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# STUDIES

## in the Spirituality of Jesuits

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The Reluctance to Admit Sin

Robert F. Harvanek, S.J.

Published by the American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality,  
especially for American Jesuits working out their *aggiornamento*  
in the spirit of Vatican Council II

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## THE AMERICAN ASSISTANCY SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

consists of a group of Jesuits from various provinces who are listed below. The members were appointed by the Fathers Provincial of the United States. The purpose of the Seminar is to study topics pertaining to the spiritual doctrine and practice of Jesuits, especially American Jesuits, and to communicate the results to the members of the Assistancy. The hope is that this will lead to further discussion among all American Jesuits--in private, or in small groups, or in community meetings. All this is done in the spirit of Vatican Council II's recommendation to religious institutes to recapture the original charismatic inspiration of their founders and to adapt it to the changed circumstances of modern times. The members of the Seminar welcome reactions or comments in regard to the topics they publish.

To achieve these purposes, especially amid today's pluralistic cultures, the Seminar must focus its direct attention sharply, frankly, and specifically on the problems, interests, and opportunities of the Jesuits of the United States. However, many of these interests are common also to Jesuits of other regions, or to other priests, religious men or women, or lay men or women. Hence the studies of the Seminar, while meant especially for American Jesuits, are not exclusively for them. Others who may find them helpful are cordially welcome to read them.

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## THE RELUCTANCE TO ADMIT SIN

by

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### Introduction: In The Beginning . . .

Are we experiencing today a new reluctance to admit sin?

Certainly the reluctance to admit sin is not new. As Karl Menninger has said in his book *Whatever Became of Sin?* (page 24), "It is surely nothing new that men want to get away from acknowledging their sins or even thinking about them. Is this not the history of mankind?" In fact, one might ask, Is this not the nature of sin, that it shuns the light? After they had sinned, "the man and his wife hid themselves from the Lord God among the trees of the garden" (Gen. 3:8). The confession of sin even in secret within our soul stirs something deep within us and uncovers a profound and puzzling mystery of our being. So, the reluctance to admit sin is something perennial. What is that sin which is within us? What restrains us from getting it out into the light? Why should we get it out? Is it not better to turn the attention of our mind and heart elsewhere?

Nevertheless there seems to be today a new call to admit our sin. We are being asked, it seems, to admit sin where we are not used to seeing sin, for instance, in the area of social structures. And we have seen the Church, which we have always looked upon as holy, called upon to admit its sin and its need for constant reformation. The 32nd General Congregation speaking for the whole Society of Jesus begins its description of "Jesuits Today" by saying: "What is it to be a Jesuit? It is to know that one is a sinner, yet called to be a companion of Jesus. . . ."

How are these calls, these unfamiliar and new calls to admit sin, to be understood and illumined? Do they stir a new and different reluctance to admit sin within us? These were the questions which the American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality undertook to discuss at one of its

sessions. What resulted was a consideration of the general question from the special background and competence of each participant, from theology, canon law, psychology, philosophy, social science, spiritual direction.

This paper is an effort to record that and subsequent discussions of the topic, for the most part as they developed in the seminar. The paper, consequently, is not written from a single perspective, but rather from the shifting perspective of the discussion. It does not pretend to be a treatise on the question, or to be scientific, or thorough. This reflects the Seminar's own belief that the question is too profound, too complex, and perhaps still too much in transition to be able to be gathered into a single essay. The symposium style would seem to be best suited to the state of the question, and this paper is a modified symposium style, put together and reported by one man as he understood and reflected the comments, with occasional direct quotation from participants in the discussions.

The observations expressed here, as a consequence, are more exploratory in nature than didactic. They open up and probe the question rather than settle or answer it. If they are of some help in initiating and leading reflection, they will have fulfilled their purpose.

## I. THE NEW USAGES IN THE LANGUAGE ABOUT SIN

### A. The Old Language about Sin

We start with a question: Is the language about sin being used in a new way today? The state of the question was presented very well by Father George Ganss in his remarks in the Seminar. He described the conception of sin with which he grew up and the difficulty he experienced when the new calls for admission of sin began to appear. His comments are quoted directly:

"In the providence of God, the era in which I received my education was one in which most Catholics understood terms in much the same way. In elementary school and my earlier Jesuit education, sin was defined as a deliberate transgression by a responsible person of a law of God after he knew it was wrong or forbidden by God. To be serious or mortal, a sin had



to be about grievous or important matter, done with sufficient reflection or advertence to its being clearly and indubitably forbidden by God, and deliberately done anyway.

"This concept of sin was enriched and developed in moral theology by multitudinous overtones: distinctions, for example, between mortal and venial sins, deliberate and semideliberate venial sins, excusing causes which reduced or even extinguished imputability, and the like. And there were formal sins and material sins, and cases where my material cooperation in a sinful act, when the cooperation was given reluctantly, was justified or even desirable for greater glory to God, or for having a lesser evil rather than a greater one.

"Also, although 'sin' was a human act of a person, by extrinsic denomination the term was applied to things exterior to a person or persons. For example, if many men performed sinful acts, 'sinful' or 'unjust' social structures were produced, such as political machines and some multinational corporations. But often these were both cockle and wheat, doing evil here and good there; they began as a good thing but evolved into something evil. Even for cases such as these we had principles which were good and fairly satisfying to guide us, although their application to individual cases was often difficult and obscure.

"There were other cases, too, where the concepts were less clear and satisfying, such as the nature of original sin or of biblical corporate sin. Then there were the expressions of some saints ("I am the greatest of sinners"), which may have been exaggerated expressions common to the language of lovers, but in any case were not too clearly or satisfyingly explained.

"All that terminology and those concepts were pretty much the heritage of scholasticism and Catholic teaching since St. Thomas Aquinas and Trent. However, the present discussion brings out the fact that many new concepts of sin have been emerging in the past few decades: the corporate sin of Adam and mankind, or, in other and better words, the biblical notion of sin in the Old Testament, and the contrast of the New Testament or the Greek concept of *hamartia*; or various concepts in existentialism or situation ethics, or other philosophies; or knowledge of the varying concepts of sin,

guilt, and penance in the Church prior to the advent of Scholasticism; or the concepts connected with modern opinions on the fundamental option.

"With that background, I, like many other Jesuits and Catholics, have reacted rather vehemently to some statements which, without bothering to explain that they arose from new philosophical concepts or linguistic usages not yet standardized, simply seemed to accuse me of 'social sin,' or of 'cooperating with sinful structures,' and even seemed to aim at stirring up a guilt complex over cooperation or participation which was reluctantly given and usually unavoidable. That approach was pastorally ineffective, even antagonizing to many.

"When I have sinned by deliberately transgressing a clear command of God and legitimate authority, usually I do not find it difficult to admit guilt or sin, at least to myself. I know that the loving God will forgive me, and even love me after my repentance more than he did before. But I feel repelled by statements which try to make me feel guilty in cases where there was no such clear obligation or deliberate transgression. To attempt to stir up such guilt--or guilt complex--in such cases would seem to me to be insincerity, and not likely to lead to any true repentance or resolution. And it is also likely that such efforts might lead to scruples, at least in many persons.

"When such statements are made, I sometimes recognize that those who make them have a different concept of sin than I; sometimes, however, I cannot understand how they can make such statements. Hence I welcome any light that discussion can bring."

These remarks certainly express the reaction and puzzlement of many. They also very clearly describe the understanding of sin that obtained before the new language began to be used.

#### B. Analysis of the Old Language

Before attempting a description of the new language it might be useful to analyze the old language as given in the passage quoted from Father Ganss.

Perhaps the first thing that can be pointed out about the old language is that it presents an "act" morality. That is, it is centered on the human act, according to the classic distinction between an act of a human person,



like sleepwalking, and a human act, like choosing to stay in bed. To be a fully human act, all the necessary conditions must be present, such as sufficient freedom, sufficient reflection, sufficient knowledge, and the appropriate intention. Such an orientation does not lend itself to thinking of sin as a condition in which a human person finds himself, or as an attitude or state of soul. And even though this language speaks of sins of omission, it does not readily think of sin as a failure or a lack. The emphasis is on a positive act of violation of a law.

This approach to sin is also almost inevitably individualistic. As St. Thomas says, quoting Aristotle, action belongs to individuals (*actiones sunt suppositorum*). Only complete substances act. Consequently the act of another is not my act, and therefore his sin is not my sin. I am responsible only for my sin. It is true that groups can act in concert, but only when all the individuals in the group concur freely in the action. If the group acts without my concurrence, I am not responsible for that action, unless I may have an office which requires me to hinder the action if that is possible.

But most importantly, the approach to sin described by Father Ganss is legalistic. Sin is defined as a violation of a law. It is true that the law is described not as the law of a state or nation, of a society, but as the law of a personal God, and so it does contain an element of personalism. But the very concept of law is largely impersonal. This is so because a "law," by contrast to a "prescription," in scholastic philosophy, is a general rule, and generalities abstract from the personal. Consequently a law morality is what ethicists have come to call "rule" ethics; that is, it thinks in terms of general rules which are applicable to all appropriate situations and all individuals. Assuredly, through the principle of *epikeia*, law morality has a way to deal with the uniqueness of individual cases. But its attention is on the law rather than on the individual.

It would seem that when sin is seen as a violation of the "law" of God, the model which is being used is civil law in civil society. This carries some other characteristics with it. It brings with it, for example, the processes of civil courts which involve accusation, judgment, sentencing, and punishment. In the sacrament of forgiveness one is one's own accuser,

and the minister is a judge who gives judgment and imposes a penance, and so in that context the sacrament is called the Sacrament of Penance. The expectation of punishment generates fear, and when the sin which one confesses is a grievous or mortal sin, the punishment one fears is eternal damnation, a fate many fear more than annihilation. Fear then is intimately connected, in this model, with the admission of sin. Fear is the first reaction of the sinner when he faces the fact that he has sinned and acknowledges his sin. This is in fact the order of reactions of the sinner in the process of repentance as given by the Council of Trent:

. . . they know that they are sinners; and, by turning from a salutary fear of divine justice to a consideration of God's mercy, they are encouraged to hope, confident that God will be propitious to them for Christ's sake. They begin to love God as the source of all justice and are thereby moved by a sort of hatred and detestation for sin, . . . (trans. of *The Church Teaches*, no. 562).

The conception of sin as a violation of the law of God also affects one's conception of God. Even though God is perceived as a forgiving and merciful God, he is primarily seen as a lawgiver who threatens and executes punishment if his law is not obeyed. This can be translated in terms of love, of God's love willing our good and our union with him, but it needs to be translated. It can hardly be argued that even in our day the image of the punishing God has been eradicated from the popular imagination.

Fear is an unpleasant emotion. The concepts of judgment and punishment are threatening concepts. It can readily be seen how the legalistic concept of sin encourages rather than relieves the reluctance to admit sin.

Reflection suggests that the legalistic conception of sin was intimately connected with the moral methodology known as casuistry, which prevailed among moral theologians in the post-Tridentine period. Casuistry dealt with cases, and its question was: Is the law violated in this particular case? It was a lawyer's approach. If one's tendency was to convict the agent of sin, one was a "rigorist." The Jesuit tradition was the opposite, to free the agent from sin. The Jesuit casuist was concerned so to define the conditions of a sinful act that only those cases which were clearly and admittedly sinful would be identified as such. As one renowned Jesuit pastoral theologian, teacher of many Jesuits, was known to say, "Of course,



of course it is a mortal sin, but nobody ever commits it." The tendency of this tradition was not, it would seem, to bring the penitent to admit sin, but to bring the penitent the easement of knowing that he had not sinned. It was perhaps also ordered to the reduction of the number and strength of cases of scruples. By insisting that there be certainty that all the conditions of a sinful act be fulfilled, legal morality was able to erase the stigma of sin from many cases and give at least external assurance to the scrupulous person that he had not sinned. The legal moralist has a special sensitivity to the problems of the scrupulous. This suggests that there may be a deeper connection between scrupulosity and legal-act morality, that legal-act morality creates an atmosphere in which scrupulosity grows.

The characterization given here of the "old" understanding of sin (which Father Ganss relates to the Scholastic and Tridentine theology) is not intended to be evaluative, though undoubtedly it will appear so by the very fact that no attempt has been made to justify or support this characterization. It was intended to be a description, so that the differences, explicit or implicit, of the current uses of the language about sin can more clearly be perceived. It is one of the characteristics of our Seminar that it resists drawing a sharp contrast between "then" and "now." The positive features that attract approval today, it is frequently pointed out, were present then; it is the emphasis that is different. Perhaps what is happening, as so often in times of cultural change, is that the primary statements and the qualifiers change places. In the former formula, morality was legal but it was also personal; it was individualistic, but it was also communal. The present formula may be: morality is personal, but it is also legal; it is communal, but it is also individualistic. This gives credence to the observation that what is happening today is that we are trying to free ourselves of excessive legalism and at the same time to come to a deeper sense of our sinfulness.

### C. The New Language about Sin

It is obvious that if one works out of the mental pattern of the act-legal morality described above, then the reaction to some of the current

language about sin will be confusion and anger. It is undoubtedly also true that new senses of sin are being used without being first explained. This is probably because the new speakers are not aware themselves of the meaning of sin which their speech entails. In all likelihood they do not first develop a new theory and then begin to apply it. They simply begin to use a new language without realizing that it embodies a new conception of sin.

The Seminar did not feel equipped to produce an orderly and comprehensive treatise on the new language about sin and its meanings. Moreover it was aware that there have been innumerable discussions by professionals on the meaning of sin today. The Seminar did feel, however, that it could reflect its own perception of some of the differences and that this might be of some help.

Certainly one of the most shocking new uses is the language of "sinful social structures"; so that may be the place to start. The language of "social structures" itself is new and therefore unclear to the uninitiate, even without the addition of the qualifier "sinful" to make it yet more confusing. However the language of "structuralism" is all around us, though perhaps it is more prominent in Europe than in the United States. Its primary locus seems to be the field of language itself, though it is also important in anthropology and sociology as well as psychology and philosophy. The meaning of "structure" is not uniform and clear in these sciences. The term seems to refer to a formal set of relationships which are somehow distinct from the elements or individuals which are related in them. These sets of relationships can be identified and characterized by themselves; they seem almost to have a life of their own. We are not used to thinking that way, but if one reflects on the matter for a while, the idea is not as absurd as it may seem at first.

Since the days of the Greeks we have been used to thinking of political structures in terms of monarchy, tyranny, aristocracy, democracy, and of a slave and free society. Since the days of Hegel and Marx we have been used to thinking of historical and economic structures, such as feudalism, capitalism, and communism. We only need to extend that mode of thinking to be able to recognize the structures of city and suburb, of inner and



outer city, of neighborhood, of ethnicity and race, of blocs of nations, of first, second, third, and fourth worlds. Then we come to realize that structures are everywhere and really do "structure" our lives.

Once the structures are isolated, it probably would not occur to us to call them "sinful," especially if we were formed by act morality. But it did occur to someone, and the usage caught on. Let us see if we can draw out the implications of that usage.

It probably was not the case that the first users of the language of "sinful social structures" were consciously using the language of attribution, that is, attributing the name of sin to the structures because sinful men produced and sustained them. There was, therefore, no charge being made that some secret sinful act of ours had produced these structures. The structures were not being called sinful because they had committed an act in violation of the law of God. That would be nonsense, and it was frequently tagged as such. The structures were being called sinful because they held some human persons or some group of human persons in a situation which limited their life as persons, that is, because there was a situation of injustice.

Structures have a character of rigidity and constraint. They set up relationships which keep people in defined places within the structure. It is important that people know their place and remain in it. Consequently, structures have a restraining power which, when compared with the power sometimes used to force the structures to change, can also be called "violence"--a restraining violence.

By this very fact, structures are resistant to change. As a formal set of relationships, there is no intrinsic dynamism or even potentiality for change in them. They express, therefore, a certain stability which can be looked on as peace and as providing law and order. Undoubtedly this resistance to change is partly due to the fact that the structures usually favor some group over others, and the dominant group does not want to lose its advantageous position. But apart from this there is an inherent resistance to change in structures themselves, and for this reason they do not promote the development of society.

A second characteristic of the language of "sinful social structures"

is that the structures are called sinful, not because they are in violation of the law of God, though they may be, but because they are oppressive to human beings. These judgments are not theological but rather humanistic in orientation. The structures are "sinful" because they limit and restrict the potentiality for growth and development on the part of human persons as persons. It is true that the older theology had, with St. Thomas, pointed out that God hated sin not because it diminished him, but because it was destructive of man. And the last seven of the Ten Commandments, it was remarked, were sins against man rather than against God. But in the newer language the reference to God is not as explicit, and the focus is entirely on the human.

A third aspect of the language of "sinful social structures" is that it thinks in terms of groups rather than individuals. Structures encase groups of people, such as women, or blacks, or capitalists, or workers. Though groups are made up of individuals, the individuals are caught by the structures not because of their individuality but because of their common characteristics, and therein lies one of the causes of "sinfulness": the structures do not promote the treatment of persons as persons but rather as members of a group.

A fourth aspect of the language of "sinful social structures" is that it does not seem to focus on the acts which produce the structures, or which sustain them--and this is what act morality has misunderstood--but, rather, it turns attention to the absence of action, a failure to act to change the structures. The very title of Pope Paul's apostolic letter to Cardinal Roy in 1971, *Octogesima Adveniens* ["The arrival of the 80th anniversary of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. . . ."], evokes both Leo XIII's and Pius XI's calls to social action, calls never completely heeded. The Detroit Catholic Conference of last year bore the name "A Call to Action," thus implying previous neglect. As Marc Oraison has remarked, our sin today is seen more as a sin of omission than as a sin of commission. We are being faced with our responsibility to do something, in the spirit of Vatican II's decree on the Church in the Modern World, which says that we are experiencing a new humanism the first principle of which is our responsibility to history and to our brothers (no. 55).



The shift of the concept of sin from an act that merits punishment to a state of failure to act is not of itself soothing and consoling. It can arouse a sense of our own powerlessness and helplessness in the face of the forces that form the structures of society, and in the face of the complex and confused character of these same social structures. Social structures are not only sinful; they also provide the possibility of life. Human communities cannot live without them. Moreover, there is a relativity in social structures. A completely just set of social structures is hardly conceivable, and so it seems reasonable to accept realistically a society which is only relatively just. What cannot be notably improved should not be tampered with. Even if we had the power to change the structures, would the changes result in a more human society?

Reflections of this sort do not seem to daunt the "call to action" people. The morality of responsibility for history and for our brothers seems to be linked with a spirituality of hope and of the cross. The spirituality of hope believes that the human condition can be improved, and that the profoundest sin would be to despair of human liberation. The spirituality of the cross believes that, even when there seems to be no hope, one must trust in the promise and act even though it may mean the cross. *The* sin is not to act. The Exodus event and the death and resurrection of Christ become the spiritual model for the new concept of sinfulness. Sin is to imitate the Israelites who grumbled at being drawn from their secure slavery to the Egyptians, or to imitate Peter in his effort to turn the Messiah from the cross.

One consequence of the new humanistic approach to sin is that it is concerned about injustice to human persons as human and not specifically as Christian. This is a delicate point that needs careful clarification if one is not to arouse skepticism. Before the advent of unions and collective bargaining there was, admittedly, some concern about the oppressive economic structures of society, that is, of the working people in the United States. But a large part of the Catholic population formed that working class, and there was a sense of fighting for "our own." In fact, when Catholic agents of change in our times moved to assist groups that are largely non-Catholic, this was greeted with some resentment and anger. When the changes advocated

affected the affluence, new-found or otherwise, of Catholics, then there has been more than anger, as for instance in some South American countries. On the other hand, agents of change become outraged at the suggestion that the Catholicism or not of those suffering injustice ought to be a factor determining action. To be a Christian is to be concerned for the poor and oppressed no matter who they are.

Skepticism, however, arises from the apparent fact that those who call us to admit social sin and to work for change seem to be selective in their perception of injustice. This is something of a reversal of our Lord's complaint. Those who call us to the admission of sin see the sliver in our own eye, but not the beam in the eye of the enemy. They are disturbed at the exploitation of the earth by the free world, but say or do little about the enslavement of man in the Communist world.

The response usually given to this charge is that we are not responsible for the consciences of the Communist countries, but we are responsible for our own. This response is hardly satisfying as long as we perceive ourselves as being on the receiving end of charges and criticism. We can still take the stance: "You blame us. Why don't you blame them? They are worse than we are by far. You are not consistent." If, however, we see the criticism as a call to admit sin, then the situation changes. We are no longer objects of a charge, in the same line of attack as "them." We are now fellow subjects with the critics who are performing the role of our conscience. We are being asked to admit our sin, and that is the only sin we can admit. We cannot admit *their* sin.

But this stirs another movement of resentment. Are we really being asked to admit *our* sin? The sins we are being asked to admit are the actions of corporations with which we generally have nothing to do, and over which we have, it seems, no control. Or they are the actions of government, for which we may have some responsibility, but little capacity to know and judge the complex mixture of goods and evils which are involved. As Father Ganss remarked, we may be reluctant cooperators, if cooperators at all.

The language of "cooperation" belongs to the structure of "act" morality. In this context the question is: To what degree and in what circumstances is cooperation with the immoral act of another justified? The factor, on the



other hand, that seems to be at work in the call to admission of sin in national or societal actions is a different conception of communal or group morality. One should avoid understanding this group morality in an "act" sense, as a consensus of the individuals involved in a common action or policy. Rather what is being called into play is a notion of solidarity with others within a group (corporation, nation, race, humankind).

This touches a very intricate question, the question of the alternatives to an unqualified individualism or an unqualified socialism. Are we complete as individuals, or are we members of one another? Who is our brother, and our neighbor? To what extent are we linked with the sin, or the virtue, of others?

The Church in recent action has been concerned to deny that present generations are guilty of the sins of an earlier generation. She has rejected the thesis that "the Jews killed our Lord," or that "the Scots killed John Ogilvie and his companions." *Roots* has raised the question whether I am guilty of the sins of slavers against the blacks brought to this country from Africa. I was not alive then, nor were my ethnic ancestors in this country at that time. How can I be guilty?

The simple answer is, I cannot be guilty of that sin and I am not, insofar as the morality of act is in use. But it is another question whether I have some responsibility to redress the wrong done to a brother, a wrong perpetrated by another brother, not because I am guilty of the wrong, but because my brother or neighbor has been injured and is suffering. Is this merely a matter of charity, or of the imitation of the goodness of Christ? There seems to be something more human here, a bond analogous to the bond of a living organism, where processes rush to the aid of an injured member.

Perhaps the solution lies in the direction of the distinction Father Thomas Clarke has made between individual, person, and society (*Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, Vol. VII [1975], 129-132). In between our separate-ness as individuals, and our structured community as society, lies our intercommunion as persons. In this intercommunion we are all of us and each of us responsible for our common growth and well-being as persons, and responsible therefore when one of us has been injured by another. The sin, then, of which we may be guilty is not the sin that was committed by others,

not even the sin of cooperation, but rather the sin of unconcern, of not being a brother or a neighbor, the sin of omission, of doing nothing.

This may be a different conception of sin, but it is no easement to our conscience. We are being asked to do something that we may not feel empowered to do, and our failure is being labeled "sin."

Perhaps there is some measure of relief in the perception of sin as powerlessness, the inability to do what we ought to do. The meaning of sin in this perception shifts from rebellion and disobedience (the sin of the angels and of our "first parents," a sin from strength) to weakness and incapacity (the good that I want to do, I don't do; the evil I do not want to do, I do). Sin shifts over from an act that merits punishment to a state that needs help and strength. Sin becomes a state of ill health that seeks a cure. The scene shifts from the judge's court to the physician's chamber. To confess one's sin is no longer to ask for condemnation and punishment, but to ask for cure and healing. It is to be in the state of the anonymous alcoholic for whom the acknowledgment of his illness is the beginning of the cure, and the confession of his helplessness a bid for help, a recognition of his dependence, of his need for support, for community, and for strength and grace and love.

Seen in that light the admission of sin is the confession of God's love for us, and of our brother's love for us. It is a warming, encouraging confession rather than a defeating and discouraging one. It certainly places the fact of sin on the personal rather than the impersonal plane, in the context of communion rather than of individualism. If we were to be caught up with this meaning of sin, we might find ourselves hurrying to confess our sin rather than hiding it or fleeing from it. Perhaps this is what it means "to be a sinner."

If so, the word "sin" has almost entirely changed its usage from that of casuistry and act morality. If so, perhaps, the word should not be used, because when it is being used in meaning B, it will invariably be understood by many in meaning A. Some attempts have been made in that direction. Some urge that we talk of admitting our "sinfulness" rather than our sin. Others prefer to drop the language of sin altogether, and talk of our helplessness, or unconcern, or lack of love. However, it is difficult, if not



impossible, to command language usage. Perhaps we have to become accustomed to the circumstance that today, as in Scripture, "sin" is used in many ways and not only, perhaps even very seldom, in the strict sense of "act" morality.

## II. THE POINT OF VIEW OF COUNSELORS

### A. A General Treatment

The discussion in our Seminar on our reluctance to admit sin then shifted to another point of view, the point of view of counselors, both psychological and spiritual. Counselors deal with people who come to them for help. These people come for companionship and help in their desires and efforts to grow in their union and communication with God, to become more fully human, and to live in effective association with others in the various communities of which they are a part in today's society.

Counselors are very reluctant to recommend the acknowledgment of sinfulness to anyone until certain conditions are fulfilled, and they are not inclined to say that the conditions will be fulfilled in a hurry. The reason for their reluctance is not the unwillingness of the persons with whom they speak, but their own perception of the state of mind of many who come to them. Observers of the national scene on a personal level perceive a massive negativity toward themselves on the part of many people. Counselors perceive this particularly among Catholics and religious. The phenomenon is not restricted to persons who are having a difficult time "making it" in the public eye. On the contrary, those who seem to be particularly affected with negativity about themselves are those who seem publicly to be highly endowed with gifts of nature and grace, to be talented above the ordinary. Counselors of Jesuits, both young and old, have long been reporting this experience of a poor self-image, an observation that might come as a surprise to many. It may be, in fact, the case that an appearance of confidence and competence frequently masks an inner insecurity. In any case, according to the counselors, many religious persons do not see themselves as very capable. They do not feel capable in prayer. They do not feel close to God or that God is close to them, and they do not know how to close the gap. They are conscious of their laziness, as they see

it, their angers and envies, their sexual desires and tendencies, their doubts about faith, about their religious community, about the Church, their lack of strong hope. They do not find themselves loving others. They readily recognize that God should not love them. How could he? They do not love themselves.

In this situation it is understandable that counselors are very loath to raise the issue of sinfulness with anyone until they are sure that the person is ready to deal with it and is able to profit from it. In other words, what this position is saying is that in the present state of our culture, and particularly of our Catholic and religious culture, the call to the admission of sin is the wrong place to begin. People are already too depressed to be able to consider our human sinfulness in any spiritual and renewing way. They are not able to sort out the various meanings of sin. They already feel guilty enough, and the burden of guilt has begun to raise feelings of resentment. Popular training in the communication of feeling supports resistance to the admission of sin. "No one is going to lay any more guilt on me." "I've had enough guilt laid on me; tell me what I can do to remove it." "Don't send me on another guilt trip."

What are the causes of this situation? One explanation links the poor perception of self-worth to early experiences in the family and in education. Parental impatience and annoyance and strong manifestations of displeasure joined, perhaps, with violence have a scarring and lasting effect on the child. A practice of multiplying negative prescriptions, the don'ts, and of expressing them with anger and punishment, generates a feeling of pain and unpleasantness that becomes deeply imbedded in the child's responsive powers. Self-protective devices are developed to avoid that pain and unpleasant feeling. Contemporary psychology has studied all the various ways the self responds to this criticism and disapproval. One way is to withdraw within itself, to hide, even from itself. It becomes afraid of being found out, because it knows in advance that what will be discovered is not good.

In religious families the negative prescriptions and threats of sanctions have frequently been expressed within the context and persons of the religious world: God, our Blessed Mother, the saints, the devil, hell, heaven, and the like. Many actions are labeled "sin" with all its dire



consequences which at best are only doubtfully sinful even if all the conditions are present. And one of the actions or attitudes that is labeled sinful is to think or speak well of oneself. That is pride, far from the humility that is the proper virtue of the Christian. It is amazing how many religious find it difficult to perceive and reflect upon the goodness that is in them, because they have been trained that it is wrong to do this. It is hard to believe also that college students trained in Catholic schools frequently agree that it is Catholic teaching that man because of original sin is basically evil.

It would seem that what is needed is not further insistence on our sinfulness, but rather a reconstruction of our human spirit beginning with a realization of God's personal love for each of us, and an awareness that we are reflections of him and his goodness. Much work may need to be done before the question of sinfulness can profitably be brought forth.

Developments in the area of psychology highlight another aspect of our traditional training in Christian holiness and virtue which fosters a negative self-image. Humanistic or existential or third-force psychology, the human-potential movement, has steadily been moving American consciousness toward a growth model of human personality. By contrast it brings into relief the perfection model of Christian personality development.

The perfection model begins with the position that there is a state of spiritual and personal perfection to which we are all urged to aspire. Some models of perfection are given to us. The first of these models, of course, is God himself, one of whose major attributes is that he is all-perfect, that he lacks nothing and is the fullness of being. We are exhorted in the gospel to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, and though the context indicates that the meaning is that we should exclude no one from our love, the phrase has come to be used to mean that we should imitate the perfection of God in all ways.

A second model of perfection is Christ. Through many centuries the perfection of Christ was reinforced by a Christology which emphasized his divinity over his humanity. It was admitted that he was a man, but what was important and significant was that he was God, and knew it, and lived in that knowledge and power from the beginning of his Incarnation. The

effect of this practical docetism was to stress the distance between Christ and ourselves and put our model far above us. Much contemporary Christology has turned the image around and stresses the humanity of Christ, a man who grew in his knowledge and awareness of himself as the only Son of God.

The case with Mary is similar. She is the perfect woman, without stain of sin, prompt and complete in her response to the Father, the woman of faith and contemplation, removed from any human weakness. The definition of her Immaculate Conception, though adding to her glory, seems to have contributed also to her remoteness. Women could see her only as totally other than themselves, an ideal ideal but not a real one. More important, they could only see themselves in a poor light in comparison with her. And though the approach of men to Mary was different from that of women, she was also for them a transcendent ideal of chastity and purity that set an impossible measure for themselves.

The saints came closer to a possible measure, but they were also presented as models of perfection. Their strengths were recounted and not their weaknesses, and even their strengths were idealized. To contemplate the saints, their prayer, their zeal, their effectiveness among men and women could only result in humbling the devout soul desirous of following in their footsteps. Few would have the spirit of Ignatius: "If Dominic and Francis and Humphrey can do it, so can I." Or if they did have that spirit in the beginning, they would have to struggle with discouragement later on as they saw themselves falling short of their goals.

The perfection model suggests the influence of the Platonic tradition on Christian consciousness. The Platonic tradition divides the world into two separate orders of reality, an ideal order of absolutes, of absolute goodness and virtue that has no limitations in it, and a second order of images or reflections which is characterized by its defects and limitations.

In the perfection model, the perfect, transcendent and out of reach, is the measure by which each person is judged. The result of that judgment can only be that we are not-good, imperfect. The model trains us to see ourselves always in contrast to the good and the perfect, to see only our negativity. In other words, it fosters a poor self-image.

If this Christian mentality is located within the situation of the



modern world with the high demands it places on the individual and the responsible members of the family and the community even for survival let alone prosperity, then it becomes understandable that the prevailing mood would be one of discouragement and anxiety and a feeling of incapacity. The American success ethic has its correlative, failure. We are divided into winners and losers and there are more losers than winners.

The growth model as it is presently being developed reverses the point of reference used by the perfection model. It is true that in the spirituality of perfection the concept of growth was prominent. Religious were defined as being in a state of striving for perfection, of being on the way, of growing in virtue. In fact, the theology of virtue, with its understanding of virtue as a habit to be progressively acquired or strengthened did embody a developmental conception. That is not the question. The issue between the perfection and the growth models is not whether we are to understand ourselves as growing and developing, but rather how the growth is measured. The perfection model looks to a goal, an ideal, a model of perfection which is up ahead, which is some distance from me, which I have not reached and towards which I am striving but never arriving. I am always falling short. The growth model, on the other hand, does not look to an ideal which has not been reached, but turns one's gaze in the other direction, to where I am, where I have arrived. It says to me: You have come this far; in what way do you still want to grow? I measure my progress by how far I have advanced over where I was. Assuming that I do make progress, I do not measure myself by how far I still find myself from the goal, but rather by how much I have improved over what I was. This perspective evidently is encouraging and positive. The approach, moreover, prefers not to think of final stages or absolute ideals, but simply of progress to a perceptible and achievable next stage. I do not take a norm of prayer, for example, from the saints, but I simply look to improve a little the quality of my own prayer.

The growth model is not totally positive, however. It has room within it for some negativity. It places responsibility on the individual himself, and makes a demand for initiative that can be threatening. The individual can refuse the responsibility. The growth process can be stopped at any



level, or it may be retarded and underdeveloped, or even negated. A person can withdraw from the process of life and growth. However, even in these cases attention is not placed on the failure of the person to be where he should be, but rather on the potential that is within him to be more of what he is.

Furthermore, the growth model admits conflicting tendencies within the person in development, a lack of integration and unity, which can be identified as the effects of sin, original, communal, or personal, or as the natural situation of man in evolution. But in this perspective also man is on the way up, as it were, and not measured by this distance below perfection or from an ideal and absolute norm.

The spirit of the growth model obviously does not encourage initiating progress in the spiritual life by a call for the admission of sin. Rather it would further meditation on the image of God that we are, on the gifts and graces that are in us, on the love that we receive, the potential that is within us. Only after that is sufficiently established will one attend to resistance toward praising and loving God and his brothers, attend to his own sinfulness.

Without special attention to either the perfection or the growth models, but simply drawing on his extensive experience as a spiritual director, Father William J. Connolly, a member of the Seminar, submitted some reflections which are very pertinent here. They round out this discussion of the reluctance to admit sin from the viewpoint of the counselor.

B. A Particular Treatment: Admission of Sin and the Experience of Alienation from God in the Earlier Stages of Contemplative Development

Frequently a person will begin a time of intensive prayer he has looked forward to--an hour or two carefully set aside in a hectic week, or a retreat, for instance--only to find the prayer a barren, frustrating experience. He cannot keep his attention on God, his care, his mercy, or any of the other gracious and vivifying givens of revelation.

If, despite his disappointment, he persists in his attempt to pray, he will probably discover eventually that he can keep his mind on the prayer

only when he begins to express the feelings and attitudes that begin to arise in him as he tries to address God. These may not be the feelings and attitudes he would like to have. He may find that as he tries to face Him, for instance, he feels worthless, insignificant, oppressed by the massiveness and the complexity of life, imprisoned in himself. Or he may suppose that there is no one in the universe, God or human being, who genuinely cares about him. If these are his feelings and attitudes, he will have to express them to God if he is to engage in a prayer that he will experience as personal and not simply pro forma.

The inability to pray in the earlier stages of contemplative development very often stems from an unwillingness or an inability to be ourselves before God, to accept the incapacities we have, and at least momentarily to put aside the assumption that to be with him we have to be someone we are not.

There are several experiences that commonly occur when a person has not yet accepted and acknowledged God's love and care for him. One is a feeling of being uncentered, unfocused. He is unable to concentrate his attention on the word of God, for example. When he tries to use Scripture as a basis for prayer, the book remains only words to him, with no reference to a Person who speaks the words.

Another common experience is a sense of impermeability before God. The heart remains hardpacked earth that does not absorb rain. The word of God does not penetrate the person's sensibility, but splashes off it. A man may know Scripture well, may even expound it several times a week. But the word may still give him only ideas and not touch his heart.

What does the experience of intensive prayer tell us about a contemporary consciousness of sin?

First, it suggests that the words "sin" and "sinfulness" are not terms that describe directly the inner experience of many Christians. The words say too little or too much. Too little because they connote extrinsic transgression rather than an interior attitude. Too much because they are often associated in people's experience with undifferentiated feelings of unworthiness. These feelings often include a sense of unlovableness that precedes any fault, that is not caused by an awareness of offense, but by



a person's human situation itself. These feelings would be present whether fault was present or not. By threatening the person's sense of worth, sometimes at its deepest level, they tend to paralyze him and prevent any deep response to the merciful God. He can experience relief, at a time of sacramental forgiveness, for instance, but he does not believe that God can change his heart.

Second, people frequently experience in prayer a sense of alienation from God. He is distant and unconcerned. They cannot reach him and they feel that he does not care to reach them. And they feel, why should he? They do not feel themselves very important, and a relationship with him seems utterly beyond them.

Third, the experience of alienation is reinforced by a desire to control their own experience. If the Other once began to address them, they feel, they would have no control over what he might say. He could say anything, call them to anything. He could undermine their fundamental attitudes toward themselves, challenge their emotional preoccupation with their work, overturn their basic social assumptions. They could be left without integration and without confidence. To protect themselves, they try to control their experience of him and let him say only what they feel they can safely hear. They may, as a result, hear nothing until they are willing to relinquish their control of the dialogue.

This control the person exercises over his own experience is not completely voluntary. He often cannot relinquish it simply by choosing to do so. It is multileveled, for one thing, and more tenacious on the deeper levels than on those closer to full consciousness. Even when control is lifted to the extent that the person can recognize, for instance, his anger at God because of a recent misfortune in his life, he may still, without knowing it, be refusing to recognize or express a deeper hurt resulting from earlier experience. Yet, until he does put that deeper hurt before the Lord, he is exercising control over the relationship with him by not allowing him to penetrate that level of his feelings.

It is here that the suggestion often made in spiritual direction not to dig for deeper attitudes that might be impeding the relationship with God becomes understandable. The digging process is inevitably self-centered.



Letting myself be receptive to the Lord, on the other hand, inviting him to reach into the dark levels of my heart and, permitted by my gradual willingness, make them transparent allows my relationship with him to draw into itself the deeper levels of my being. He removes the control, I permit him to remove it, and its withdrawal places me on a deeper level of relationship. The removal thus brings about not only an absence of control, but the initiation of a new level of relationship.

Does the person in this situation need forgiveness of fault? Perhaps, but more clearly he needs release from the isolation his control imposes on him, and this release comes about through a new explicitation of his relationship with God.

Fourth, when the experiences of alienation and control begin to break down, they do so because the person feels a need to be healed and set free and sees the Lord as having the power and desire to heal and set him free. Rarely do alienation and control succumb to an explicit realization that one needs forgiveness. Rarely are they explicitly seen as experiences of sinfulness.

Fifth, the experience of oneself as rebel, or deliberate offender against God, is rare. The prodigal son says, "I have sinned against God and against you," but the contemporary Christian who tries to live an explicit relationship with God, though rarely arrogant about his Christian life, seldom sees himself as offending God. He can see himself as unworthy of, incapable of, a relationship with the Lord, and very distrustful of his capacity to let such a relationship develop, but he has great difficulty in admitting offense.

Perhaps it is difficult to admit offense in any relationship. It seems much easier to admit ignorance, inadvertence, or inability. Offense can seem to threaten the very existence of the relationship. For this reason a person would rather put up with confusion or blankness than admit that he has offended God. The confusion and blankness may well continue until he is willing to speak of offense to the Lord. The principal movement, though, is toward an attitude of openness and transparency rather than the acknowledgment of a particular fault or offense.

There are situations in prayer, then, that make God seem inaccessible

or make the praying person feel inaccessible to God. These situations are often caused by attitudes that, if they appeared in any interpersonal relationship, would tend to keep the relationship cool and distant. To call them sinful would be presumptuous, for the word in this context is ambiguous. Its proper use depends on the theology of sin one is using, and its helpful rather than confusing use in spiritual direction presupposes that director and directee understand the word in the same way. Since the word sin carries powerful, even violent, emotional connotations, it will be generally advisable not to use it at all in regard to the attitudes that have been discussed here. These attitudes can be more helpfully described in terms drawn from the experience of human relationships. If I withdraw from a close association with a friend by letting some resentment toward him go unexpressed, I know that there is something I can do to overcome the sense of distance that has attenuated the relationship, and that if I do not do it the continuing distance will be my own fault. If I generally "control" my conversations with a friend by listening only to what I want to hear, I can restore mutuality to the friendship by letting myself listen to all that he has to say. The development of the inner relationship with God is more likely, at this stage of its development at least, to be furthered by recourse to the experience of human relationship than by the use of a word like sin that carries massive paralyzing power and offers no encouragement.

### III. THE POINT OF VIEW OF SPIRITUALITY

#### A. A General Treatment

The reluctance to admit sin is approached from yet another point of view, the point of view of prayer and spirituality and of the experience of holiness. This view acknowledges and recognizes the validity of the first two analyses, the extension of the language about sin to structural and communal areas, the psychological and moral models of human growth, but it considers the problem to lie on a yet deeper level, the level of the inner spirit and one's relationship with and perception of God.

From this point of view the anxiety and uneasiness induced in the



soul by the call to admit sin may be founded in a self-centered spirituality. This spiritual outlook is almost totally concerned with one's own appearance or image, how one appears to oneself, to one's friends and acquaintances, to strangers and the general public. Furthermore, the concern is to appear without flaw. If a flaw or scratch in the shiny surface should be perceived, then the whole appearance turns to ugliness. Even the possibility of having one's goodness questioned is disturbing. The concern is to be beautiful, in body, in ability, and in soul, and being beautiful is identified with appearing beautiful. Appearance is a high value, with the consequence that every effort is made, largely unconsciously, to not see, or to render invisible whatever is not thought to be beautiful. Anxiety is always close to the surface in this spiritual attitude. There is fear that some evidence will appear and demonstrate that one is not beautiful, that one has a selfish streak, or is ungenerous, or really does not have a prayer life, or does have sexual attractions and disturbances, or is hesitant about some aspect of the faith. The call to admit sin stirs that anxiety, stimulates a measure of fright that one will be found not to be what one appears.

In one interpretation this outlook is an expression of an individualist view of self. In the familiar scholastic definition an individual is an entity which though unified in itself is cut off from everything else. On the personal level, an individual with this perspective would not see himself as intimately related with others, esteemed and supported by them, and caught up in their lives in return. He tends to see himself, in the current jargon, as simply an object for others, someone who is looked at and judged by others. This relationship to others is transferred also to God. The individual sees himself even as separate from God, as being alone, even though he acknowledges with another part of his mind that God is his creator. He sees God also as watching him, looking for flaws, or mistakes, or sins. Turned thus into himself he can find nothing there except nothingness. It is the liminal awareness of this reality that founds the angst and nervousness which the individual manifests to himself and to the world. The existentialists Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre have fascinated the contemporary reflective world with their analyses of this dimension of man, of ourselves.

This tendency to individualism or egoism, as has been suggested, is in



each of us. Perhaps because of the familial, ecclesial, and cultural training spoken of above, the tendency may be reinforced in the devout Christian. He sees others, even God, looking at him as a failure. He begins to turn into himself and to experience himself as alone, cut off from others.

The criticism of this spiritual attitude is that it begins in the wrong place. It begins with self instead of beginning with God. But this by itself is not enough. It is the way in which one perceives and experiences God that needs to be corrected. This is not particularly a philosophical exercise, though in one sense there needs to be some purification of how one understands God. It is properly an exercise of prayer. God needs to be experienced, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, the God of Jesus. This is the God of personal love who has made us in his image, who is faithful, whose mercy is the greatest of all his works, who desires friendship with us, who communicates himself to us.

This changes our perspective from that of individualism to interpersonalism, from isolation to relationship. We are not alone, but from the very beginning are lifted up and existing within the love of God. Once this communion is experienced there is no longer any fear or angst. There might be fear of displeasing God, fear of his anger, but there is no longer any fear of being alone, of not being loved, just as a child in a loving family has no fear of not being loved, though he may on occasion fear his father's displeasure.

The experience of the God of Israel is bound eventually to lead to an experience of his holiness. It has been pointed out that the God of Israel, by contrast with the gods of other peoples, as well as with the god of the philosophers, is a holy God. For Abraham and his descendants, God is not only the Lord of heaven and earth, the God of power and might, but he is, above all and especially, holy. The whole court of heaven, all the angels and saints, stand before him and cry: holy, holy, holy. The sense of that word has fascinated and intrigued the religious analysts. Otto's phenomenology of the holy has been given classical status; the holy is the *mysterium tremendum*, the completely other. Perhaps, however, this translates the Jewish and Protestant experience rather than the Catholic. The holiness of God speaks of his purity (*sanctitas*) by saying he is "unapproachable light"; also,

"You are holy indeed, the source of all holiness." It includes all justice but goes beyond it. Even though Jesus says, "Only one is good, God," the attribute of goodness can be applied to man directly, with reference only to his own nature. No creature, however, is called holy except in reference to God. If a man is said to be holy, it is because he is judged to be in communion with God and thereby to partake of God's quality of holiness. A holy man separates himself from all that is not God, and therefore is an ascetic, in order to be filled with God. He is a man of prayer (meditation), for it is prayer that puts him in communion with God.

The holiness of God is without stain, without blemish. When one comes to know with real knowledge the holiness of God, he can only see himself as sinful: "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man." Sin is perceived only in relation to God, and specifically to God's holiness. Sin is not perceived simply in reference to oneself.

It might be useful to suggest a distinction between sin and evil. Evil, as its correlative, good, has classically been understood with reference to the being or act itself which is said to be evil. It is a defect, a deficiency that should not be there. Sin, on the other hand, appears only in relationship to God's holiness, by contrast to him. It is therefore a relational notion. It might even be said that in himself a person may be good, very good, but as soon as he comes into the presence of the holy God, he sees himself as sinful. Consequently, to admit one's sinfulness, to confess one's sin, is not to make a statement about oneself, but rather to confess and glorify the holiness of God. It is not that we are decreased, but he is increased. To confess our sinfulness is really to praise God, as St. Augustine demonstrated so well.

It may very well be that true knowledge of our sinfulness comes only when we are touched by God's forgiveness. When Jesus came as the manifestation of the Father, he came preaching forgiveness. Perhaps it is only in the light of the knowledge of that forgiveness that the disciple of Jesus becomes aware of the meaning of his own sinfulness. If this is so, then it follows that awareness and acknowledgment of sin is not a depressing and discouraging state but a fulfilling and graceful one, because the state is preceded by and induced by a prior awareness of God's personal love and



mercy. Thus, to admit one's sin is to admit and receive God's love.

This would seem to be the meaning of the "exaggeration" of the saints. It is exaggeration only if one thinks of sin merely in reference to oneself, to one's deliberate acts of violation of the moral law. It is not exaggeration if one thinks of sin as the difference between ourselves and the holiness of God. The finiteness of our virtue, of our justice and love, of our prayer and zeal, when compared with the justice and love and holiness of God, as St. Ignatius suggests in the *Exercises*, takes on the coloring of sin.

This spiritual sense of sin was perceptively developed and expressed by Father Daniel Meenan in some reflections on the General Congregation and on St. Ignatius which are highly apropos here.

#### B. A Particular Treatment: On Sainly Sinfulness

What is it to be a Jesuit? It is to know that one is a sinner, yet called to be a companion of Jesus as Ignatius was . . . (decree of the 32nd General Congregation on Jesuits Today, no. 1).

I am a sinner who loves Jesus Christ (Monsignor José-María Escrivá de Balaguer).

I am fascinated by the saintly concept of sinfulness. In the quotation from the 32nd General Congregation, it may well be that in the phrase "as Ignatius was" we can find a viable and operative concept of sinfulness based on his experience. We are all, at once and always, "sinners who are called." What we find in the life of Ignatius may well be suggestive of the reason for our own ability or non-ability to admit our own sinfulness before God.

Ritually, in whatever form, we daily confess before God and before each other that we have sinned. Yet in the reality of our self-awareness, seldom, it seems, does this confession go beyond a ritual statement.

A beginning to an approach to saintly sinfulness might be the statement that only that person is free to confess his sinfulness who does not feel threatened by such a confession; that person is truly defenseless who feels no need for defenses. Somewhere in these roughly equivalent statements, I suspect, is to be found the salvific concept of saintly sinfulness.

On February 13, 1544, according to his *Spiritual Diary*, Ignatius experienced a profound movement of the sense of fault, of unworthiness, of the need for reconciliation--because during a grace-filled moment of prayer



in the preceding day's Mass, he succumbed to a passing distraction. The vocabulary of his expression is drawn from the lexicon of sin: he is aware of "having greatly failed" (*faltado*); he decides to abstain from saying the Mass of the Trinity for a period, in the meantime having recourse to intercessors; he resolves to withdraw (*abstiendome*) from the presence of the divine Persons; ultimately he decides that it would be better to refrain from his favorite votive Mass (of the Trinity) for a full week.

This is the reaction of a very sick man--or it is the reaction of a very saintly man. If it is the latter, it may safely be presumed that he takes and means what he says very seriously, because for the very saintly man, the meanings of words constitute a very precious commodity. It follows, I think, from this that if *we* are to take very seriously our general congregation's words that we are sinners who are yet called, if we are to mean the words in more than a merely ritualistic sense, we have to "get into" the innards of Ignatius' experience on that occasion and others.

Among the elements that must constitute such an experience must be an intensely profound, immediate awareness of the holiness, love, and grace of God, precisely known as *my* creator and Lord, and at the same time a commensurately immediate experience of the objective inadequacy of *my* response to him. There must be a deep awareness of the immediacy and richness of his grace (*favor*) given to me, of what it is to which that grace calls, of what that grace enables, and, on the other hand, of the sempiternal inadequacy of my response. Immediately and intimately co-present to the self-awareness of the saintly sinner are the two inter-connected elements of gift and of rejection--in this case, partial rejection--of the gift. It is precisely because of the intimacy and immediateness of this awareness in the saintly sinner that his only and utterly sincere response can be: "mea culpa."

Because it is rooted in his person before God, the saint knows radically his own unworthiness. On the other hand, graces given or withheld in regard to others are not immediately present to his awareness; they cannot be part of his existential self-awareness. He knows neither what grace others have been given, nor in what proportionate way they have responded to the gift that is theirs. And so there is lacking in his field of real possibility the basis for any comparison or judgment. Of his own relationship and

response, he is so deeply aware that he is confident in the assessment that surely *anyone*, gifted thus, must have responded better to so rich a gift. And so his only recourse, before the rest of men, is to abase himself, to account himself as worthless.

To the extent that the terms used to describe this experience express what is existentially real to the saint, to that extent must he consider himself as ulcerous, an abomination to be swallowed up by God's otherwise good creation, a shame to be hidden.

Yet, at the same time, and precisely because of the immediacy of *both* elements of this experience, the saint must become still more existentially aware of the dimensions of so divine a love, the love with which he has been gifted. This awareness of infinite dimension does not lessen his sorrow for his sin, but it renders his sorrow joyful, it illumines radiantly the foundation of his hope.

For him, in point of fact, the sin of the saint, by its very negation, exalts yet more the dimensions of that love. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that his sin *celebrates* that love. And so, without diminishing in the slightest his *metanoia*, he is able to "glory in his infirmity" because it is precisely his infirmity which proclaims the wonder of God's merciful and faithful love.

Somewhere in here, I suspect, is the reason why the saint does not have our more cowardly reticence in "proclaiming from the rooftops" his sinfulness, at times his seeming boastfulness of his sinfulness. I suspect, too, that somewhere in here is the reason why, in *eschaton*, everything that has been hidden will be revealed. And why, at that time, loving him perfectly, our joy in him will be the greater precisely because of the revelation of the wonder of his love, made manifest in our sins.

And in this dynamic, someplace, I suspect, is the reason that, even now, it is possible for one man to be "free" in his confession, and another man, in his fear, to be "bound"--unable to see himself authentically as sinful. In here someplace is the reason why, for some, conversion and redemption are ongoing processes for all their lives, while for others, such terms are forever uncomfortable; for whom there is, in fact, an abandonment of hope in favor of presumption; whose souls grow sterile and die, even before their death.



And, finally, in here somewhere is both the gate and the stumbling block to the Society's quest for authentic renewal. If we can grow to the maturity of confession, we will be free to grow, in God's hand, into a new and limitless future. If, in our fear, we are loath to confess our sinful condition, we are perpetually condemned to the narrow confines of our present "now"--whatever that might be at any given moment. *A peccatis nostris, libera nos, Domine!*

#### IV. THE PERSPECTIVE OF HISTORY

##### A. A General Treatment

What our discussion has not taken into account up to this point is the historical perspective of the understanding of sin in the Church. It does not seem that people are naturally historical in outlook. They are much more inclined to recognize diversity of traditions in different cultures when they encounter different cultures, than they are to recognize historical change and development within their own tradition. If a particular tradition does not develop any major changes within a lifetime, then the tendency is to believe that the tradition has always been what it is. And of course within Christianity, and especially Catholic Christianity, tradition, with its continuity with the Gospels and the early Christian community, has a special value. History cannot be experienced the same way that the diversity of contemporary cultures can. Only the scholar can have a certain experience of history. The rest of us know of it through his telling.

In the not very distant past there has been a significant change in the practice of the sacrament of penance, as it was then called. This was a consequence of the movement of the Catholic community towards frequent Holy Communion under the leadership of Pius X. This brought with it the practice of frequent confession, and the confession of devotion, and the problem for many of finding in their conscience significant sins to confess. It can be surmised that this frequent examination of conscience not simply out of a motive of growth in holiness but out of a need to find sins for absolution had some impact on the devout Christian's attitude towards sin. However,

this change did not really modify the confessional approach to sin which had developed in the period since the Council of Trent. This approach reflected the act-violation theology of sin discussed earlier in Part I of this study.

Historical studies, it is said, show that the detailed examination of conscience according to the lists of sins given in devotional books as an aid to preparation for confession was not always the practice in the Church. Apparently the early Christian centuries had an approach to sin and the sacrament of penance that was notably different from our own. This discussion is not prepared to describe these historical changes, but awareness of them is enough to relativize our own age and practice.

We certainly seem to be going through a period of major change in the common conception of sin and in the common use of the sacrament. It seems, for instance, that a change that many had predicted in the realm of sexuality is actually taking place. The focus of attention has gradually been shifting from the area of sexuality to the area of justice, from individual and family morality to social morality. The idea of sexual sinfulness itself seems to be shifting from a narrow and strict view (frequently identified as Jansenism) which identified all sexual behavior as sinful except a carefully prescribed area of activity between married persons, to a broadly affirmative view which sees all sexual activity as positively humanistic and even religious, except a limited sphere of activity which has really not been defined as yet. In place of seeing sin in almost everything sexual, a general perception of sin is spreading to everything social, so that many spheres of social life which were passed over as simply part of history and certainly not sinful are now being perceived as sinful. And the mentality which sees sin broadly in the sphere of justice and human relations tends not to see it broadly in the sphere of sexuality.

The new Rite of Reconciliation is perhaps the most dramatic evidence of change in the perception and understanding of sin. The change in title itself expresses a change from the model of judgment and punishment to a model of friendship and community. But the entire process of the new rite itself moves away from the atmosphere and spirit of the old rite. It is much more open, scriptural, communitarian, and leisurely, far removed from the confined confessional, the detailed self-accusation, and the privacy;



less judgmental, more healing and supportive. If it is broadly accepted by the people, it will do more to change the attitude of Christians and the meaning of sin in their lives than any of the other changes that have taken place up to now. If this happens, then it can be expected that the reluctance to admit sin will also undergo a significant change.

The importance of looking far back into history, and not merely across the earth or through the few decades we can remember, for acquiring an understanding of the changing concepts of sin was well brought out in our Seminar by Father Ladislav Orsy. We present his ideas here.

#### B. A Particular Treatment: Sin and Forgiveness--Some Highlights of History

When we say in the Creed that we believe in the "communion of saints," we do not mean only the unity that exists among Christians dispersed across the length and breadth of the earth; we mean also the unity that extends through history from the first disciples of Jesus to his followers today. Communion means unity that transcends not only the boundaries of earth but also the boundaries of time. Therefore if we are seeking a deeper understanding of our faith, we must explore the awareness of Christians living in various cultures and countries, and we must also reconstruct the understanding of revelation which Christians had through succeeding generations. For they too had the Spirit of God.

Historical changes always take place at different levels, one deeper than the other. There are the external changes in structures, signs, and symbols that are the most visible; often they strike the eye. There is also the subtler development of doctrine which is at the root of external changes. Such development usually reflects the increasing penetration by the Christian community in its progress toward understanding a mystery of faith. Evidence of such development is found in the works of Christian writers, in the dispersed texts of prayers, and even in the silent attitudes of communities.

Beneath all these is the person or the community that undergoes the deep changes. A generation of Christians may focus on one aspect of revelation and express its understanding in a way that ought to be completed and balanced by another generation, one which looks at the same mystery from a

different standpoint. The horizon of a historical community can be quite limited; often a later one can see much further while it is trying to achieve some understanding of the word of God.

Nor should we imagine that we can stand at some absolute spot in the universe, so that we can observe God's kingdom with unfailing objectivity and measure it with everlasting precision. God's revelation and his mighty deeds do indeed have an absolute character; whatever once happened cannot be changed anymore. Nevertheless we are looking at those things from our own standpoint; we see them within our own limited horizon. We contemplate changing events and examine the flow of ideas from a position that moves with the world around it. We too are historical beings.

Such historical existence does not make our knowledge all relative, so that we can only ask: "What is truth?" Rather, through the ministry of the Church, through the knowledge that comes to us from Christian tradition, we learn about God's kingdom with a knowledge that is true and will not perish. But our understanding of the mysteries will be always partial; we are pilgrims moving toward the fullness of truth. Often it is not easy to separate the permanent core element of the revelation which has been authenticated by the Church from those relative elements which are contingent and can be changed.

Certainly there has been, throughout the Christian centuries, an evolution in the understanding of the mystery of sin and forgiveness. The two always went together, and hence the one cannot be studied or understood without the other. Our aim here is not quite to explain the evolution, but rather to indicate the complexity of the issues, and perhaps to encourage further reading. Hence it seems wise to mention here several books available in English which may be helpful.

First, there is Bernhard Poschmann's *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), the best overall history of penance available in English. The German original was published in 1951. Though the book does not display a deep sensitivity for the problems of development and evolution, it is rich in factual information. Michael J. Taylor has edited *The Mystery of Sin and Forgiveness* (New York: Alba House, 1970), a collection of fourteen essays dealing with the historical, doctrinal,



and pastoral aspects of penance. A scholarly survey of relatively recent theologians' understanding of sin is "A Newer Look at the Theology of Sin" by Eugene J. Cooper, in *Louvain Studies*, III (1971), 261-307, which includes a comprehensive survey of the issue of the "fundamental option." Cooper aims more to expound the opinions than to evaluate them. The *Committee Report: The Renewal of the Sacrament of Penance* (Secretariat of the Catholic Theological Society of America, St. Mary of the Lake Seminary, Mundelein, Illinois 60060, 1975) states many problems about sin and forgiveness with clarity. It has an extensive bibliography. Finally, the chapters on "Sin and Mercy" in L. Orsy, *Blessed Are They Who Have Questions* (Denville, N.J.: Dimension Books, 1976) may clarify many points put perhaps too concisely by the present writer in his contribution here.

In the short space we have we cannot recount all the developments. But we can point out that there were significant changes in structures, signs, symbols, and attitudes, and that there was an evolution of doctrine. Beneath it all was the succession of Christian generations with varying mentality and outlook.

1. The apostolic Church was keenly aware that Christians can and indeed do sin against God and that when this happens forgiveness is available to them. John gives an expression to this awareness in his first letter: "If we say we have no sin in us, we are deceiving ourselves and refusing to admit the truth; but if we acknowledge our sins, then God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and purify us from everything that is wrong" (1 John 1:8-9). In his Gospel, he makes it clear that forgiveness is granted through the ministry of the apostles who were sent by the risen Christ, as Christ was sent by his Father, to forgive sins. Jesus breathed on the apostles and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained" (John 20:22-23).

The apostolic Church had a substantial understanding of the way of life taught by Christ. Its members knew what was right and what was wrong, although they certainly did not come to a systematic elaboration of moral theology. Much of their teaching about morality consisted in referring to the example of Christ and to his sayings as handed down by the first

disciples. Also, they knew that forgiveness could be granted through the ministry of the Church. But there is no evidence in the New Testament of a well-determined sign for the granting of forgiveness, such as the washing with water was in baptism. Consequently the Church had to develop structures and symbols to express the granting of forgiveness in the community.

2. In the first five centuries the particular churches developed structures through which forgiveness was granted by the bishop in the midst of the community. Such structures were modeled after old procedures, which the Jews had used, excluding a sinner from the synagogue and readmitting him again when he repented. Although practices differed from one place to another, by the fourth or fifth century a fairly uniform pattern had developed in the churches around the Mediterranean and on the continent of Europe. An important clue to the understanding of this process of granting forgiveness is found in the rule that, to become a penitent, the sinner had to enter into the "order of penitents." Then he was marked for life: once a penitent, always a penitent. He became one of a group of persons for whom a special and severe discipline prevailed. He was received into this new way of life by the bishop. From the moment he was accepted into this order, he contracted ecclesial and civil disabilities. He was barred for life from clerical service. In many churches he could not marry or, if he was married, he was forbidden to use his marital rights. In the civil society, access to public and honorable offices was closed to him for good. He was also barred for a time from Eucharistic Communion and, according to the discretion of the bishop, he had to perform penitential acts in the midst of the community. The understanding behind all this was that he had to satisfy for his sins with the prayers and support of the community that was around him and sheltered him. Readmission to the Eucharist was granted by the bishop and the bishop only. But all did not end there. In many ways he remained a penitent and the disabilities remained. If he failed again, as a rule no reconciliation was given to him until the time of his imminent death.

Here a question naturally arises: For what kinds of sins was anyone condemned to do such drastic penance? There is no uniform answer. In many churches, especially the larger ones, a list evolved containing all those sins for which the bishop could grant someone admission into the order of



penitents. Those lists were of different lengths. All of them contained major offenses such as apostasy from faith, murder, and adultery, but none of them stopped there. Often the sins listed were of a general character, such as doing harm to one's neighbor, being greedy or jealous, and so forth. In practice it was left to the bishop to judge how much injury or what degree of jealousy or greed warranted public penance. It was an existential approach. A person, the bishop, judged about the sin and the fitting character of the penance.

Relatively few Christians officially became penitents. Particular councils warned the bishop and the clergy not to admit young persons; after all, they would be marked for life. Bishops, priests, and deacons were rarely admitted; it meant the loss of their office. It seems that women were not admitted easily either.

But what did the vast majority of Christian people do? Were they unaware of their sins? Quite the contrary. They had a strong awareness of their sinfulness. Anyone who doubts should only read early Christian prayers. The very prayers of the Eucharist are replete with confession of sinfulness and petition for mercy. But the vast majority of people sought forgiveness through other means. They were exhorted to do so through prayer, through vigils, through almsgiving, and through participating in the Eucharist itself.

There is simply no historical evidence that they went to confession in the way we understand that practice today.

3. The Irish church, ever since its foundation in the fifth century, was aware of the same facts that prompted so much development around the Mediterranean: Christians do sin, and they can obtain forgiveness through the ministry of the Church. But due mainly to the strong monastic spirit of the Irish Christian communities, the structure of the process of forgiving developed in a different way. The Irish created their own signs and symbols.

They had no "order of penitents"; anyone could go to any bishop or priest for forgiveness. There was no prolonged separation from the community nor penance done in public. It was enough to confess a sin in private to a priest or a bishop who then imposed a proportionate satisfaction on the penitent. Once the necessary expiation was fulfilled, reconciliation was given through absolution. No one was marked for having done penance, nor

did he incur any ecclesial or civic disabilities. In fact, all remained hidden, a secret between the priest and the penitent. If someone failed again, he could ask for forgiveness without delay, and he could do so any number of times. This was something unheard of in the other system.

The confession of sins was not understood to be "of the essence" of the penitential rite. But it was necessary to assess the amount of satisfaction to be done. To guide the priest in calculating the penance, abundant literature developed, called "the penitential books." For all intents and purposes they were dictionaries of all conceivable sins in all imaginable circumstances, giving the right amount of expiation for each. This was a system remarkably different from the one used on the continent of Europe.

The Irish church created new structures and symbols to give and signify forgiveness. There the process was much less rigid than the one used on the continent. It was more adaptable to the needs of all kinds of people, young and old, men and women, weak and strong. Harsh as Irish penances were, they did not match the extreme severity of public satisfaction. Also the sins could be submitted to an ordinary priest for forgiveness; there was no need to seek out the bishop. And forgiveness was available any number of times; there was no restriction whatsoever.

There is no doubt that on the continent, by the end of the fifth century, the system of public penance had alienated many or virtually all from the use of the sacrament. Now the new practice of the Irish opened the door for Christian people elsewhere to receive the sign of forgiveness without suffering public and permanent humiliation. But there was some loss, too; the awareness of the social dimension of sin and repentance diminished significantly. The customs of the Irish church regarding penance did not remain isolated. In large numbers, its monks went to the continent ready to forgive sins there, too.

We should note that the Irish had a new understanding as to what sins could or should be submitted to the priest. There was no restriction. There was no short list of sins in the churches; rather, there was the voluminous mass of sins listed in the penitential books.

4. With the arrival of the Irish monks full of missionary zeal in the continent, conflict was inevitable. It lasted for some five centuries, with



varying intensity. The two conceptions of how to request and grant God's forgiveness in the Church were too different to coexist peacefully side by side. Before the end of the sixth century, the Council of Toledo in 589 directed at the intruding Irish a stern condemnation of their unheard-of practices. It is worth quoting (Mansi, vol. 9, col. 995, my translation):

We have learned that some people in some churches of Spain are doing penance not according to the canonical prescriptions but in a detestable way. That is, every time they sin, they request absolution from a priest (*presbyter*). To put an end to such an abominable presumption this sacred council issues the following order.

Penances will be given according to the forms prescribed in the ancient canons. The sinner must first be barred from the Eucharistic Communion; then while he remains among the other penitents he must receive several times the imposition of hands; and when he has fulfilled the time of satisfaction, always according to the judgment of the bishop, he is readmitted to the Eucharistic Communion.

Those who relapse into their sins, either while doing penance or after they have been reconciled, must be punished severely according to the prescriptions of the ancient canons.

But the bishops of the western kingdoms of the Franks recognized God's ways in the Irish practices. Gathered in synod at Chalon (644-656), they approved the new way of granting forgiveness. But it is interesting to note how restrained and prudent their language was. Obviously they meant more than what was wise to say in the circumstances.

We judge that to do penance for sin is a medicine for the soul and is good for all. The bishops (*universitas sacerdotum*) are in agreement that penance should be given by the priest to all penitents who have confessed their sins (Canon 8, Concilium Cabilonense, in Mansi, vol. 10, col. 1191).

This quiet and firm gesture from the bishops of the Franks opened the door to the Irish missionaries.

It would take too long to recount all the vicissitudes of the conflict. But if anyone complains today about confusion concerning the sacrament of penance, he should be told about the times when one diocese was continuing the struggle to restore the discipline of public expiation, while another diocese was administering forgiveness through a discreet encounter with the priest. This conflict lasted a long time.

In the ninth century an overall effort to restore the ancient discipline

was made. Prompted and helped by the emperor and his authority, synods of bishops (at Chalon in 813 and Paris in 829) issued strict ordinances enjoining clergy and laity to return to the old discipline. They ordered the penitential books to be burned, the clergy to be disciplined, and if there should be any resistance, they were ready to petition the emperor for help toward restoring the tradition of the church.

But there was no return to earlier times. Eventually a subtle distinction that may have originated from some compassionate and down-to-earth canon lawyer eased the situation and brought relief to many: Public penance was to be imposed only in the case of certain notorious and publicly known crimes; private reconciliation could be given to those whose faults were not known to others.

Eventually public penance disappeared, and the Fourth Council of the Lateran (1215) imposed the obligation on all the faithful to confess their sins once a year.

At this point let us note that the system that originated in Ireland was not fully identical with the system that we know today. There were two significant differences. First, the penance for sin was meticulously calculated, often prolonged and harsh. It had to be completed, as a rule, before the absolution was given. Second, the confession of sins was not understood as the core of the sacrament, but as something necessary for assessing correctly the amount of satisfaction. Not until the twelfth century was confession itself understood to pertain to the essence of the sacrament.

5. The Scholastic age is the time of the elaboration of theories about both the sacrament of penance and the moral teaching of the Church. The Aristotelian categories of matter and form were used to explain something of the mystery of the rite of forgiveness. Controversies arose about the precise nature and effect of contrition or attrition, and of the absolution. Not much was known or remembered about the public penance practiced in the early Church, or of its understanding of sin. But the new systematic elaboration of moral theology certainly had its positive aspects. The great Scholastics focused their attention much more on virtues than on vices, and moral theology remained firmly embedded in the doctrine of grace, redemption, and incarnation.



But the Scholastic doctors had their own limitations. Their knowledge of history did not extend far. They knew the writings of the Fathers, but not so well the ancient practices. They had no "historical consciousness"; they worked mainly with the essences and accidents of metaphysics. They did not have any knowledge of empirical psychology, in fact, hardly any information that comes from empirical sciences.

Their theology of virtues and vices focused somewhat excessively on acts; they were less attentive to internal trends and movements in a human person. Their understanding of sin was confined to two possible categories. A sin can be fatal; then the person who knowingly and willingly commits it loses eternal life. Or a sin can be venial; then the person simply does not progress but there is no interference with life. They found it hard to conceive of a progressive state of illness that is serious and eroding life, although not fatal immediately.

6. The Council of Trent is the next important landmark. In its fourteenth session (1551), the council decreed that Christians are bound by the law of God, "iure divino," to confess each and every mortal sin of which they find themselves guilty after diligent examination of conscience (canon 7; in Denzinger-Schönmetzer, 1707).

We cannot do more here than list some questions that theologians are asking today about the Tridentine decree.

a. As time and research progress, the meaning of the Tridentine decrees in general appears to be less clear than it seemed to theologians in the past. Some canons are obviously equivalent to dogmatic definitions. Others reaffirm or impose a discipline and anathematize all those who are not ready to obey. Each *anathema sit* must be examined in its own context and its meaning must be determined according to the historical evidence. At present there is no doubt that in this case the council intended to state the Catholic doctrine.

b. There is debate about the meaning of "divine law." There is at least one other instance in the council when the bishops used a similar expression, but did not mean it in a strict sense. Nevertheless, in our case no convincing evidence has yet been found that the bishops meant something else than divine law.

c. The Council never determined what is meant by mortal sin. Should the expression be taken according to the scholastic definition and elaborations prevalent in the sixteenth century? Or could it be taken according to the existential practice of the early Church? This is an important question. If the former interpretation is correct, many are obliged to go to confession. If the latter understanding is permissible, relatively few need to present themselves individually to the priest.

7. Between the Council of Trent and the promulgation of the new Rite of Penance (*Ordo Poenitentiae*) in 1974, there was no great or even significant development in the structure of the sacrament of penance, or in the understanding of it.

But much work was done during the last four centuries in moral theology. The attention of the moralists focused principally on the elaboration of a system, or different systems, of norms. Their main concern was to define the nature of a given act in terms of right or wrong. The starting point of their reflections was the evangelical doctrine and our authentic traditions. But they often went well beyond this and presented definitions and conclusions as a binding part of Christian morality, although they were really no more than respectable human speculations. Much of the so-called "common opinion of theologians" has never been authenticated by the Church as part of our Catholic teaching. It merely appeared in manuals. Unfortunately, it was often imposed on the faithful in a way which invoked an authority that was never granted by the Church. There was a mixture of wheat and chaff. It is no small task today to sort out the wheat from the chaff.

8. The present situation concerning both the sacrament of penance and the foundations of moral theology can be best understood in terms of a period of transition and search. Behind the maze of different practices in various places and in succeeding centuries, we must find the common authentic elements of the sacramental sign of forgiveness. We must gather them together in order to find new structures that contain all that is precious in our tradition and what is suitable and needed in our times.

A similar process should be pursued in moral theology. We must gather the elements of the Church's authentic belief about the Christian way of life, whether it be manifested in theory or in practice. The knowledge of the



true way will teach us much about the meaning of sin too.

There is among theologians an increasing understanding, even a good deal of agreement, that good or evil is found primarily in the direction of the movement of a person's life. Acts are signs of an internal trend or disposition. They are like the fruits of a tree which reveal what is inside.

Assuredly, guidelines and rules are needed as well. The apostolic Church and subsequent succeeding Christian generations developed the teaching of Jesus. But later much was added to it that was of mere human origin. Besides the authentic Christian teaching there was in moral theology an accumulation of opinions which are perhaps respectable but still only human. The authentic teaching must be preserved; the human opinions must be critically reexamined.

The new Rite of Penance is the product of a period of transition and search. Pastorally it opens up broad horizons; doctrinally it remains enclosed within a strict interpretation of the Tridentine tradition. Hence come the severe restrictions on common absolution. Yet, the new Rite is an important step in the right direction. No doubt other steps will follow in due course of time.

To enhance our awareness of our sinfulness and at the same time to experience God's mercy, we are looking forward to the time when there will be, in religious houses and in many more places too, regular penance services, with the community participating and common absolution granted. We need to admit our sinfulness not only privately but also in community. We need to experience God's mercy not only in our hearts but also in the midst of our brothers. There is nothing in our tradition to forbid this, and there is much to commend it.

History tells us that the Church is "like a householder who brings out from his storeroom things both new and old" (Matt. 13:52). The treasures of that storeroom are never exhausted; the householder will continue to bring out new and surprising gifts.

Conclusion: In the End . . .

At the conclusion of the historical sketch just given by Father Orsy,

many were more aware than ever of the complexity of the topic. Even so, we can make some concluding remarks. In the end, there seems to be no doubt that sin is at the heart of our encounter with Christ. "The heart of the Christian Gospel is that Jesus came to save us from our sins" (Eugene H. Maly, *Sin, Biblical Perspectives*, p. 77). The familiar variation between Franciscan and Thomistic Christology on the cause of the Incarnation points up the fact that in Christian revelation it might have been otherwise, but in actual history it is because man is a sinner that the Word became flesh. The statement "man is a sinner" is an abstract and general statement, and could be said with different meanings. The meaning becomes more determined and anxiety-producing when it is said that sin defines the condition of all men, and that it is this condition which defines any person's relationship to Christ. Jesus is the Messiah who forgives sins.

If that is so, then it would seem that the beginning of relationship with Christ depends upon "man's" acknowledgment of his sinfulness. The question is: How does man come to know his sinfulness so that he can acknowledge it? That may seem to be a silly question. Man's sinfulness, it must be thought, is obvious. If you are Cain, and you have killed your brother Abel, then you must know your sinfulness. But perhaps you are not Cain. Perhaps you love your neighbor and have always striven to be just and respectful and concerned. On the other hand, if you are seeking to do good, to love God with your whole heart and your neighbor as yourself, you surely are aware of your incapacity to love God "with your whole heart and your whole soul and all your strength," and if failure to love is sin (Maly, p. 12: "sin basically is a failure to love God"), then surely you must know your sin. But if you do not know the living God, then how can you love him? The profundity of the condition of sin in everyman is such that man cannot, or does not, know it of himself.

At the same time there is an uneasiness, a restlessness, an alienation in the depths of everyman which has been noted above. Alienation is a central theme of philosophical and religious anthropology even in the most secularized of modern thinkers. And Freud's unconscious has largely been uncovered as the locus of evil. This may account at least in part for the mysterious and all-pervasive feeling of guilt which bedevils modern man,



and men of every age. He seems to know that he is a sinner, but he does not know why, and consequently does not want to admit his condition.

It would seem, then, that our sinfulness needs to be revealed to us, and the knowledge of our sinfulness is a faith-knowledge:

Only God can reveal man's sin to him. Here is a profound mystery: that which is most our own, the fruit of our own freedom, escapes our knowledge. "Any one who acts shamefully hates the light, will not come into the light, for fear that his doings will be found out" (John 3:20). Sin blinds a man and makes him love the darkness. To know oneself as a sinner, one would have to be a saint, and we really know only those faults from which we have been converted. Is this a vicious circle? How can we in fact be converted if we do not know our faults? Humanly speaking there is no escape; evil encloses the conscience in a prison without windows (Winoc De Broucker, S.J., "The First Week of the Exercises" [Jersey City], p. 2).

A suggestion was made earlier that our sinfulness is made known, that is, revealed to us, in the revelation of our forgiveness in Jesus. It is, perhaps, only when Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven," that we began to have some awareness of our sinfulness. It is, perhaps, the constant call of Jesus to repentance, to conversion, which makes known to us that our following of his way, our discipleship, is a constant "turning from . . . to . . .," turning from sin to the Father. And it would seem to follow from this that all progress in Christianity, in companionship with Jesus, begins with the admission of sin. This seems to be taught by the Church in all its ritual actions, especially in the liturgy of the Eucharist, and in fact in all its catechesis.

Another consequence entailed in this understanding of the Good News is that every increase in knowledge of Jesus is accompanied by an increase of awareness of our sinfulness. The reason for this is, as was said above, found in the fact that Jesus is precisely the savior from our sins. At the same time this awareness of our sinfulness, this progressive awareness of our sinfulness, is the concomitant of an increasing knowledge of forgiveness of the Father, of the saving grace of grace. So we know our sin in knowing God's love for us. The knowledge of our sin, and its acknowledgment, then, does not destroy us, but is part of our re-creation, of our being made new.

Probably each individual person has his own special difficulty about the admission of sin. Probably also groups and societies have their own

special problem about the admission of sin. It may be that the admission of sin is a special problem for Jesuits, individually and collectively. Our friends and our enemies have detected in us a species of pharisaism: "We are not like the rest of men." We are superior. We are better educated on the whole. At least in times past Jesuits could be expected to have the answers, or in any event to give them.

We have the Spiritual Exercises and that has made us the givers of retreats par excellence. We have preached something like the Exercises to priests and bishops, and to countless communities of religious women. We have not only been spiritual directors, but also spiritual men, directing out of our own ascetical and interior experience.

We have, as a matter of fact, served the lay leaders of the Church. In our schools and universities we have served the elite, or educated the poor to become the elite, and then shared in their companionship and gratitude. Our retreat houses have been "first class," places of comfort for those used to the comforts of society. They have not generally been places where the unsuccessful would feel at home.

We have been an exempt order with many privileges. Given our education and educational apostolate, we have not been a part of the parochial community. In fact, we have at times watched what goes on "in the Church" as something apart from us, so that people have sometimes seen us acting as though we were our own Church.

It must come hard for us to admit that we are sinners, that is, that the Society of Jesus has sinned, that it has in fact lived in contrast to its professed commitment to Christ as expressed in the oblation of the exercise on the Call of the King, in contrast to its triple colloquy in the Two Standards where it asks to follow Christ poor and humble.

It has indeed been a humiliation in these days of crisis, reformation, and revolution to recognize that Jesuits are like the rest of men, that they can be unfaithful, that they can transgress the commandments and violate their vows, that their leadership of people in the Church in transition has been and perhaps still is ambiguous. How many of our prophets have walked away from those to whom they preached and left them like sheep without a shepherd?



What is it to be a Jesuit? Is it to be a sinner called by Christ to repentance?

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