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REALITY OF A SIN AND HOW TO OVERCOME IT

Abstract. In theology, a sin is described as *mysterium iniquitatis* and absolution from it — *mysterium salutis* or *pietatis*. In the New Testament a sin is always connected with absolution, “forgiveness,” and sinners are of great concern for Jesus. Nevertheless, modern culture becomes more and more detached from Christian tradition and thus deprives a human being of the spiritual values and makes him become further impoverished. This article provides a synthetic discussion of the reality of a sin — “mystery of illicitness” and also reflects on repentance and reconciliation with God and with one’s own neighbour.

The reflections presented in this article are based on the teachings of the contemporary Church and on the Papal teachings especially.

Key words: sin; forgiveness; repentance; conscience; human dignity.

Observing the lives of many modern people, we notice the phenomenon of the loss of sensitivity to sin; often we get the impression of the loss of a sense of sin. In theology, sin is referred to as *mysterium iniquitatis*, and the forgiveness of sins is referred to as *mysterium salutis*. All Christianity – despite the existing divisions – is aware that sin is an offense against God, which, however, can be forgiven by Him. In the New Testament, sin is always associated with “forgiveness.” Like the poor and sick, sinners are at the center of Jesus’ care. Here, we will focus on the issue of how this *mysterium iniquitatis* is understood by the Catholic Church, thereby making us aware of the evil of sin and showing the essence of God's “forgiveness” in the context of spiritual life. It turns out that contemporary culture, devoid of the spirit of Christian tradition, leads to the impoverishment of man and his detachment from spiritual values.

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1. SIN — *MYSTERIUM INIQUITATIS*

In one of his texts, the Apostle John writes: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). His words accurately reflect the truth about the situation that is close to the man of our time. On the one hand, we are aware that with the moment of heavenly disobedience, every sin is integrally connected with man in his dimension of mundane life, on the other hand, more and more attempts are being made to eliminate it, and thus to “condemn it to oblivion.” As it seems, nowadays many people, including those baptized, live as if the phenomenon of *mysterium iniquitatis* was a past, a historical illusion, a reality from a nonexistent era. The Apostle John speaks of a sin that permeates man and the whole world. The entire effectiveness of salvation depends on the discernment and acknowledgment of sin: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). Therefore, it is worth to return to the original belief, which recognizes sin as a real problem, related to human life. For the fact of the existence of sin is a truth about a man who, only when he “recognizes his sinfulness,” can completely submit to God’s forgiveness and redemption.¹

What is sin? How should it be defined? To answer these questions, let us refer to the understanding of sin in the early Church. The Fathers of the Church, based on biblical texts, define sin as a manifestation of “disorder” and “act of disobedience” to God’s law. It is also said about sin as a manifestation of man’s “ungratefulness” to the Creator; moreover, in this context, sin is perceived as a “struggle” against the eternal love of Almighty God, which ultimately results in the “blurring” of God’s image in the human soul.²

For a better understanding of the problem of sin, not only in a purely moral but also spiritual sense, it is worth recalling here two very important concepts of the understanding of sin: the concept of St. Augustine and the concept of St. Thomas Aquinas.

St. Augustine, defining sin as the violation of God’s law, says that sin is always an attempt to “abandon God” and turn to creation. This attempt to “abandon God” is a “rebellion,” and thus a form of opposition to God. By sinning, man breaks out from God’s control, ignores Him, acts as if he was absolutely independent. It can be said that by sinning man misuses the gift of freedom

¹ This attitude is consistent with what the Apostle John says: “If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts” (1 John 3:20).

² For example, it is worth mentioning the achievements of St. Ambrose, who in one of his works *De Paenitentia* (PL 16, 465–524), referring to the issue of the “power of forgiveness of sins in the Church,” also speaks of penitential discipline, including sin.

received from God; he wants to set the final rule and measure for himself. Therefore, in each sinful act the temptation of absolute power is expressed by the biblical author: “you will be like God” (Genesis 3,5).³

St. Thomas Aquinas is the theologian who after Augustine brought the most content regarding the concept and understanding of sin. He considers the matter of sin in several perspectives. He uses the doctrine and experiences of Augustine, especially Augustine's view of sin understood as a manifestation of violation of God's law. In his view of sin, Thomas puts a clear emphasis on the issue of the ultimate goal of man.

Thomas describes sin as “a word, deed, or desire against God's law” which as such constitutes the ultimate criterion of good and evil. Since the ultimate goal of man is God, and achieving it brings the highest happiness to man, sin has the character of turning away from that goal.⁴ For this reason, as Aquinas points out, sin has the mark of disobedience and rebellion against God, and what is more, sin is a manifestation of contempt shown to the supreme Ruler of human souls.

In the context of the above statements of both Doctors of the Church regarding the concept and understanding of sin, it should be said that they do not differ significantly from the contemporary approach to this issue. In today's theological reflection, sin is perceived as a clear manifestation of disobedience to God. In this sense, it is similar to the attitude of the first-parents in paradise. Sin is unrighteousness and injustice.⁵ Man, being disobedient to God, the Creator and Father, is unjust to Him because he does not render to God what is God's, for example, gratitude and love. Such an attitude essentially leads to ignoring God, and even rejecting Him. The negation of the Creator, which is behind every sin, can in extreme cases lead to an attitude that is called “practical atheism.” It manifests itself in indifference to faith and religion.⁶

It should be noted that sin does not bring any offense to God, if only man renounces it and converts to God. In fact, it is harmful to us and our humanity; sin primarily destroys the good of God in people. The evil of sin also means that a man gifted by God the Father with His Son Jesus Christ turns away from this

³ Cf. *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, PL 42, 207-518. It is worth noting that Augustine's views regarding his understanding of evil and sin were described by Hermann J. Häring. Cf. Hermann J. HÄRING, *Die Macht des Bösen. Das Erbe Augustinus* (Zürich, Köln, Gütersloh: Benziger Verlag, Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1979).

⁴ Cf. *Summa Theologiae* (STh) 2-2, q. 118, a. 5.

⁵ It is worth recalling the reflections of the authors of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* related to the understanding of sin, including “original sin,” and its effects on man. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 385-409.

⁶ This is a form of Nietzschean negation of God expressed in his thesis that “God is dead,” or “God does not exist.”

“embodied Love.” God loves people, and sin harms His love and breaks the bond of friendship with Him and makes it impossible for man to realize the proper vocation of life.

It is also worth emphasizing that sin harms human dignity. It reveals the erroneous manifestation of freedom, which, paradoxically, is a direct attack on freedom itself, limiting it and determining it in a false direction, namely, imprisoning the sinner into the slavery of sin. Thus, every sin, to a greater or lesser extent, intensifies the struggle of man against God, humiliates the dignity of man and is the process of self-degradation (self-destruction) of the human person; finally, it can result in “spiritual death,” which can precede physical death!

In our reflection on sin, we emphasized its individual dimension. It should be noted, however, that every sin also has a broader, social meaning. The evil of sin not only strikes and destroys my personal relationship with God, but it also is a sign of “corruption” towards the community to which I belong. Sin destroys the established harmony in social life; it weakens it and shows negative disintegration. In this context, sin breeds a noble interpersonal relationship, brings divisions and splits.

It should also be emphasized that especially today it is easy to see the phenomenon of a great accumulation of moral evil in the world. It is the effect of the intensification of “social sin,” which takes various forms and is revealed especially to the family, professional groups, in relations between states, and in the entire community of the “human family.”⁷

2. TOWARDS CONVERSION AND RECONCILIATION

When we reflect on the attempt to secularize the modern world, which unfortunately affects many people, and perhaps primarily the community of baptized people (believers declared), it can be assumed that man lives as if God did not exist. Since we accept such rhetoric, we must recognize that there is also no law that protects the social order, and any other order. The disappearance of the awareness of sin, and ignoring it, or relativizing moral evil, is directly related to the increase in unbelief. It is therefore a modern form of atheism. The consequence of this attitude is the lack of “sense of sin.” Of course, we know that conscience is a kind of “thermometer,” thanks to which a human is able to discern moral good and moral evil. Is it not as it was asked by John Paul II in the 1980s:

⁷ In *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (RP), John Paul II discusses this problem, especially emphasizing those areas of social life that are contaminated with sin and are therefore at risk. Cf. RP 16.

“Is it not true that modern man is threatened by an eclipse of conscience? By a deformation of conscience? By a numbness or ‘deadening’ of conscience?”⁸

Unfortunately, it is sad to say that his analysis of events related to religious and moral life, reaching the end of the 20th century, works and now even gets deeper. There are a lot of arguments proving that there is some strange “eclipse” of human consciences. As it seems, it is the result of ill-conceived and ill-implemented freedom. For if we accept, following the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, that conscience is “the most secret core and sanctuary of a man,”⁹ in which he can meet God and hear His voice, we can clearly see why conscience is guarding human freedom. Moreover, “conscience, to a great extent, constitutes the basis of man’s interior dignity and, at the same time, of his relationship to God.”¹⁰ The consequence of this attitude can only be “the obscuring of the sense of sin.” However, along with the loss of sensitivity to the voice of one’s conscience, there is also a sense of loss (non-existence) of God.

It is interesting that Pope Pius XII, in the context of what happened as a result of the terrible in its effects World War II, and what happened after its end, namely the matter of an unjust political division in the contemporary world (especially in Europe), in one of his radio messages spoke about “declining the sense of sin.” Pius XII said: “Perhaps the greatest sin in the world today is that men have begun to lose the sense of sin.”¹¹

Reflecting on the cause of this phenomenon in our time, it must be clearly stated that the perceived decline in the “sense of the evil of sin” has its source in the crisis of conscience and personal “sense,” and thus perceiving and discovering the presence of God Himself.

Contemporary humanism, promoted in the space of public life, especially through liberal, hedonistic media, which rejects the existence of God in the name of human freedom, in fact leads to secularism. The rejection of God manifests itself in the “cult” of a man who focuses on activism and “the cult of action and production.”¹² All of this is revealed and finds its expression in excessive consumption, the search for endless pleasure, and ultimately can lead to “losing one’s soul.” In this context, the lack of “sense of sin” is fraught with many conse-

⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Angelus*, 14 March 1982, *Insegnamenti*, V, 1 (1982), 861.

⁹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Gaudium et Spes*, 16.

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Angelus*, 14 March 1982, *Insegnamenti*, V, 1 (1982), 861.

¹¹ PIUS XII, “Radio Message of His Holiness Pius XII to Participants in the National Catechetical Congress of the United States in Boston, Pontifical Palace in Castel Gandolfo, Saturday, 26 October 1946,” The Holy See, Pius XII, Speeches, accessed 15 June 2018, https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/speeches/1946/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19461026_congresso-catechistico-naz.html.

¹² RP 18.

quences, because it manifests itself in the various efforts and actions of “building the world without God.” However, history shows that such actions fail; the world built without God turns against man.¹³ In the name of these liberal and libertine ideas, people do not want to or do not realize that such actions result in the danger of “losing their soul.” And yet, in fact, God is the beginning and the ultimate goal of man. He creates a man “in His own image” (see Genesis 1:27), He also allows this creative reality to lead man to discover his own greatness.¹⁴ However, when the proper hierarchy of values is lacking, when there is a lack of “sense of sin,” it is hard to expect that man creating his own “moral directory,” would be aware that his sinful (reprehensible) behavior causes harm both to God and to himself.

It is worth noting that one of the reasons for the lack of “sense of sin” is to tell a man, as some contemporary trends of psychology¹⁵ or psychiatry do, that the “sense of sin” often results in a morbid “sense of guilt.” This contradicts the process of achieving the psychophysical balance of a person provided with therapeutic help. Furthermore, it is even said that the “sense of sin”¹⁶ can lead to scruples, or even, especially in psychiatric states, depression. Sometimes it is said that “guilt” which is the result of moral evil and the sin of man – in the opinion of psychiatrists – destroys their efforts to build a balance in man and, moreover, damages the peace of mind or even the the health of and individual.

The problem that today very often affects the attitude of “sense of sin: is a kind of “ethical turning upside down.” It is “overthrowing and downfall of moral values” which originates not so much in ignorance of Christian ethical norms as in the attempt to “attenuate” them. As John Paul II rightly observes, the direct result of this “ethical turning upside down” is “an attenuation of the notion of sin as almost to reach the point of saying that sin does exist, but no one knows who commits it.”¹⁷ This kind of phenomenon is noticeable in various forms and spheres of public life, especially in the case of persons performing the function of

¹³ John Paul II explicitly emphasized this in his “program” encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*: “The man of today seems ever to be under threat from what he produces, that is to say from the result of the work of his hands and, even more so, of the work of his intellect and the tendencies of his will. All too soon, and often in an unforeseeable way, what this manifold activity of man yields [...] turns against man himself.”

¹⁴ John Paul II wrote: “In this dimension man finds again the greatness, dignity and value that belong to his humanity. [...] In Christ Jesus [...] man’s deepest sphere is involved—we mean the sphere of human hearts, consciences and events.” *Redemptor Hominis*, 10.

¹⁵ Cf. Stanisław KUCZKOWSKI, “Poczucie winy w literaturze psychologicznej,” *Collectanea Theologica* 44 (1974), no. 1: 67–75; IDEM, “Geneza patologicznego poczucia winy,” *Collectanea Theologica* 44 (1974), no. 2: 61–77.

¹⁶ Cf. Waclaw GUBALA, “Zanik poczucia grzechu,” *Homo Dei* 1985: 177–182.

¹⁷ RP 18.

the so-called public utilities: officials, lawyers, doctors, teachers, representatives of social communication media and others. Of course, it should be emphasized that not everyone who represents one of the above-mentioned social groups should automatically be “stigmatized,” but to a large extent, among the above-mentioned professions, we can meet the attitude of relativizing Christian morality (“attenuation”) as to the behavior assessment; as already noted, this results in a lack of “sense of sin.”

It is worth mentioning here once again the reflection of John Paul II in which, analyzing the foundations of the modern phenomenon of “the loss of the sense of sin,” he notes that it is “a form or consequence of the denial of God: not only in the form of atheism but also in the form of secularism.” For if we assume that “sin is the breaking, off of one’s filial relationship to God in order to situate one’s life outside of obedience to him,” the consequence of such an attitude – as the John Paul II adds – “is not merely to deny God. To sin is also to live as if he did not exist, to eliminate him from one’s daily life.”¹⁸ Thus, the attempt to “transform” a society that has grown up and has been shaped on the foundation of Christian spiritual richness, or even the creation of a new “society which is mutilated,” promoted by liberal, anti-Christian means of social communication, consistently contributes to the loss of “sense of sin.” Everything happens in the spirit of striving for the alleged autonomy of man, which contradicts the reference to any transcendence. Thus, “the notion of God’s fatherhood and dominion over man’s life” is obscured.¹⁹ Such a vision “interferes” with the objective view and assessment of human life, and with the perception of errors, that is, the sins that it commits, which requires proper assessment, regret and repentance as well as satisfaction.

In this context, it should be noted that the disappearance of the “sense of sin” can be found “even in the field of the thought and life of the church.” It turns out that from seeing sin “everywhere,” a tendency is born not to recognize it “anywhere.” Thus, from the attitude that gives rise to excessive fear of eternal punishment, we often hear today in teaching that God’s love excludes “any punishment deserved by sin.”²⁰ We see, therefore, that today there is a need for those involved in the Church and endowed with an appropriate mission, in the Gospel message of the Truth, to do so in a proper way, in accordance with Tradition. For one can not distort human consciences; in the name of truth, evil and everybody should be “unmasked.” It is, what John Paul II also calls for, especially “in relation to *diffi-*

¹⁸ RP 18.

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

cult and delicate problems of Christian morality,”²¹ to talk about these problems in a comprehensible way, that is, one that will lead to movement of conscience, and recognition of sin; consequently, to genuine repentance and conversion.

In conclusion, it should be stated that today there is a need for increased effort to restore a “proper sense of sin,” because – as it seems – it is the shortest path to overcome the spiritual crisis that has affected the man of our time. The existence of moral evil, and the “sense of sin” associated with it, are proclaimed by the Church from the very beginning in order that a sinner aware of his guilt, in other words, conscious of his sin, will be brought to the source of God’s mercy, and through the sacrament of penance and reconciliation to unity with God and His Church.

To sum up the issue, it must be said that, despite many God’s gifts that help us to fulfill our Christian calling, initiated by baptism, we are not free from sins and weaknesses. We still need God’s forgiveness, reconciliation with Him and a new rebirth. We would be in a tragic situation, if there was no sacrament of forgiveness that is sometimes called the “second baptism;” it is an important element of man’s conversion for the spiritual life.²²

It is also worth emphasizing that under normal conditions the sacrament of reconciliation, instituted by Christ, is a sign of the sinner’s meeting with a merciful and forgiving Savior. His love, pulsating in this sacrament, is “greater than sin.” It is Christ, whose heart has been wounded by our sins, that gives everyone the chance to return to the Father’s house by forgiving our faults. The Fathers of the Church rightly saw the sign of water and blood, flowing from Christ’s heart and side pierced with the spear of the soldier, as the inexhaustible source of grace for the forgiveness of human sins. It is therefore necessary, on the one hand, not to lose the awareness that, as “mortal people,” we are sinful. On the other hand, we must relive the truth about the forgiveness of sins, and be grateful to God in His Son – the Savior of the world, and in the Holy Spirit who is the cause of our sanctification.

²¹ Ibid. The essence of Christian conversion is the discovery of “true” dignity which finds its source in God and in the grace of His forgiveness. Cf. Jarosław M. POPLAWSKI, *Nawrócenie św. Pawła w kontekście chrześcijańskiej duchowości*, in *Spiritualitas*, vol. I. *Św. Paweł i jego dzieło*, Lublin 2014, pp. 69-73.

²² Cf. J. MISIUREK, “*Wierzę w grzechów odpuszczenie*”, in *Miłość większa niż grzech* (Homo meditans, 12), Lublin 1996, p. 59.

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