Topic 10: Sin and God's Mercy

The loss of the sense of sin has led to the loss of the awareness of the need for salvation, and hence to the forgetfulness of God through indifference. But Christ’s triumph on the Cross is an expression of his mercy towards us, an assurance that “love is stronger than sin.” Mercy is the fundamental law that should guide the heart of every person when looking at a brother or sister encountered on life’s journey.

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1. The mystery of mercy

Alongside the great achievements of our civilisation, the contemporary world also presents shadows and deviations that are not always superficial. For “the imbalances under which the modern world labours are linked with that more basic imbalance which is rooted in the heart of man.”[1]

The human person experiences many limitations as a finite creature. When the impossibility of responding to evil, suffering and injustice is perceived, many people fail to turn to the merciful God, but rather give in to indignant accusation. The experience of evil and suffering thus become a justified reason for turning away from God,

calling into question his merciful goodness. Some even come to see suffering as a divine punishment that falls upon the sinner, further distorting God's mercy.

A vicious circle is thus formed. In the words of Saint John Paul II, "the center of the tragedy being experienced by modern man is the eclipse of the sense of God and of man."[2] It seems that God is not relevant, since He cannot solve our problems. On the one hand, it is not clear to us that we need salvation. And the salvation offered by Christ and his Church does not seem relevant.

The final consequence of this eclipse of God is the widespread rejection of the need to turn to God for forgiveness and mercy. Thus the loss of the sense of sin has led to the loss of the awareness of the need for salvation, and hence to the

forgetfulness of God through indifference.

Therefore the more that people, succumbing to secularisation, lose the sense of the word mercy, the more the Church feels the imperative right and duty to preach the God of mercy. The mystery of the Christian faith seems to find its synthesis in this word. The evangelising mission is the forceful proclamation that in Christ crucified, dead and risen, we find full and authentic liberation from evil, sin and death.[3]

Jesus is the face of the Father's mercy. "It is as though Christ wanted to reveal that the limit imposed on evil, whose cause and victim is man, is ultimately Divine Mercy."[4]

Christ's triumph on the Cross is an expression of his mercy towards all men and women, an expression of the truth that "love is stronger than sin," "stronger than death and all

evil."[5] The world will only achieve peace over war, over violence, when it invokes divine mercy: "Jesus, I trust in You."[6]

It is not easy to give an answer for so much evil in the world. Perhaps this is because evil is not a problem, but a mystery. A mystery in which we are personally involved. A mystery that is not solved theoretically, but with one's whole life.

We always need to contemplate the mystery of mercy: the relationship between suffering, injustice, sin, mankind and God. For, as Pope Francis says,[7] mercy is the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person when he or she looks at their brother or sister encountered on life's journey. Mercy is the word that reveals the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Mercy is the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. And therefore

mercy is the path that unites God and mankind.

In the life of the Church, mercy is a permanent reality. But there are times when we are called to look at mercy more intently.

2. Sin is understood on the basis of mercy

“God is infinitely good and all his works are good. Yet no one can escape the experience of suffering or the evils in nature which seem to be linked to the limitations proper to creatures: and above all to the question of moral evil” (*Catechism*, 385). “Sin is present in human history; any attempt to ignore it or to give this dark reality other names would be futile” (*Catechism*, 386). But where does evil, especially sin, come from?

To answer this question we must consider the mystery of God, because sin can only be understood in light of the merciful God of Jesus Christ. “The mystery of iniquity (cf. 2 Thess 2:7) is only clarified in the light of the ‘mystery of our religion’ (1 Tim 3:16). The revelation of divine love in Christ manifested at the same time the extent of evil and the superabundance of grace (cf. Rom 5:20). We must therefore approach the question of the origin of evil by turning our eyes in faith on Him who alone is its Conqueror (cf. Lk 11:21-22; Jn 16:11; 1 Jn 3:8)” (*Catechism*, 385). As Pascal says in his *Pensées*, knowledge of God without knowledge of the need for our redemption is deceptive, as is recognising our misery without knowing our Redeemer.[8]

In recognising this deep bond between mankind and God we can come to see that sin is an abuse of

the freedom God gives to created persons so that they can love Him and love one another (cf. *Catechism*, 386).

In order to clarify the reality of sin, the light of divine Revelation speaks to us in particular of the "original sin." But the starting point for understanding this is the message of divine mercy revealed by Jesus.

3. Original sin: an essential truth of faith

"The doctrine of original sin is, so to speak, the 'reverse side' of the Good News that Jesus is the Saviour of all, that all need salvation and that salvation is offered to all through Christ.

"The story of the fall (Gen 3) uses language made up of images, but it affirms a primordial event, an event that took place at the beginning of

human history (cf. GS 13,1). Revelation gives us the certainty of faith that the whole of human history is marked by the original sin freely committed by our first parents (cf. Council of Trent: DS 1513; Pius XII, *Humani generis*: ibid., 3897; Paul VI, Discourse 11 July 1966)" (*Catechism*, 388-389).

"Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God (cf. Gen 3:1-5), which makes them fall into death out of envy (cf. Wis 2:24). Scripture and the Church's Tradition see in this being a fallen angel, called 'Satan' or 'the devil' (cf. Jn 8:44; Rev 12:9). The Church teaches that Satan was at first a good angel, made by God" (*Catechism*, 391).

"Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart (cf. Gen 3:1-11) and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's

commandment. This is what man's first sin consisted of (cf. Rom 5:19). All subsequent sin would be disobedience towards God and lack of trust in his goodness" (*Catechism*, 397).

"Scripture portrays the tragic consequences of this first disobedience. Adam and Eve immediately lose the grace of original holiness (cf. Rom 3:23). They are afraid of the God (cf. Gen 3:9-10) of whom they have conceived a false image, that of a God jealous of his prerogatives (cf. Gen 3:5)" (*Catechism*, 399).

As a consequence, "the harmony in which they had found themselves, established by original justice, is destroyed; the dominion of the spiritual faculties of the soul over the body is broken (cf. Gen 3:7); the union between man and woman is strained (cf. Gen 3:11-13); their

relations will be marked by desire and dominion (cf. Gen 3:16)" (*Catechism*, 400).

Harmony with creation is also broken: "the visible creation becomes strange and hostile to man (cf. Gen 3:17:19). Because of man, creation is subjected to 'bondage to decay' (Rom 8:21). Finally, the consequence explicitly announced for the case of disobedience (cf. Gen 2:17) will come to pass: man 'will return to the dust from which he was formed' (Gen 3:19). Death makes its entry into human history (cf. Rom 5:12)" (*Catechism*, 400).

"From this first sin, a veritable invasion of sin inundates the world: the fratricide committed by Cain on Abel (cf. Gen 4:3-15); universal corruption, as a result of sin (cf. Gen 6:5,12; Rom 1:18-32); in the history of Israel, sin frequently manifests itself, especially as unfaithfulness to the

God of the Covenant and as transgression of the Law of Moses; and even after the Redemption of Christ, among Christians, sin manifests itself in many ways (cf. 1 Cor 1-6; Rev 2-3)" (*Catechism*, 401).

4. Consequences of original sin for humanity

Human existence shows the evidence of sin in our lives, along with the reality that sin is not the result of our being evil by nature, but comes from the free choice of evil. Moral evil does not, therefore, belong to the essence of human nature; it comes neither from man's social nature nor from his material being, nor obviously from God or from a fixed destiny. Christian realism places man before his own responsibility: he can do evil as the result of his freedom, and the person responsible for it is none other than himself (cf. *Catechism*, 387).

“What divine Revelation teaches us coincides with experience itself. For man, when he examines his heart, finds himself inclined to evil and immersed in many evils which cannot come from his Creator, who is good. By often refusing to acknowledge God as his principle, he has also broken the proper order with regard to his ultimate end and, at the same time, his whole order in relation to himself, to all other men and to all created things” (GS 13,1).

Throughout history, the Church has formulated the dogma of original sin in contrast to an exaggerated optimism and pessimism (cf. *Catechism*, 406). In contrast to Pelagius, who claimed that man can do good only with his natural powers, and that grace is a mere external help, thus minimising both the scope of Adam’s sin and Christ’s redemption (reduced to merely bad or good example, respectively), the

Council of Carthage (418), following Saint Augustine, taught the absolute priority of grace, for man has been damaged by sin (cf. DH 223.227; cf. also the Second Council of Orange in 529: DH 371-372). In contrast to Luther, who maintained that after sin man is essentially corrupted in his nature, that his freedom is annulled and that sin is found in everything he does, the Council of Trent (1546) affirmed the ontological relevance of baptism, which erases original sin. Although its consequences remain – among them concupiscence, which is not to be identified, as Luther did, with sin itself – man is free in his actions and can merit with good works, sustained by grace (cf. DH 1511-1515).

At the heart of the Lutheran position, and also of some recent interpretations of Gen 3, is the lack of a proper understanding of the relationship between 1) nature and

history, 2) the psychological-existential plane and the ontological plane, 3) the individual and the collective.

1) Although there are some mythical elements in Genesis (understanding the concept of “myth” in its best sense, i.e. as a word-narrative that gives rise to and thus is at the foundation of subsequent history), it would be a mistake to interpret the story of the fall as a symbolic explanation of the original human sinful condition. This interpretation turns a historical fact into part of human nature, mythologising it and making it inevitable: paradoxically, the sense of guilt that leads to recognising oneself as “naturally” sinful would lead to mitigating or eliminating personal responsibility for sin, since man could not avoid that to which he spontaneously tends. What is correct, rather, is to affirm that the sinful condition

belongs to man's history, and not to his original nature.

2) Since some effects of sin remain after baptism, a Christian can experience strongly the tendency towards evil, feeling deeply sinful, as happens also in the life of the saints. However, this existential perspective is not the only one, nor is it the most fundamental one, for baptism has truly erased original sin and made us children of God (cf. *Catechism* 405). Ontologically, the Christian in grace is righteous before God. Luther radicalised the existential perspective, understanding all reality in light of it, which was thus seen as ontologically marked by sin.

3) The third point leads to the question of the transmission of original sin, "a mystery which we cannot fully comprehend" (*Catechism*, 404). The Bible teaches that our first parents

transmitted sin to all humanity. The following chapters of Genesis (cf. Gen 4-11; cf. *Catechism*, 401) narrate the progressive corruption of the human race. Drawing a parallel between Adam and Christ, Saint Paul states: “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience [Christ’s] many will be made righteous” (Rom 5:19). This parallelism helps us to understand correctly the interpretation usually given to the term *adamah* as a collective singular: as Christ is one and at the same time head of the Church, so Adam is one and at the same time head of humanity.[9] “By this ‘unity of the human race,’ all men are implicated in Adam’s sin, just as all are implicated in Christ’s righteousness” (*Catechism*, 40).

The Church understands the original sin of our first parents and the sin inherited by humanity in an

analogical way. “Adam and Eve commit a personal sin, but this sin . . . will be transmitted by propagation to all mankind, that is, by the transmission of a human nature deprived of original holiness and justice. This is why original sin is called ‘sin’ in an analogous way: it is a sin ‘contracted,’ ‘not committed,’ a state and not an act” (*Catechism*, 404). Thus, “although proper to each one, original sin does not have, in any descendant of Adam, a character of personal fault” (*Catechism*, 405).

For some people it is difficult to accept the idea of inherited sin,[10] especially if one has an individualistic view of the person and of freedom. What did I have to do with Adam’s sin? Why should I pay for the consequences of someone else’s sin? These questions reflect an absence of a sense of the real solidarity that exists between all men and women as created by God.

Paradoxically, this absence can be understood as a manifestation of the sin transmitted to each one. In other words, original sin obscures the understanding of that profound fraternity of the human race which makes its transmission possible.

Faced with the lamentable consequences of sin and its universal spread, the question arises: "But why did God not prevent the first man from sinning? St. Leo the Great responds, 'Christ's inexpressible grace gave us blessings better than those the demon's envy had taken away' (*Sermo* 73,4). And St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "There is nothing to prevent human nature's being raised up to something greater, even after sin; God permits evil in order to draw forth some greater good. Thus St. Paul says, 'Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more'; and the Exsultet sings, 'O happy fault . . . which gained for us so great a

Redeemer!' (*Summa Theologiae*, III, 1, 3, ad 3)" (*Catechism*, 412).

5. Life as combat

This view of sin in the light of Christ's Redemption provides a lucid realism about man's situation and actions in the world. The Christian must be aware both of the greatness of being a child of God and of being a sinner. This realism:

(a) Prevents both naive optimism and hopeless pessimism and "provides a lucid discerning look at man's situation and his action in the world . . . Ignorance of the fact that man has a wounded nature, inclined to evil, leads to grave errors in the fields of education, politics, social action and morals" (*Catechism*, 407).

b) It gives us a serene trust in God, Creator and merciful Father, who never abandons his creatures,

always forgives, and leads everything towards good, even in the midst of adversity. “The trial, I don’t deny it, is very hard: you have to go uphill, ‘against the grain.’ What is my advice? That you must say: *omnia in bonum!* Everything that happens, ‘everything that happens to me,’ is for my own good. Therefore you need to accept what seems so hard to you, as a sweet and pleasant reality.”[11]

c) It fosters an attitude of deep humility, which leads one to acknowledge one’s own sins without surprise, and to be sorry for them because they are an offence to God and not merely because they are a personal defect.

d) It helps to distinguish what is proper to human nature as such from what is a consequence of the wound of sin in human nature. After sin, not everything that is

experienced as spontaneous is good. Human life therefore is marked by the need for struggle: we need to fight to behave in a human and Christian way (cf. *Catechism*, 409). "The entire tradition of the Church has described Christians as *milites Christi*: soldiers of Christ. Soldiers who bring serenity to others while continually fighting against their own bad inclinations."[12] A Christian who strives to avoid sin loses nothing of what makes life good and beautiful. Some people maintain that it is necessary for man to do evil in order to experience his autonomous freedom, because a life without sin would be boring in the end. Opposing this view is the figure of Mary, conceived immaculately, who shows us that a life completely given to God, far from producing boredom, becomes an adventure filled with light and infinite surprises.[13]

6. The tenderness of God: sin, salvation, mercy

Confronting the reality of sin, God's mercy rises up as a forceful answer. Jesus is the face of this mercy, as we can see in his attitude towards sinners ("I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners") such as Zacchaeus, the paralytic, the adulterous woman, the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene, the good thief, Peter, and countless others.

In a particularly relevant way, we can see this in the parables of mercy such as the parable of the prodigal son, which in fact bring to it fullness the whole Old Testament teaching on the God who is "compassionate and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6). We see this expressed again and again in the Psalms: the Lord is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and rich

in mercy and faithfulness" (Ps 86:15); "compassionate and merciful, slow to anger and rich in mercy" (Ps 103:8); "gracious and just, our God is compassionate" (Ps 116:5); "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in mercy" (Ps 145:8).

In Jesus' Passion, all the filth of the world touches the infinitely Pure One, the soul of Jesus Christ, and hence the Son of God himself.[14] While it is usually the case that anything unclean touching something clean renders it unclean, here it is the other way around: when the world, with all the injustice and cruelty that makes it unclean, comes into contact with the infinitely Pure One, and through this contact the filth of the world is truly absorbed, wiped out and transformed in the pain of infinite Love.

The reality of evil and injustice that disfigures the world and at the same time distorts the image of God – this reality exists, through our sins. It cannot simply be ignored; it must be addressed. Nor is it the case that a cruel God demands something infinite. It is just the opposite. God offers Himself as the “place” of reconciliation, and in the person of his Son takes all human suffering upon himself. God himself grants his infinite purity to the world. God himself “drinks the cup to the dregs” of all that seems unbearable in human suffering, and thus restores the right order of creation through the immensity of his Love.

Jesus in his Passion cries out to the Father with all his might. In a way, “all the misfortunes of humanity of all times, slave of sin and death, all the pleas and intercessions of the history of salvation are gathered in this cry of the incarnate Word.

Behold, the Father receives them and, above all hope, he hears them in raising his Son."[15] This suffering concentrates in itself all the misery, sin and death of mankind, all the evil in history. And the Love with which He accepts it overcomes it, redeems it, saves it.

The Cross is the final word of Christ's love for us. But it is not the final word of the God of the covenant. This word will be pronounced at the dawn of Sunday: "He is risen."[16] God raises his Son Jesus Christ, and in Christ He gives us the gift of sharing in his own Life forever.

Basic bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 374-421.

Saint John Paul II, “I Believe in God the Father,” *Catechesis on the Creed*.

Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 11 April 2015.

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[1] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 10.

[2] Saint John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 21.

[3] Cf. Saint John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, 44.

[4] Saint John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*.

[5] These expressions appear repeatedly in Saint John Paul II’s *Dives in Misericordia*.

[6] Saint Faustina, *Diary of Divine Mercy in My Soul*, 47, 309, 327, 949.

[7] Cf. Pope Francis, *Redemptoris missio*, 2.

[8] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 556 and 449.

[9] This is the main reason why the Church has always read the story of the fall from the point of view of monogenism (the origin of the human race from a single couple). The opposite hypothesis, polygenism, seemed to be required as a scientific (and even exegetical) fact for a few years, but nowadays the biological descent from a single couple (monophyletism) is considered more plausible even at the scientific level. From the point of view of faith, polygenism is problematic, since it is not clear how it can be reconciled with the Revelation on original sin (cf. Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, DH 3897), although this is a question that can still be investigated and reflected upon.

[10] Cf. Saint John Paul II, General Audience, 24 September 1986, 1.

[11] Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, 127; cf. Rom 8:28.

[12] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By,* 74.

[13] Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily, 8 December 2005.

[14] This commentary on the contrast between Christ's purity and the filth of sin is found in Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, Ignatius Press, pp. 231-232.

[15] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2606.

[16] Cf. Saint John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 7.