

# SOCIAL SIN

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**I**N OUR CATHOLIC culture sin has been seen almost exclusively in an individual sense. It is a personal act, requiring the personal engagement of knowledge and consent before there is any question of sin. This emphasis on personal sin as an individual act no doubt reflects a long tradition of confessional practice, which has tended to lay stress upon personal sins and the confession of one's serious transgressions according to number, kind and circumstances.

However, in the Bible sin is considered, not only as a personal action but also, and even more emphatically, especially in the Old Testament, as something done by the community. Sin has a social dimension. Israel is shown to have a solidarity in sin. The Hebrew prophets constantly inveigh against the infidelity of the whole community of Israel and Israel's breaking of the Covenant with Yahweh. Indeed the Scriptures see sin primarily, not as the malice of individual persons, but as the infidelity of Israel as a whole. For Paul, 'sin and death reign over all the world'.

In the Christian tradition the social character of sin is brought out in the teaching about 'original sin', which, as Richard Gula puts it, is a theological code word for the human condition in a world influenced by more evil than we do by ourselves and for which we carry no personal guilt (Gula 1989,106). We all come into this world, as our experience of life testifies, marked, scarred and weighed down by this sinful condition, for which we are not personally responsible and which we hope to surmount by the superabounding grace of Jesus, our Redeemer:

...the gift itself considerably outweighed the fall. If it is certain that through one man's fall so many died, it is even more certain that divine grace, coming through the one man, Jesus Christ, came to so many as an abundant free gift...however great the number of sins committed grace was even greater; and so, just as sin

reigned wherever there was death, so grace will reign to bring eternal life thanks to the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom 5:15-21)

Distinct from the notion of original sin, the biblical character of sin as a social evil on the part of the community as such has been recaptured in recent times in a relatively new concept, *social sin*, thanks in great part to the work of Liberation Theology. Liberation theologians sought to understand how faith should react to challenges arising from grave violations of social justice in the community. In the Church we have become more aware today of social justice and its demands, despite the fact that, as Andrew Hamilton SJ, points out, in the secular culture around us,

It is unfashionable to speak about social justice because of the emphasis on individual choice and on material advancement in a competitive society. Such an outlook leaves little room for responsibility, and even less for social responsibility to those less fortunate in society. (Hamilton 2014, 1)

Where the demands of social justice are recognised, there is also a growing consciousness of political, economic and social elements in society, and even sometimes in religious institutions, that oppress the poor, aid and abet racism and intolerance, treat asylum seekers and other members of society harshly and inhumanely, endorse a free market that operates on effective demand and not on human need, do grave damage to the environment, and so on. Such unjust social structures and institutions are what is called 'social sin'.

The first official recognition of the magnitude of evil structures that contaminate the social sphere and that have their source in human pride and selfishness was made in Vatican II's 1965 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World Today, *Gaudium et Spes* (No.25).

In 1984 Pope John Paul II gave nuanced

recognition to social sin in his post-synodal exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Poenitentia*, and again in 1988 in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern). In this encyclical he instanced as examples of social sin: class struggle, confrontation between blocs of nations and confrontation between different groups within one nation. His statement ran as follows:

Sin and 'structures of sin' are categories which are seldom applied to the situation of the contemporary world. However, one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the roots of the evil which afflicts us...it is not out of place to speak of 'structures of sin' which...are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people's behaviour. (No.36)

Society as such cannot sin of course, for sin is a personal act of freedom on the part of an individual person. Pope John Paul recognises that society is the bearer of sinful structures, but he stresses that responsibility for the creation and maintenance of these structures rests upon the personal sins of its members. There is an intimate link between social sin and personal sin. The notion of social sin, therefore, must not lead to underestimating the responsibility of individuals involved. Social sin, as the Pope puts it, thus makes an appeal to the consciences of us all. How this is to be understood remains to be considered.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* again stresses the connection of social sin, as evidenced in such evils as sexism, racism, genocide, oppression of the poor, with the sins of individual persons:

Sin makes (us) accomplices of one another and causes concupiscence, violence, and injustice to reign among (us). Sin gives rise to situations and institutions that are contrary to the Divine Goodness. 'Structures of sin' are the expression and effect of personal sins. They lead their victims to do evil in their turn. In an analogous sense they constitute a 'social sin'. (No.1869)



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Three points arising from this teaching will bear further explanation.

### 1. Persons create society

People create society, not only in the sense of constituting members of the society, but because by their free choices over time they establish patterns of thinking, acting and communicating with others. These patterns are social structures and institutions such as family life and marriage, which are set ways of relating between individuals or groups within a society. Institutions such as marriage provide patterns of behaving which act as a model for members of the group. When groups of structures are organised into set ways of acting they form what are known as systems (O'Keefe 1990,45-47). Thus it may be said that structures, institutions and systems are ways in which we act *as* societies. They are embodiments of the way persons understand reality, of what they believe and of what their values are.

For example, *economic structures* such as import quotas, income taxes, medicare, social security benefits, *educational structures* such as compulsory schooling, religious education in state schools, *political structures* such as policies regarding the treatment of asylum seekers, carbon emissions into the environment, work choices and penalty rates, and *ecclesial structures* such as an all-male clergy, liturgical rubrics, centralisation of power, are all embodiments of the meaning and value placed on things by persons who establish and maintain society. (Gula 1989,119-120)

So it is true to say that when social structures, institutions and systems are unjust, oppressive and discriminatory, this occurs not simply

by accident but because they are social embodiments of a multitude of sinful attitudes, actions or culpable omissions of a great variety of persons over a long period of time. For example, we may consider the Australian policy regarding asylum seekers and the structures established to implement the policy to be inhumane and immoral, but it is well to remember that these structures would not be in place without the support of over 50% of the Australian population who consider the offshore detention of people seeking asylum from persecution to be justified or even not harsh enough, or the 10% of people who say ‘they don’t know’. Social sin is inextricably linked to personal sin.

## 2. The influence of social sin on personal behaviour

We are apt to forget the connection between social sin and individual acts. A good percentage of ordinary people see unacceptable social structures and institutions as ‘just the way things are’ or ‘the way things have always been’ and therefore none of our concern. Some people seem to be of such a mind as to simply limit the idea of justice to the criminal justice system, overlooking the demands of the common good and the support of education and the health of the community as vital requirements of social justice.

The structures, institutions and systems of the society and the world in which we live, whether we are aware of it or not, become *internalised* by us as time goes on. In this way society influences the way we think and behave and relate to one another (Connors and McCormick 1998, 64). This process is illustrated by the story of *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. His people do not see that he is naked because they are browbeaten by their political leaders. They fear losing their jobs, so they convince themselves they can really see the Emperor’s clothes. It takes a child who has not internalised this viewpoint to see that the Emperor has not got any clothes on. This process of internalisation is the reason why, as Pope John Paul says, structures of sin ‘grow stronger, spread, and become the source of

other sins, and so influence people’s behaviour’.

So there is a vicious circle at work. The sinful actions of individual persons create in society structures of sin and in turn these sinful social structures and institutions, this social sin, have their influence on individuals in society and lead them to further wrongdoing. The structures of society modify our consciousness. So by living and working under the influence of these social structures we help to maintain them and their effects in society, whether we wish to do so or not.

## 3. Personal moral responsibility for Social Sin

Social sin arises from the personal sins of individual members of society. We share in the creation of the society in which we live at least by maintaining its structures and institutions. However, this does not automatically mean that we are *morally* responsible for its sinful structures and institutions. Culpability requires knowledge and consent. How then do we become culpable for social sin?

In his encyclical *Reconciliatio et Poenitentia* to which reference has already been made, Pope John Paul II states that social sin is:

a case of the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world and also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required (no, 25).

These strong words ought to move us to examine our consciences. We may not perhaps realise the evil in some of the structures in place in our society and in our world. If, through no fault on our part, we are unaware of the evil, then we cannot bear culpability for it. But failure to recognise evil may not always dispense us from culpability. As not infrequently happens, we fail to recognise the evil

we perpetuate because of the reasons the Pope suggests or others like them. In that case we cannot be excused from blame. It is our own fault that our conscience has become dulled and we are therefore morally responsible for it. We have put ourselves in danger of becoming blind to dehumanising social injustice and to the suffering of people with whom we may never rub shoulders.

But once we do become conscious of 'structures of sin' in our society, we have a moral obligation to do what is in our power to avoid, eliminate or limit their impact, at least by urgent prayer that the structures of sin be redressed. Richard Gula sums it up in these words,

But if, after our consciousness has been raised and our imaginations transformed so that we can see clearly the wrongdoing being perpetrated by our social practices, we still do nothing about the oppressive structures, then we are on the verge of culpable personal sin for these social ills. Our liability, or obligation to make reparation for them, becomes proportionate to our degree of culpability. (Gula 1989,120)

In this manner social sin becomes linked with personal sin.

If the moral responsibility for social sin really rests upon us as members of society, what can we do to reform social structures that we perceive to be unjust, that discriminate against the poor, the 'little people' and the underprivileged in our society, that are calculated to do grave damage to the environment, and such like?

Collective prejudices, as is well known, lead to an entrenched attitude of resistance to change, whatever it is and even if it is demanded by justice. This must be recognised and overcome. For many that may not be easy. The struggle to change and reform 'structures of sin' is a challenge to the consciences of all. It is the only way to liberate both the oppressors and also the victims from the forces that led to the imposition and acceptance of the unjust structures in the first place.

Not everybody may feel able or disposed

to engage in public protest or demonstration or direct approach in person or by letter to those in power in the community. But the force of public opinion must never be underestimated, and our expressed attitudes about the dignity of human persons and the right of all to justice and a fair go play an important role in forming that. We do not need to be persons in authority to make our personal attitudes and our judgment of what is going on around us known to those around us, and that is what makes up public opinion.

It is important also that we keep the structures and institutions of our secular society and of the Church under regular scrutiny, to ensure that they are not oppressive of persons or classes in the community and so in need of removal or reform. The Church is no exception to this. The Royal Commission into Institutional Response to the Sexual Abuse of Children by Clergy, in currently calling the Church to account for the structures set in place to deal with this public scandal, does a salutary, if painful, service to the Church.

Finally, sins against justice call for reparation and reconciliation. We have a moral obligation to make reparation for injustice to individual persons. Social sin also lays a demand upon us for atonement and reconciliation. Hopefully, penitential services celebrated by Church communities, in which the Word of God is reflected upon and in which consciences are examined, will serve the dual purpose of awakening us to both personal and social sins and of leading us to sincere reconciliation, especially if a general absolution becomes part of the service.

#### REFERENCES

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