

Basics of Catholicism

In recent decades, there has been a loss of understanding around sin and how it affects us as individuals in relationship with Our Lord. We hear much about so-called “social sin”, which is sin on the part of a nation, a corporation, or other group of individuals. These social sins include areas of environmental concern, interracial relationships, and international policies and practices, just to name a few.

As a Church, we should be concerned about sin on a social or corporate level. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states in paragraph 1869, “Thus sin makes men accomplices of one another and causes concupiscence, violence, and injustice to reign among them. Sins give rise to social situations and institutions that are contrary to the divine goodness. “Structures of sin” are the expression and effect of personal sins. They lead their victims to do evil in their turn. In an analogous sense, they constitute a “social sin.” Sin affects all of us, and causes injustice in our world. We should always be fighting to overcome social sins and their causes in our world today.

At the same time this focus on social sin has become so strong, however, we have lost a sense of what is sinful on an individual level. Behaviors and actions that are contrary to God’s law given to us through nature and divine revelation are no longer seen as sinful. Some are tolerated as character flaws or human failings, while other sins are held up as virtuous ideals or even more strongly defended as human rights. In either case, sin is not seen as something that can and does cut us off from God.

To better understand why this is a problem, let’s go back to the basics about sin. The Catechism defines sin as, ‘an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity. It has been defined as “an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law.”’ (#1849)

To put this definition more simply, sin is an action that cuts us off from God and our neighbor, both of whom we are called to love above all things. Sin is selfish, not self-giving. Sin is disobedient and prideful, not obedient to God and humble. Sin is saying to God, “I know better than you, who created everything that exists, how I should live my life.” St. Augustine defined sin as, “love of oneself even to contempt of God”.

As human beings, we are all subject to the effects of sin in our lives. We all say and do those things that damage our relationship with God and hurt our relationships with others. Sin is a part of being human in this fallen world affected by the Original Sin of humanity: pride. It was through pride that humanity lost its proper relationship and unity with God, and it is pride that keeps us from seeking that unity. Pride lead to disobedience, and disobedience lead to death.

We should realize that sin comes in many forms and various levels of seriousness. All sin is serious, as all sin

affects our relationship with God and neighbor, but some sins are more serious than others. The lesser sins, which do not cut us off from God but weaken our practice of the virtue of charity, are called venial sins. These lesser sins can build up in our souls and make us more susceptible to the greater mortal sins, which do sever our relationship with God and cut us off from His grace.

To have a mortal sin on our souls, meaning to have committed a mortal sin and not asked God for forgiveness through the Sacrament of Confession, is to be outside of the state of grace. By committing a mortal sin willingly while knowing the seriousness of the sin, we turn away from God completely and to reject Him. This can and does have eternal consequences if we do not take the steps necessary to turn back to God.

Not only does sin turn us away from God, which is the most serious consequence of sin, but it also turns us away from each other. Anytime sin enters into a relationship, whether directly or indirectly, division eventually occurs. Every sin that we commit has an effect on our relationship with others, even the so-called “private” sins. At a minimum, sin makes us more selfish and causes us to view others as objects for our selfish gratification. This is the danger of sins like pornography and other sins labeled as “victimless” by the larger culture.

The good news, of course, is that God desires to forgive our sins and repair our relationship with Him. God, our Heavenly Father, desires this so much that He sent His Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, to become “like us in all things but sin” (as stated by the Council of Chalcedon in 451) through the incarnation. By His Crucifixion and Death on the Cross, Our Lord sacrificed Himself for our sins so that we might have forgiveness for all the sins we commit, and by rising from the dead, Our Lord made salvation from sin available to us that we might enter into the eternal life Our Father offers to each and every one of us.

Sin brought death into the world and continues to lead to death, but Our Lord died that we might have eternal life and offers it to each of us. Turn away from sin and embrace the Gospel of Christ!

