. For example, someone who feels unloved and lacks strong emotional ties, whether with God or their own family or friends, may react with suspicion and aggression, and even with injustice, when faced with others' claims on them, in order to protect themselves and overcome their own insecurity. Or perhaps they may seek a substitute for the love they lack in “throwaway” relationships, easy pleasures or material things.

Only God's love fully satisfies us.^[4]

Benedict XVI put it this way:

“Happiness is something we all want, but one of the great tragedies in this world is that so many people never find it, because they look for it in the wrong places. The key to it is very simple—true happiness is to be found in God. We need to have the courage to place our deepest hopes in God alone, not in money, in a career, in worldly success, or in our

relationships with others, but in God. Only He can satisfy the deepest needs of our hearts.”[5] On the other hand, when we forget Him, it is easy to feel frustration, sadness and despair, consequences of an empty heart. Hence Saint Josemaría’s advice makes so much sense: “Don’t forget, my son, that for you on earth there is but one evil, which you must fear and avoid with the grace of God: sin.”[6]

An offense to God, our Loving Father

The *Compendium* of the Catechism defines sin as “an offense against God in disobedience to his love.”[7] But many people ask themselves: “Does God really care? Is He affected by what I do, even by what I think? How can I hurt God? Can God suffer or feel pain? How can I offend God, who is absolutely transcendent?”

If by offense we mean *to cause harm*, obviously God cannot be offended by anything that we do. Nothing that I do can damage God. But God is Love. He is a Father full of love for his children, and has compassion on us. Besides, God has become one of us, to take upon himself our sins and redeem us. Benedict XVI said in his second encyclical: “Bernard of Clairvaux coined the marvelous expression: *Impassibilis est Deus, sed non incompassibilis*. God cannot suffer, but he can have compassion. Man is worth so much to God that he himself became man in order to suffer with man in an utterly real way, in flesh and blood, as is revealed to us in the account of Jesus’s Passion. Hence in all human suffering we are joined by one who experiences and carries that suffering *with us*; hence *con-solatio* is present in all suffering, the consolation of God’s compassionate love.”^[8] We can recall Saint Paul’s

strong words about the mystery of Christ: *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21).*

In a way, God suffers with our sin because it does harm to us. He is not a capricious being who makes into sins actions that in themselves are indifferent, forbidding them so that we show Him obedience by avoiding them. Rather He is a loving Father who tells us what could harm us and hinder the happiness to which we are called. His commandments could be compared to an instruction manual for mankind on how to attain happiness and not hinder the happiness of others (we should keep in mind that the content of this manual is inscribed in our created nature, and is grasped spontaneously by our conscience when open to the truth).

Sin injures God's love for us—the Love that longs to make us happy. When we sin, it's as though God laments through his tears: “But what are you doing, my child? Don't you realize that this harms you and my other children? Don't do it! Don't be foolish! Look, you won't find the happiness you seek there, but quite the opposite! Listen to me!” Hence we can say that sin “is an offense against God in disobedience to his love.”^[9] We insult his love, and put it into doubt with our sinful deeds.

It is worth adding that God never gets angry with us. He never retaliates, even when we sin. In those moments, it is as if he is suffering with us and for us in Christ. Clement of Alexandria said that “God, in His great love for mankind, comes to our help as the mother-bird flies to one of her young that has fallen out of the nest; and if a serpent opens its mouth to swallow the little bird, the

mother flutters about and utters cries of grief over her dear offspring (cf. *Deut* 32:11). Thus God seeks His fallen creature with a fatherly love. He heals it from its fall and pursues the serpent. He recovers the young one and encourages it to fly up to the nest.”[10] How good God is!

God is like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, who scans the horizon eagerly for the return of his sinful son (cf. *Lk* 15:11-19). Sin distances us from God. But that is not true on God’s part. Many Gospel passages show us how Jesus seeks out sinners, and defends them against the attacks of the scribes and Pharisees. God does not distance Himself from us. He never stops loving us. Our distance from Him is created in our own heart, on the inside. But God’s heart remains attached to us. We are the ones who close ourselves to his love. And a single step towards Him on our part

is enough for his mercy to pour into our soul. *And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him (Lk 15:20).* Sin is the principal enemy of our happiness, but it has little power over God's mercy: "We are all sinners. But He loves us, He loves us."[11] That is our hope.

Attack on human solidarity

After speaking about the offense against God, the *Compendium* adds that sin, all sin, "wounds human nature and injures human solidarity."[12] Actually, both elements are joined together, since human beings are social by nature. But we can focus on the second part: sin *injures human solidarity*. Faced with this statement, some people ask: "Why is personal sin bad if it doesn't affect other people, if I don't harm

anyone?” Actually, we have already seen that, by sinning, I always harm someone: myself. And precisely because of that, I offend God. But now we will try to grasp why all sin, even the most hidden ones, damages the unity among human beings.

Genesis describes how the first sin broke the bond of friendship that united the human family. After the fall, we see the man and the woman pointing at each other with an accusing finger: *The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate (Gen 3:12)*, Adam says. Their relationship, marked before by loving wonder, now bears the mark of desire and domination: *yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you (Gen 3:16)*, God says to Eve. [13]

Saint John Paul II said in this regard: “Since by sinning man refuses to

submit to God, his internal balance is also destroyed and so it is within himself that contradictions and conflicts arise. Wounded in this way, man almost inevitably causes damage to the fabric of his relationship with others and with the created world.”[14] Those who let themselves be carried away by internal sins of resentment or criticism are already treating others unjustly, and it is impossible to prevent external omissions of love due to their neighbor, or even external faults against charity. Those who commit sins of impurity, even if only interior, corrupt their capacity to look, and therefore to love, and are already treating some people as objects, and not as persons. Those who only think selfishly about their own needs, will find themselves committing injustices and mistreating the environment they share with others. Sin introduces an internal division in man, a loss of

freedom so that: “as a weak and sinful being, he often does what he would not, and fails to do what he would. Hence he suffers from internal divisions, and from these flow so many and such great discords in society.”[15]

Sin sows division in the hearts of men and women and impedes their shared advance towards happiness. Seeing sin in all its harsh reality can lead to the temptation of becoming pessimistic and sad, especially if we take our eyes off Christ. But contemplating Jesus carrying the Cross, suffering but serene, weak but majestic, fills us with hope and optimism, no matter how great our miseries and sins may be: “his fall lifts us up, his death brings us back to life. To our falling again and again into evil, Jesus responds with his determination to redeem us, with an abundance of forgiveness. And, so that no one may despair, again he

wearily raises himself, embracing the Cross.”[16]

José Brage

[1] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1.

[2] Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, nos. 1095-1097, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1999, trans. T. H. Irwin.

[3] Pope Francis, Visit to Auschwitz, 29 August 2016.

[4] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 361.

[5] Benedict XVI, *Address to the students of St. Mary's University*, Twickenham, London, 17 September 2010.

[6] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 386.

[7] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 392.

[8] Benedict XVI, Enc. *Spe Salvi* (30 November 2007), no. 39.

[9] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 392.

[10] Clement of Alexandria, *The Protrepticus*, 10.

[11] Francis, Words from the window of the residence of the Archbishop of Krakow during World Youth Day, 29 August 2016.

[12] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 392.

[13] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 400.

[14] Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (2 December 1984), no. 15.

[15] Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (7 December 1965), no. 9.

[16] Saint Josemaria, *Way of the Cross*, 7th Station.

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