

# Sin as an Obstacle to Grace

I think I can safely assume that everyone here is familiar with the early stories of the book of Genesis. These ancient stories can be seen as answers to simple childlike questions, such as have been immortalized in the Baltimore Catechism

“Who made me?”	God made me. (Genesis 1 & 2)
“Why did God make me?”	To know Him, and love him, and serve Him in this world, And to live with him for all eternity in heaven. (Gen 2)

But then, as we mature and grow in knowledge so do our questions begin to mature? For instance, when one hears the story of the Adam and Eve and the perfection of the Garden of Eden one cannot help but compare this to our own life experiences and begin asking the questions about evil, and suffering, and death. And so the next logical question can be,

“If God made us perfect then where did evil come from?”

The answer to this is found first in Genesis 3 with the story of the fall. Our first parents were disobedient to God and sin entered the world. As a consequence of this sin they were banished from the Garden of Eden, which is a symbol for us of heaven. And with sin, suffering and death entered the world.

Nearly 400 years after Christ, St. Augustine, in reflecting on the fall of our first parents, is the first to use the phrase “Original Sin.” Augustine, before his conversion experience was quite the sinner and so sin, and its consequences, was an important part of Augustine’s reflection on God’s mercy and our relationship with God.

Now while Adam and Eve’s disobedience formed the origin of sin, when one thinks about it there is nothing original about sin. Just ask any priest if he has ever heard any “original” sins in the confessional. No, when we celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation every sin that is confessed is simply a sin that has been confessed time and time again by others.

Why do we sin?

The simple answer is that we want things our way. If you have ever doubted the doctrine of Original Sin just spend an afternoon with a two-year-old. We don’t teach children to misbehave. We don’t teach children to be self-centered, but say just “no” to a two year old who has his heart set on something and you will see the tendency to sin in action.

Sin, in its basic form, is simply wanting things our own way, regardless of the effect it might in the lives of others. It is a desire to have things my way, even if I know it is contrary to what God has taught. Sin, at its most basic, is disobedience towards God. This is the story taught us in Genesis 3.

Wanting things my way is placing me at the center of the universe. It is putting me in the place of God. While children cannot know any better it cannot be that way with us adults. Basic maturity brings with it knowledge and responsibility.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church gives an excellent summation of the reasons that we sin, or as theologians call sin, "errors of judgment in moral conduct." The list, found in paragraph 1792 is as follows.

*CCC 1792 "Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example given by others, enslavement to one's passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church's authority and her teaching, lack of conversion and of charity: These can be at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct."*

Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel – some people make bad choices simply because they do not know Christ and his teachings. It is good to note here, in order for a person to be culpable or responsible for sin he/she must first know that the action is wrong. Then he/she must commit the act with full will and intent. This is why a two year old does not sin, even when he/she throws a temper tantrum. The child simply is not mature enough to know the action is wrong. It is our responsibility to help them grow in this awareness as they mature.

Enslavement to one's passions is a second reason people make bad choices. God has given to us the gift of the basic appetites. We desire food, love, relationships, pleasure. Each of these things is good and necessary to life. But when out of control each of these things can become a disorder. Our appetite for food or drink can lead to gluttony or excessive drinking. A disordered appetite can also lead to one of the many eating disorders. The desire to love is tied to our ability to procreate. This is one way in which we are created in the image of God who made us. God has chosen to make us co-creators. Again this appetite, when out of control, leads one into the many sexual sins.

Assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience

*One of the big problems today is that "conscience" is confused with our feelings and passions. A well-formed conscience is about doing what God wants, not what I want. There are many voices both inside and outside of us that tend to influence our conscience. The internal voices are our own preferences, memories, motivations, disordered desires). The external voices are family, friends, the media, etc. Because of these voices vying for our attention it is sometimes difficult to hear the voice of Jesus calling us to make right choices.*

*This is why the Catechism mentions "enslavement of one's passion" as a source of moral errors. Even when we're fairly well attuned to our interior life, our passions are constantly pushing the envelope and distracting us from listening to the Holy Spirit. If our intellects and wills are not firmly grounded in the moral law, our passions will assume the role of conscience.*

Another source of error of judgment in moral conduct is “assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience.” It is true that one should not be forced to against one’s own conscience. But it is quite another to assert that a Catholic with a well-formed conscience may put the Church’s teachings in the areas of faith and morals through one’s own “personal approval process.”

### Rejection of the Church’s teaching and her authority

If we truly believe that Jesus is Lord and that he speaks authoritatively through his Church, we do not merely consult with him, we follow him! Different people will have different personal opinions on moral issues. When the Church gives us a moral teaching it is much more than just one more opinion. It is the moral truth as revealed to us by God the Father, acting in the presence of Christ in the Church, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. When we tell our children what we want them to do (because we desire good for them), we expect obedience. We don’t consider it obedience when they merely take what we say as “suggestion” and do something else instead.

Following God’s law is a matter of obedience, but more it is about love. As our Lord says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). As he says in the Gospel, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).<sup>1</sup>

### Lack of conversion and of charity

Some people’s conscience is so ill-formed that they think only of themselves and their own needs and desires. Concern about the well-being of others never enters their thought process. They live their lives only looking out for themselves.

## CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

### Loss of integrity

To sin is to believe one thing, but then to live the exact opposite.

Let us take for instance the sin of “lying”

Lying is held by all as a part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment “bearing false witness”

From a purely philosophical perspective lying is a violation of human integrity . . . for when we lie we speak one thing while thinking another – a practice hardly conducive to the integral personal development or growth in virtue.<sup>2</sup>

St. Augustine stated that lying is “deliberately speaking against one’s own mind.”

Modern Catholic Dictionary “When a person tells a lie, he or she deliberately says something that is contrary to what is on that person’s mind; there is a real opposition between what one says and what one thinks”

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<sup>1</sup> “More than a Feeling: What it Means to Follow Your Conscience,” Leon J. Suprenant, Jr. This Rock, September 2007, pp 20-23

<sup>2</sup> “Is Lying Ever Right?” Jeffrey A. Mirus, This Rock, September 2008, pg 20

CCC 2482 *“speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving.”*

This definition has the virtue of anchoring a lie in objective reality.  
To be properly termed a lie, a statement must fulfill two conditions:  
a) it must be objectively false  
b) It must be spoken with the intention to deceive.

If you think about it, by definition every sin we deliberately commit is a lie, because it ultimately goes against God's will. Since God knows everything, God knows when and why we sin. When we deliberately sin we are deceiving or lying to ourselves in that we are acting as though that God doesn't know. This deception eventually leads to the consequence of sin which is perhaps the most painful. This consequence has become nearly epidemic in the modern world. It is the consequence which inspired the words in the Act of Contrition, *“I detest all my sins, because they offend you my God whom I should love above all things.”* Theologians call this the loss of a sense of God.

Loss of a sense of God

*Pope John Paul II, in his 1995 Encyclical on the Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae), identified “the heart of the tragedy being experienced by modern man [is the] eclipse of the sense of God and of man” (21). He noted that “when the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man, of his dignity and his life” (21). The Holy Father was speaking to us: We in the West have largely lost the sense of God, leading to a loss of our own sense of purpose or mission.*<sup>3</sup>

Because sin is a turning away from God one begins to feel a sense of separation from God. The degree of separation is directly related to the seriousness or even to the frequency of the sin. When one has committed a very small sin, most people will feel a small twinge of guilt, an uncomfortable stirring in the pit of their stomach. This is the simple awareness that God knows what we have done. When one commits the same sin again, that twinge begins to go away. Eventually one can become completely desensitized to his/her sin.

One theologian has described this in the medical terms of arterial blockage. Small sins are like plaque building up in our arteries. Eventually the small sins left unconfessed and without contrition, which is the intention of stopping the sin, block the flow of God's grace. God is still blessing us, but we simply are not receiving the full benefit of that grace because sin is blocking the flow of grace in our lives.

Small sins have a way of building up until we feel a profound distance from God. On the other hand serious sins, the ones we call “mortal,” separate us completely from God. They may be better compared to a blood clot which completely blocks the artery. Left unattended serious sins can become deadly, especially if we die with such sins on our souls. When we have committed a serious sin deliberately and with free will the flow of God's grace stops completely. Again God continues to pour out his graces on us, because that is God's basic nature, but the grace simply cannot enter our lives because of the serious sin.

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<sup>3</sup> “The Sin of Sloth,” Leon Suprenant, This Rock, January 2008, pg. 16

These sins are called "mortal" or "deadly." The first Letter of John, in his discourse on prayer, speaks of deadly sin. *"If anyone sees his brother sinning, if the sin is not deadly, he should pray to God and he will give him life. This is only for those whose sin is not deadly. There is such a thing as deadly sin, about which I do not say that you should pray. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not deadly"* (1 John 5:16-17).

Deadly sin: pride, lust, gluttony, envy, greed, sloth, anger

Again, for a person to be culpable or responsible for a mortal sin three things must be present:

- 1) The matter of the sin must be serious (murder, lust, etc.)
- 2) The person must know the sin is serious.
- 3) The person must with full will and intent commit the sin

Now it is important to note that one ever commits a serious sin as a very first sin. We don't, by nature, just go out and kill someone. In fact many people will go through life without ever committing a serious sin. This is because they take the little sins seriously, bringing them to God as often as they commit them. Serious sins usually occur only after a long period of time of little sins building up distancing us from God's grace. For young adults it usually begins like so:

- Young adult leaves parent's home where there is a regular practice of faith
- New schedules break their routine of prayer (before meals & bedtime)  
(1<sup>st</sup> commandment)
- Skipped mass for the first time (just too tired and slept in) (3<sup>rd</sup> commandment)  
2<sup>nd</sup> & subsequent times (got out of habit)
- Basic moral teachings are being challenged by educational authorities
- Occasionally drinks excessively (breaking the law) (5<sup>th</sup> Comm. Killing body)
- Finds themselves dating more frequently
- Exposed to many sexual temptations
- Gives into the temptations and becomes pregnant (6<sup>th</sup> commandment)  
Contemplates having an abortion (5<sup>th</sup> commandment)

Each of these things is a violation of the 1<sup>st</sup> commandment not honoring God. They are also violations of the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment "Honoring father and mother." The sins are seemingly small or venial in the beginning. But, left to themselves, apart from the grace of God, and sin can become deadly.

Another consequence of sin, in addition to a separation from God, sin separates us from one another. There is no such thing as a totally personal sin. Every sin we commit has an affect in the lives of others. If we have gossiped about someone, we will find ourselves uncomfortable when we are in their presence. This puts a distance between us and them. If we have lustful thoughts about another person we have reduced them to an object. If we swear, or gossip, or tell off-colored jokes around others, we diminish their worth, and subtly give them permission to do likewise. When we skip Church on Sunday or Holy Days, we give others the permission to do so. We also diminish the entire community by our absence. When we are not in Church, we are not praying with and for the community and the entire body suffers.

Because sin affects the lives of others, and not just our selves, it is important to confess our sins regularly. Because it affects others, who are the Church, the priest represents the Church in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. But reconciliation is only as effective as our own willingness to make amends with those we have hurt by our own sin:

- Saying you are sorry to your parents for disrespecting them;
- Making efforts to get along with your brother or sister, or cranky neighbor;
- Returning the thing you have stolen;
- Truly making an effort at not swearing or gossiping.

For my final thoughts on sin I leave you with my personal experience of watching Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." This movie, like nothing else, helped me to get in touch with the serious nature of my own personal sin. As I watched the movie I sometimes had to force myself to keep watching the beating and the brutality. At times I wanted to close my eyes because it was just too much. At one point in the movie, when Jesus had fallen to the ground under the weight of the cross, the mob swarmed him hitting him with stones, spitting at him and mocking him. I wanted to jump up and scream "Just leave him alone. Stop hitting him."

It was in that moment that I realized it was my soul that was screaming out for the many times I had sinned against him. Every lash of the whip across his back, every slap on the cheek, every bit of spitting and mockery, was me and my sin. I was the crowd. I was the Roman soldier. I was the one inflicting this pain, and he endured it all because he loves me . . . and he loves you . . . and he wants you to know how much you are loved. For when we know we are loved we will do anything for the one who loves us, and then we become what we have been created to be . . . love . . . for God is love.

So my friends, as we continue our prayer tonight let us ask for God's grace, love, and mercy. Let us ask for the grace that we might be aware of any way we have offended God by our sin. If we find any way we have offended God let us pray for the grace to confess our sin. Let us pray that we might resist all future temptations to sin that we might always walk on in the abiding, loving presence of God.