SIN AS FAILURE TO BE FULLY RESPONSIBLE

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THE BIBLICAL renewal has led to the popularisation of the term 'responsibility' (literally *ability to respond*) as the framework to understand Christian life and morality. God calls—we respond. God is present to us always and makes a call to us in every action upon us. In responding to these actions upon us we respond to God. 'Responsibility' thus means responding to God by making a positive response to genuine human goods and values, and ultimately to persons. The failure to do this, *'irresponsibility',* understood as refusal or failure to respond as we should to the good of persons (including ourselves) is what is meant by the term we use—in our tradition we call it sin.

Sin is a religious term which is used to refer to a reality, a mystery of evil, which experience shows is very much part of the human condition and which in some way involves a negative relationship to God. Sin is meaningless without awareness of a relationship with God, who reveals himself in Jesus and pours out his love through the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that sin is not also a moral evil, for it is about the moral evil that people do. Still sin is not just about doing evil; it is about saying no to God. If it is not this it is not sin in the proper sense. If we use the word in other ways that do not refer to the fundamental relationship with God we are using 'sin' analogously, as we do, for example, when we talk about original sin or social sin.

Perhaps the unpopularity of God-talk for many today is one of the reasons why sin-talk is not much in fashion in our secular society. People use other ways of describing wrong conduct, whether the vandalism of festooning walls with graffiti or violence in our streets or whatever. It is 'unacceptable', 'inappropriate', 'disgraceful', 'unfair', 'irresponsible'. It is this last commonly used term understood as a rift in our relationship to God, whom we do not see, brought about by our wrongful behaviour in the world we do see, that may help to bring home to people today the reality and meaning of sin.

Our experience

It is a fact of personal experience that people are very often irresponsible, in that they fail to respond creatively to the good and value of human persons. Indeed, much human behaviour is destructive of human relationships and in fact dehumanising. Ethnic cleansing, violence, rape, sexual and physical child abuse, corporate crime, wanton waste of the world's forests for the sake of monetary gain, cruelty to animals, are some examples of this. Personal moral failure, doing evil, sin, is unfortunately our common experience as human beings. Rifts in personal relationships are let go on because people are too proud to acknowledge their part in them and apologise. People are hurt when personal gain or job satisfaction are put ahead of concern for the welfare of others, even sometimes of members of the same family. Some in our community fail to control their sexual drives and may even be led to commit violence against others. Most of us are sometimes irritable and impatient. Or we jeopardise our health by over-indulgence in food or drink. People often hate to admit that others may be better than themselves and how often do we find some persons seeking to cut down 'tall poppies' as much as they can. We probably have to admit that we are

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often enough wanting in commitment, or lazy, or unwilling to expend sufficient effort in working towards our personal growth.

Commenting on Western democratic societies, the Pontifical Biblical Commission says: 'On the plea of the right to total liberty, people claim the right to commit abortion, euthanasia, to genetic experimentation, homosexual unions, and to behave as independent authors of their own being. Consumerist greed can often be satisfied only through the exploitation of other people and of weaker nations' (*The Bible and Morality*, 2008, n.117).

We fail, not only by our actions, but also by our omissions. It is much easier to shut our eyes to such failures than to own up to them. The worst sins of omission these days occur in the public arena. Senseless slaughter of innocent children causes great concern in the community, yet most of this focuses on the perpetrators of such crimes and very little on those who could have done something but did nothing to prevent them. Psychologists and sociologists have studied what they call 'bystander apathy', the reluctance of observers to act to save someone in danger. Various suggestions are offered to explain this. It is due to fear, to the conscious or unconscious rejection of something too horrible to contemplate, to the excuse that others also see the evil and do not act and therefore action is inappropriate, to a diffusion of personal responsibility in society.

There may in some instances be a reasonable explanation for the apathy that leads people to do nothing when doing nothing allows evil to triumph. The fact remains that this is at root a moral failure, because we do have a responsibility towards each other, particularly to children and others most in need of care. What people do as individuals and as members of society matters. Sometimes what they do (or fail to do) matters even more by reason of the destructive impact on personal relationships and conditions.

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The Bible and Sin

Perhaps the most striking words used for sin in the Bible mean 'to miss the mark or the target', as in the sport of archery. In the context of the Covenant the words took on the religious and moral meaning of failing to meet one's obligations to other persons and so breaking one's relationship with God. The Covenant is essentially relational (*The Bible and Morality,* 2008, n.14-22). We sin against Yahweh whom we do not see by breaking his Law and in violating the rights of the neighbour we do see (Leviticus 19:9-18; Isaiah 1:23-25). It is the same with the New Covenant in Christ Jesus. Love of God and love of neighbour are inseparable (Mark 12:28-31; Matthew 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-370).

Sin is expressed, like most decisions, in individual external actions or omissions concerning persons, such as lying, theft, murder, adultery, or negatively in failure to come to the aid of the needy. But of much more importance than the external act or omission is the inner attitude, the heart of the person (Isaiah 29:13), from which the external act (or omission) proceeds and which gives meaning to it. In the Bible 'heart' is more than the symbolic seat of affections, as we think of it today. The 'heart' means the inner self in its totality. It is the place where projects are born, where decisions, good and bad, are made, and above all it is the meeting place with God. 'What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery,

fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man' (Matthew 15:18-20).

This sinful inner disposition is variously described in the Bible. It is not just opposition to the revealed will of God and rejection of God's law of love but a kind of *idolatry*, not so much blatant as in the making of the golden calf, but in terms of putting the focus on the self rather than acknowledging the Lordship of Yahweh (recall the desire of Adam and Eve to 'be like gods' and the rebuke levelled by the prophets against Israel wanting to 'go it alone'). It is not only selfishness, it is *infidelity* to the ever faithful God and to the love owed to oneself and to one's neighbour as a sister/brother in Christ, for 'he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen' (1John 4:20). At root it is *blindness*, the failure to consider what should be taken into account (as in David's adultery with Bathsheba), the ears that will not hear and the eyes that will not see (Isaiah 6:9). One who sins does not come into the light of Christ but remains in darkness. 'For every one who does evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed (John 3:20). Sin springs from the situation of Israel, of Christians, of humankind, when they fail to recognise the needs of their sisters/brothers and the claims they have upon them, and in so doing offend God. For, 'as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me' (Matthew 25:45).

Against this background it is clear that every sin stands in relationship with God: it is a turning from God, an offence against God, and also a violation of the relationship that should exist with God's people. It is not often that God is offended directly, as in blasphemy. God is most often offended indirectly through the persons he has created and redeemed, whom he loves. One who sins misses the truth of human creatureliness before God the Creator and Redeemer and so is alienated from the self (Romans1:2ff). It is only by turning to God again that one can find the true meaning of human existence (*Penance and Reconcilia-*

tion, 1984, 13:31,517,522-3).

Much more important than the reality of sin taught in the Scriptures is the biblical stress on the readiness of God to forgive the sinner. The New Testament writings are in agreement on the central truth that God granted pardon for sin through the person and work of Jesus (*The Bible and Morality*, n.82-84). In the Synoptic Gospels sin is never mentioned except in this context of forgiveness. From the promise of the Garden of Eden, to Yahweh's repeated renewals of the Covenant with Israel, to the message of the prophets, God's mercy and compassion are constantly emphasised. It is this that Jesus came to reveal in his words and deeds and in his whole life, as the Synoptics show, for example, in the parable of the Prodigal Son and the stories of the woman taken in adultery, Mary Magdalene and the good thief. For John, Jesus is the 'Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world' (John1:29), 'the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world' (1John 2:2). And Paul had already made the point that 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8).

Certainly Jesus is not presented in the Gospels as underplaying the evil of sin or as treating it with false indulgence. Indeed, he was often more demanding than the scribes and pharisees of his day. But there is every indication that he was at pains to challenge the attitude of his contemporaries towards sin and the importance they attached to it (he caused surprise by eating with sinners and associating with Samaritans and prostitutes), because their view deformed the image both of God and of humanity.

Sin in Christian History

It has been a constant temptation for Christians to revert to the attitude to sin that was the stock in trade of the establishment in Jesus' day and that is still found to some extent in the New Testament, notably in some of the

writings attributed to St. Paul. Sin is placed at the centre of human existence and seen as defining both the human condition (our status is precisely to be sinners) and the God who in forgiving sin brings salvation (Jesus is virtually defined as one who saves from sin).

This exaggerated dramatic conception of the Christian life was taken up by St. Augustine and through him had a dominating influence on Martin Luther and later on Pascal in France and Protestant theologians Barth, Bultmann, Pannenberg and Moltman in Germany. Unfortunately, some popularisations of sound theology, for example, St. Anselm's theory of redemption, have led at the popular level to quite distorted views about God and sin, about satisfaction for sin, redemption as substitution, *etc*. However, another healthier perspective, which is also as old as the New Testament, sees God's saving work precisely in the giving of a new life over and above the life given to us in creation, a richer relationship with God and with one another, and Jesus Christ as primarily the one who in his incarnation has revealed this life for us. Sin is not eliminated in such a perspective—it can disrupt and even destroy this gift of new life and so it calls for corrective and preventative measures. It is important but it does not occupy centre stage (J. Pohier, *God in Fragments*, 1985, 214-244).

Sin as Failing to be Fully Responsible

Acting against or refusing to respond creatively to basic personal values, and ultimately to the good of persons is what in general terms we mean by sin. We have suggested it be called moral irresponsibility.

We act irresponsibly when we disrespect and are destructive of human persons, when we inflict harm, particularly serious harm, on them (and on ourselves). We are irresponsible when we refuse opportunities to grow as persons by making any form of radical commitment, because we are afraid of the demands that may be made upon us or of the risk of

exclusion from the group to which we belong. We are irresponsible when we are resistant to change because we fear it might disturb our personal comfort, challenge our complacency, or lead us where we do not want to go. We are irresponsible when we fail to seek to improve relationships within our family, when we ignore the cry for help, whether spiritual or material of those in need, when we are not concerned to attempt to better social, economic, ecological and political conditions of living in our community and in our world, when we condone unjust structures in our society.

Failure to respond to truly personal values can range from some minor fault to an action that is seriously harmful to persons. Not all moral faults are equally bad. They can range from a passing hurt to a person to a completely irresponsible act that is totally dehumanising and totally destructive of a human relationship. The degree of seriousness of a moral fault, a sin, will depend on the harm one intends to do and in fact does to human persons in themselves and in their relationships.

Addressing economic matters, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* instances kinds of behaviour contrary to human dignity: theft, deliberate retention of goods loaned or objects lost, business fraud, unjust wages, forcing up prices by trading on the ignorance or hardship of another, the misappropriation and private use of the corporate property of an enterprise, work badly done, tax fraud, forgery of cheques and invoices, excessive expenses, waste and such like (n.2408-2413). At a deeper level it condemns 'actions or enterprises which for any reason, selfish or ideological, commercial or totalitarian—lead to the *enslavement of human beings*, disregard for their personal dignity, buying or selling or exchanging them like merchandise. Reducing persons by violence to use-value or a source of profit is a sin against their dignity as persons and their fundamental rights' (n.2414).

In regard to the political sphere, Pope John Paul II specified relevant moral principles and stressed that these 'are primarily rooted in, and

in fact derive their singular urgency from, the transcendent value of the person...' He followed this with a timely warning about the grave danger in modern societies of these principles being violated. For 'in every sphere of personal, social and political life, morality—founded upon truth and open in truth to authentic freedom—renders a primordial and immensely valuable service not only to the individual person and his (her) growth in the good but also for society and its genuine development' (*Veritatis Splendor*, 1993, n.101). The transcendent value of the human person is then the ultimate criterion of what is morally right or wrong.

The human person as the foundation of morality was again the emphasis of Pope Benedict XVI in his address on the foundations of law to the German Parliament in 2011, in which he appealed to the example of King Solomon's prayer for a listening heart. 'Through this story, the Bible wants to tell us what should ultimately matter for a politician. His fundamental criterion and the motivation for his work as a politician must not be success, and certainly not material gain. It must

be a striving for justice, in short, for the good and the rights of persons' (*The Listening Heart*, 2011,1).

Clearly therefore sin, or moral irresponsibility as we have defined it, generally involves harm to human persons in themselves, in society or in their environment. God is offended because human persons made in his image are harmed. Could it be said that too exclusive a focus on sin as offence against God while taking too little account of the relational dimension of harm to others has led to failure to recognise the reality and extent of sin today? Do we need a re-awakening in this regard?

The reality is that in the normal case the immediate criterion of what is moral or immoral is the reality of human persons and through them and in dialogue with them our response to God. Could we say simply that before God what is sinful is that which conflicts with human well-being. Sin offends God because it hurts persons, whom God has created and whom he loves dearly. As St.Thomas Aquinas said long ago, what is morally wrong is that which conflicts with human well-being (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3,122).

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Christians see their morality in a particular context. In the Christian religious tradition, as in the Jewish, morality is markedly religious. That is, it is immediately related to God and its significance is seen in the God-context. It must be so because the Christians view the whole of creation as God's creation and themselves as part of that creation.

—**Komonchak** *et al.* **(Eds.),** *The New Dictionary of Theology***, 'Moral Life, Christian'.**