

Thinking about Reconciliation

a reader for priests and people

Part Three:

The Church, the sinner and society.

Christ 'loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy' (Ephesians 5:25-26), and he united the Church to himself as his bride. He filled her with his divine gifts, because she is his body and fullness, and through her he spreads truth and grace to all.

The members of the Church, however, are exposed to temptation and unfortunately often fall into sin. As a result, 'while Christ, "holy, innocent, and unstained" (Hebrews 7 :26), did not know sin (2 Corinthians 5 :21) but came only to atone for the sins of the people (see Hebrews 2: 17), the Church, which includes within itself sinners and is at the same time holy and always in need of purification, constantly pursues repentance and renewal'.

RP 3

This work of purification, of repentance and renewal is a work for the whole Church.

The whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways in the work of reconciliation which has been entrusted to it by the Lord. Not only does the Church call sinners to repentance by preaching the word of God, but it also intercedes for them and helps penitents with maternal care and solicitude to acknowledge and admit their sins and so obtain the mercy of God who alone can forgive sins. Furthermore, the Church becomes the instrument of the conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors.

RP 8

The readiness of the Church to repent of its faults and failings, and of her members to accept the call of God to turn from sin and seek to grow in love,

provides the world with a sign of hope. Sin and failure is not the end. The last word always is God's word of love and mercy.

Offending against God, the Church and our neighbour

Sin is always an offence against God. The sin of a Christian is also a sin against the community of the Church – it is an act by which we distance ourselves from the way of life the members of the Church commit themselves to. And sin is always a sin against our neighbour. Sometimes because we do something which directly injures him or her, at other times because our example compromises the witness of the Church. Not uncommonly these ecclesial and social dimensions of sin are overlooked.

By the hidden and loving mystery of God's design men are joined together in the bonds of supernatural solidarity, so much so that the sin of one harms the others just as the holiness of one benefits the others'. Penance always entails reconciliation with our brothers and sisters who are always harmed by our sins.

In fact, men frequently join together to commit injustice. It is thus only fitting that they should help each other in doing penance so that freed from sin by the grace of Christ they may work with all men of good will for justice and peace in the world.

RP 5

When we think of the sins that we are responsible for, there is a tendency to think only of our personal sins. We are familiar, perhaps all too familiar, with those. But there is also what the Church calls social sin. And it is often not so easy to identify what such sin is – for it will include those sins that are perhaps no-one's direct and immediate fault, but where many people, even unwittingly, have contributed to the evil.

Pope John Paul explored this category of sin in his encyclical *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*.

To speak of social sin means in the first place to recognize that, by virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual's sin in some way affects others. This is the other aspect of that solidarity which on the religious level is developed in the profound and magnificent mystery of the communion of saints, thanks to which it has been possible to say that "every soul that rises above itself, raises up the world." To this law of ascent there unfortunately corresponds the law of descent. Consequently one can

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This series offers an oversight of reconciliation in the liturgical life of the Church. It offers individuals a broader perspective on reconciliation than is provided in other Liturgy Office resources which are specific to the Rite of Penance itself. The text includes extensive quotations from the Rite of Penance and other Church documents, and series of questions to encourage personal engagement with the material.

The parts of Thinking about Reconciliation are listed below. They can be downloaded from the Liturgy Office website: www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources.

Part One: *The Mystery of Reconciliation in the History of Salvation*

Part Two: *The Mystery of Reconciliation in the Sacraments*

Part Three: *The Church, the sinner and society*

Part Four: *The Rite of Penance*

Part Five: *Preparing for and celebrating the Rite of Penance*

Appendix A:

Two sets of additional questions. The first is intended for those who wish to review current parish and/or deanery practice in the light of the Rite, and the second for those who wish to reflect on *Thinking about Reconciliation* as a group.

Acknowledgements

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poor housing and other social ills, the human dignity of those who suffer these afflictions is denied. In every society respect for human dignity requires that, so far as possible, basic human needs are met. The systematic denial of compassion by individuals or public authorities can never be a morally justified political option.

The Church does not present a political programme, still less a party political one. The social teaching of the Church, as expounded in this document, provides a set of consistent and complementary principles, values and goals. We recognise, of course, that many people of other faiths or even none would be able to accept much that this teaching has to offer, whether it is described as Catholic or not. Every public policy should be judged by the effect it has on human dignity and the common good. We accept that in many cases there will often be much scope for debate about the best way to achieve these.

The Church's social teaching places the political within the larger context of humanity's relationship with God. Social and political action is important, but realising our full human dignity as children of God, made in his image and likeness, also requires each of us to undertake an inner spiritual journey. The future of humanity does not depend on political reform, social revolution or scientific advance. Something else is needed. It starts with a true conversion of mind and heart.

Preface by Cardinal Basil Hume to *The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching: a statement by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.*

Questions

1. What experiences have you had which confirm or challenge the assertion that there is a social dimension to even apparently 'private' sin?
2. What examples of 'social sin' can you identify in addition to those given in the chapter above?
3. In what ways do the Church and individual Christians most effectively contribute to the private and public dimensions of sin?
4. In what ways does the social dimension of sin, conversion and reconciliation find expression in your parish and local community?

speaking of a communion of sin, whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the church and, in some way, the whole world. In other words, there is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family. According to this first meaning of the term, every sin can undoubtedly be considered as social sin.

Some sins, however, by their very matter constitute a direct attack on one's neighbour and more exactly, in the language of the Gospel, against one's brother or sister. They are an offence against God because they are offences against one's neighbour. These sins are usually called social sins, and this is the second meaning of the term. In this sense social sin is sin against love of neighbour, and in the law of Christ it is all the more serious in that it involves the Second Commandment, which is "like unto the first." Likewise, the term social applies to every sin against justice in interpersonal relationships, committed either by the individual against the community or by the community against the individual. Also social is every sin against the rights of the human person, beginning with the right to life and including the life of the unborn or against a person's physical integrity. Likewise social is every sin against others' freedom, especially against the supreme freedom to believe in God and adore him; social is every sin against the dignity and honour of one's neighbour. Also social is every sin against the common good and its exigencies in relation to the whole broad spectrum of the rights and duties of citizens. The term social can be applied to sins of commission or omission – on the part of political, economic or trade union leaders, who though in a position to do so, do not work diligently and wisely for the improvement and transformation of society according to the requirements and potential of the given historic moment; as also on the part of workers who through absenteeism or non-cooperation fail to ensure that their industries can continue to advance the well-being of the workers themselves, of their families and of the whole of society.

The third meaning of social sin refers to the relationships between the various human communities. These relationships are not always in accordance with the plan of God, who intends that there be justice in the world and freedom and peace between individuals, groups and peoples. Thus the class struggle, whoever the person who leads it or on occasion seeks to give it a theoretical justification, is a social evil.

Likewise obstinate confrontation between blocs of nations, between one nation and another, between different groups within the same nation all this too is a social evil. In both cases one may ask whether moral responsibility for these evils, and therefore sin, can be attributed to any person in particular. Now it has to be admitted that realities and situations such as those described, when they become generalized and reach vast proportions as social phenomena, almost always become anonymous, just as their causes are complex and not always identifiable. Hence if one speaks of social sin here, the expression obviously has an analogical meaning. However, to speak even analogically of social sins must not cause us to underestimate the responsibility of the individuals involved. It is meant to be an appeal to the consciences of all, so that each may shoulder his or her responsibility seriously and courageously in order to change those disastrous conditions and intolerable situations...

Whenever the church speaks of situations of sin or when she condemns as social sins certain situations or the collective behaviour of certain social groups, big or small, or even of whole nations and blocs of nations, she knows and she proclaims that such cases of social sin are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins. It is a case of the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world and also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of higher order. The real responsibility, then, lies with individuals.

A situation—or likewise an institution, a structure, society itself—is not in itself the subject of moral acts. Hence a situation cannot in itself be good or bad.

At the heart of every situation of sin are always to be found sinful people. So true is this that even when such a situation can be changed in its structural and institutional aspects by the force of law or—as unfortunately more often happens by the law of force, the change in fact proves to be incomplete, of short duration and ultimately vain and ineffective—not to say counterproductive if the people directly or indirectly responsible for that situation are not converted.

Reconciliatio et Paenitentia 16.

Examples of this third form of social sin would include the continued economic exploitation of the developing world by the first world; institutional racism; the marginalisation of the elderly and seriously ill in our society.

These sorts of sins are not the sorts of things we are likely to bring to our individual confessions. However they are the sorts of things human communities including the Christian community are implicated in, and for which we need to express our sorrow, and determination that things will become otherwise. We can do this most effectively when our celebrations of the liturgies of reconciliation are seen to be having a direct impact on the way we live as individuals and as a community, in our 'private' and Church lives, and also in our taking up our responsibilities in society and the world at large.

Religion is always personal, but never just a private affair. Discipleship involves seeking God in this world as well as preparing to meet Him in the next. The Gospel imperative to love our neighbour entails not only that we should help those in need, but also address the causes of destitution and poverty. The deepening of the spiritual life must go hand in hand with practical concern for our neighbour and thus with social action.

Many Catholics and indeed others too may well be surprised to discover how over the centuries the Catholic Church has reflected on the social dimension of the Gospel; that is, the way society helps or hinders people to live out the command to love God and our neighbour. In recent times the Church's social teaching has been further emphasised and further developed by Pope Paul VI and John Paul II...

The Church has the right and the duty to advocate a social order in which the human dignity of all is fostered, and to protest when it is in any way threatened. Thus the Church opposes totalitarianism because it oppresses people and deprives them of their freedom. While recognising the importance of wealth creation, the Church denounces any abuses of economic power such as those which deprive employees of what is needed for a decent standard of living.

The Church also rejects the view that human happiness consists only in material well-being, and that achieving this alone is the goal of any government. If a government pays too much attention to material welfare at the expense of other values, it may advocate policies which reduce people to a passive state of dependency on welfare. Equally, if a government gives too little priority to tackling poverty, ill-health,