

All My Liberty

Chapter 2: Estrangement From God

Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.

The doctrinal background of the Spiritual Exercises is the creature's estrangement from the Creator. In the First Week the main theme of the meditations is sin – angelic, original and personal – with its painful retribution in death, judgment and hell. In the mortal life of Christ, from the Incarnation to the Passion, sin occasioned the coming of the Redeemer who suffered and died for its expiation on the cross. And finally in the Resurrection, we see the conquest of the consequences of sin and the correlative promise of heaven, “where the former things will have passed away and sin will be no more.” Thus in a true sense sin was never far from the mind of St. Ignatius in the Exercises, as something to be recognized and feared, deplored and fought against with all the powers that grace and nature can afford.

Realizing the Gravity of Sin

Objectively and theoretically no Christian will doubt that sin is the worst evil in the world. One venial sin, as Newman describes it, is more terrible in the eyes of God than the death of millions of men in extremest agony. Yet practically sin is so common, even among those who profess to believe in Christ and are bound by the most solemn promises to His devoted service.

St. Ignatius was conscious of the variance between faith and practice and therefore early in the Spiritual Exercises placed a series of meditations that are calculated to deepen our realization of the gravity of sin. He believed this

conviction was indispensable if we are to amend our lives and avoid offending God in the future.

The first and radical knowledge of the malice of sin in the Exercises derives from a consideration of its effects. The wages of sin is death: bodily death to the human race for the sin of Adam and spiritual death in hell for the unrepentant sinner. For Adam and his progeny it means the dissolution of the most intimate union under heaven, a tearing apart of matter and spirit that God Himself has ordained for mutual composition. For the demons and their victims it means the separating of a created spirit from the Source of its happiness for eternity. All this because of sin.

Characteristically the Exercises do not stress the visible or temporal effects of sin, like loss of reputation and friends, dishonor and physical distress, sickness in body and mind – no doubt because they are insignificant by comparison with the consummation of evil in hell. We also know from other writings of St. Ignatius that he looked upon physical sufferings in this world more as evidences of God's mercy seeking to convert the sinner than as signs of His justice to punish the evildoer. But one temporal effect of sin which he clearly emphasized is the Passion and Death of Christ. Ignatius makes it the first colloquy of the retreat, where he recommends that we imagine Christ before us on the cross and ask Him, “how, being our Creator, He had come to this, that He has made Himself man and from eternal life has come to temporal death.” Bellarmine refers to the crucifixion as the most convincing lesson God could teach us on the malice and gravity of sin, that the Creator Himself had to become man to expiate the disobedience of His creatures.

Coming closer to the substance of sin, we get a deeper understanding of its nature by reflecting on the disproportion between the sinner and the Lord against whom he sins. Since the gravity of an insult depends on the dignity of the person insulted and his superiority to the one who

commits the injury, then a deliberate flouting of the divine law, as happens in mortal sin, is the acme of wickedness. In order to bring home this infinite distance between God the offended and us the offenders, I should abase myself first by comparison with the rest of creation (a drop in the ocean of mankind), which itself is inferior to the angels and saints, who are as nothing compared with the infinite God. Then I compare myself alone with the Creator against whom I have sinned: my ignorance with His wisdom, my weakness with His omnipotence, my malice towards Him with His goodness to me.

There is more than psychology in these contrasts. They touch upon the essence of sin, which pretends to aseity or self-sufficiency, possessed by God alone but madly aspired to by every sinner since Paradise, when the devil persuaded our first parents that by eating the forbidden fruit they would become as gods, knowing good and evil. This deep-rooted instinct needs to be corrected by prayerful reflection on God's greatness and my nothingness. Otherwise past sins will scarcely be recognized as really serious and future amendment is proportionally more difficult. Especially under the stress of passion, when pressure from the senses tends to obscure the mind, I must be thoroughly convinced that because the God who obliges me to self-control is all-wise, He knows better than I what is good for me, and because He loves me more than I love myself, His commandments must be obeyed under penalty of self-destruction. Looking back, I will see how irrational my sins have been when I followed my own puny judgment in preference to the wisdom and goodness of God.

But sin is not only irrational. It is unjust. Since God is man's Creator, He has a right to determine His creatures' conduct and prescribe the conditions on which men will attain their final destiny. Not from mere habit does Ignatius constantly refer to God as the Lord. "Christ our Lord, God our Lord, Son and Lord, the Lord God, Creator and Lord, Eternal Lord" are all found (and some more than once) in the single

meditation on sin to impress the retreatant with the right of dominion which God has over His creatures. The corresponding emphasis on man's dependence upon God and the consequent injustice of sin are more than ever necessary in modern times, when secularist philosophy has severed morality from religious ideals and professes a code of ethics that excludes the notion of God.

In their national pastoral of 1948, the American bishops warned against the prevalent tendency "to teach moral and spiritual values divorced religion and based solely on social convention. Unless man's conscience is enlightened by the principles that express God's law, there can be no firm and lasting morality. Without religion, morality becomes simply a matter of individual taste, of public opinion, or majority vote."

[1] Once God is removed from the concept of morals, sin becomes a label for superstition or a name for divergence from accepted custom.

Besides injustice, sin also appears as ingratitude. The sinner "acts against the Infinite Goodness" of God, to whom he owes absolutely everything, including the physical power of refusing obedience to his Creator. Ingratitude is so closely bound up with sin as practically to define it. According to St. Thomas, we are ungrateful to God when we despise the gifts received from His bounty, and sin is precisely "the contempt of God by which a man attaches himself to changeable creatures" in preference to the unchangeable Creator." [2] St. Ignatius stresses one aspect of ingratitude that is characteristic of the Exercises. A sinner contemns the divine goodness not only in the gifts of creation, but especially in the order of grace that was merited for us by the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ. Whenever we sin, therefore, we abuse more than the blessings of nature; we reject the love which raised us to the family of God.

Finally, underlying all the other phases of malice, sin deviates from the order that God established in the universe. This is the high-point

of St. Ignatius' insight into the evil of sin. He urges the retreatant to reflect on the disorder which his perversity has introduced, so that "abhorring it, I may amend and order myself aright."

The variety of disorders that sin produces in the world is legion. Unfortunately the most serious, namely, insubordination of a creature to its Creator, may be the least obvious. More painfully evident are the corollary derangements that fill the story of every human being according to the measure of his sin: an unbridled tongue which caused a loss of reputation or grave injury to the innocent; intemperate drinking which destroyed a happy marriage and the peace of family life; unbridled passion which ruined a person's character and induced the tyranny of vice. If virtue has a law, there is also a law of sin, whose consequences are the havoc caused in the hearts and lives of countless people, beginning with the sinner and extending to everyone, though unknown and still unborn, who is in any way touched by one person's disobedience to the will of God.

Ascetical Value of the Consciousness of Sin

Since the Spiritual Exercises are instruments of sanctification and not merely conversion, we must look for something deeper than the immediate contrition and remission of guilt as the fruit of meditation on sin. Why rehearse the sins I committed and which I trust have been forgiven? Why not look only to the future, considering how I may serve God more faithfully, and not rack my conscience with the memory of past failings? The reason is that the prospect of a life of virtue and even high sanctity is often—very often—conditioned on the abiding realization of one's sinfulness. Newman was so taken by this fact that he practically defined the Christian religion by its ability to make people conscious of their sin. Considering the actual state of man as found in this world, he said, "any

standard of duty which does not convict him of real and multiplied sins, and of incapacity to please God of his own strength, is untrue; and any rule of life which leaves him contented with himself, without fear, without anxiety, without humiliation, is deceptive; it is the blind leading the blind; yet such, in one shape or another, is the religion of the whole earth, beyond the pale of the Church." [3]

The understanding of my sinfulness will make me humble, if for no other reason at least because I can scarcely pride myself on strength of character when I look back at a lifetime of weakness in resisting temptation. Pride, in the last analysis, is an over-weening self-esteem, often based on high talents or native ability. Frequently the proud man has some possession which others do not have—money, business connections, a sharp wit or social graces. Whatever it is, the more plain the disproportion between me and other people, the more likely will I be tempted to pride. But if God permitted me to sin, I am faced with the testimony of experience to discount any superiority in other things, in view of my evident failure in the most important thing in life, conforming myself to the divine will. St. Augustine, judging by his own struggle against the flesh, felt that God often brings a proud person to his senses by allowing him to fall into sins of impurity, thus humiliating his pride of intellect by exposing his surrender to temptations of the flesh.

Correlative to a deeper humility, the recognition of past sins normally leads to a distrust of self and greater reliance on God. Man is so constituted that unless he has a strong realization of his contingency, he will not easily betake himself to prayer. The spontaneous, "God help me," of otherwise unreligious people when in trouble illustrates this connection between a sense of need and asking for divine assistance. If this be true in general, it is especially true of those who aspire to perfection and higher sanctity. By profession they are not so concerned about temporal cares or even about things which

stimulate most people to pray. Yet, consistent with human psychology, they will pray more earnestly as they see themselves in definite need, which in their case is the lack of will power to resist sin, unless God supplies the grace, as past experience has proved to them.

In much the same way the recollection of past sinfulness helps to promote our charity towards the neighbor. Whenever I am tempted to criticize another person's fault, if I only reflect for a moment on my own serious sins, I place an obstacle in the way of rash judgment that is hard to overcome. No matter how I compare the evident failings of other people with my own, I can always end the comparison in their favor. Their fault may be an isolated action, by contrast with my repeated violations of the moral law; appearances are often deceiving and what externally seems to be grievously wrong, and intentionally so, on their part may be only lightly culpable or not even sinful at all, whereas I know (without guessing) the internal gravity of my own past sins. The same technique is useful for checking a tendency to depreciate the achievements or good qualities of other people by reflectively parading my own. Granted that someone is less gifted as a teacher or business man, or less popular than I. But if I balance my superiority in this area with my inferiority in the moral order, brought home to me by the consciousness of sin, the lesser advantage cancels and I am protected from uncharity when I see how irrational an invidious comparison would be.

However, the stress on sin and its consequences is not only or primarily purgative, at least in the case of exercitants who are fairly advanced in the spiritual life. St. Ignatius was mostly concerned with exciting sentiments of gratitude, where past infidelities may serve as stepping stones to future sanctity. Thus I am told to reflect on the one sin of Adam and Eve, of the angels, of a hypothetical sinner in hell, and compare this with my own many sins which may have merited eternal punishment. The climax is reached when

I exclaim in wonder as I review God's creatures and ask how they have permitted me to live and sustained me. "Why the angels, who are the sword of Divine Justice, have borne with me, have guarded and prayed for me ... Why has the earth not opened to swallow me up, creating new hells that I might suffer in them forever."

The gratitude for God's mercy can be a powerful stimulant to make reparation for a life-time of sin. "A sinful act," says St. Thomas, "makes a man guilty of punishment to the extent to which he transgressed the order of divine justice. Nor does he restore this order except by a positive compensation, which is based on the strictest equity. Consequently the more a person has indulged his own will by disobeying a commandment of God, the order of divine justice requires that he correspondingly endure something against his will, either spontaneously or by coercion." [4] When, therefore, I see that my offenses against the Divine Majesty have not been punished "by coercion," I am moved to repay what I owe spontaneously, by voluntary expiation for my sins. I am thus motivated not only by a sense of justice to repair the divine economy I have violated, but especially by a loving generosity to compensate for past ingratitude. My sorrow for sin consequently becomes an instrument of sanctification, since the desire to amend my life is born of a conviction that whatever sacrifices this amendment may require, they are small by comparison with the suffering that my sins really deserved.

Human Freedom and Sorrow for the Past

One aspect of St. Ignatius' treatment of sin cannot be fully appreciated except in the historical setting of the Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius stresses the power of a human will, with divine grace, to avoid sin and therefore to amend one's life for the future. If this seems like a platitude to us, it was a live issue in the sixteenth

century. Among the propositions of Martin Luther condemned by the Church was the assertion that “after Adam’s sin, man’s free will was destroyed and lost,” so that “the just man sins in every good work, and free will is a term without meaning; and when it does what is in its power, it sins mortally.” [5]

That St. Ignatius was not oblivious of this error appears from one of Rules for Thinking with the Church, where he expressly cautions against overemphasizing grace at the expense of human freedom. “We ought not to speak or insist on the doctrine of grace so strongly,” he warns, “as to give rise to that poisonous teaching that takes away free-will.”

In line with this attitude, the meditations on sin describe its intrinsic malice as arising from a perversion of created freedom. Thus “the angels were created in the state of grace, but they did not want to make use of the freedom God gave them to reverence and obey their Creator and Lord.” Our first parents “sinned by violating the command not to eat of the tree of knowledge.” And after reviewing my own life of sin, in colloquy with God the Father, “I will resolve with His grace to amend for the future.” Always the will is conceived as perfectly free to obey or disobey, to remain in sin or be converted to God with the help of His Grace.

Parallel with the stress on freedom against Protestant heresy, St. Ignatius regards contrition for sin as a “retreat” into the past and not only, as did Luther, a kind of resolution for the future. Where Ignatius has the exercitant “call to mind all the sins of my life, reviewing year by year, and period by period,” in order to excite sorrow and a firm purpose of amendment, Luther held that “the kind of contrition engendered by the recollection, consideration and detestation of sins as a person reviews all his years with a bitter heart ... This kind of contrition makes one a hypocrite, makes him, in fact, a worse sinner.”

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The difference between Luther and Ignatius lies in their antithetical concepts of sorrow for sin. For Ignatius, contrition meant not only future amendment but also hatred of past sins because they offended God and deserved eternal punishment. For Luther “the best penance is a new life,” irrespective of any regrets for the past. Behind this notion was the implicit denial that we can be truly sorry for the wrong we have done. According to the Reformers, “it is not in man’s power to make his ways evil, but God performs the evil works just He performs the good, and not only permissively but also properly and directly, so that Judas’ betrayal no less than Paul’s vocation was God’s own work.” [7] Viewed in this atmosphere, more prevalent than ever today, the Ignatian meditations on personal sin and the fear of hell take on a more intelligible meaning. They serve to clarify a cardinal principle of Christianity, that man is a responsible agent at every stage of his moral journey through life: when he chooses evil in preference to what his conscience tells him is good; when he decides to reflect on certain motives leading to repentances for sin; when he is actually sorry for what he has done and resolves to amend his life and make reparation for his offenses against God.

By an interesting coincidence St. Ignatius was first drafting the Spiritual Exercises, with their insistence on man’s responsibility, almost the very year that Luther began propagating his errors on human freedom. Ignatius made the Exercises at Manresa in the winter of 1522-1523; Luther was condemned by Leo X in 1520. When Ignatius later said that “we ought to distrust anything written by heretics,” he had learned from experience how much harm can come to Catholic orthodoxy by injudicious contact with the Reformation whose theology had eliminated human liberty.

Chapter

References

[1] *Catholic Mind*, January 1953, p. 60

[2] *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 104, a.3.

[3] John H. Newman, "The Religion of the Pharisee, the Religion of Mankind," *Sermons on Various Occasions*, London, 1898, p. 20.

[4] *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, q. 87, a. 6.

[5] Denzinger, 771, 776.

[6] *Ibid.*, 746

[7] *Ibid.*, 816

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