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Tired of Imagined Sins

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa

I am tired of sin. Specifically, I'm tired of what many people think sin is and routinely confess in the sacrament of reconciliation. I'm tired of lack of catechetical training about the meaning of sin, the effects of sin, and the confession of sin.

Far too often I hear confessions of thoughts, words, and actions that are not sinful—and this phenomenon is not limited to people with scrupulosity.

I seldom hear the confession of actual sin. Instead, I hear stories of guilt, shame, fear, and anxiety, none of which are sinful. The vast majority of the confessions contain reports of “sinful” thoughts about 65% of the time, “sinful” words about 30%, and “sinful” actions about 5%.

What's missing from this list? Actual sin.

About 75% of the supposedly sinful thoughts, words, and actions have something to do with sexuality and/or human interpersonal relationships. The rest is evenly mixed between distraction in prayer, missing Mass (particularly on holy days of obligation), and not trying hard enough to “place God before myself each day.”

Here's a provocative concept: *Almost all of the people in line to receive the sacrament of reconciliation are the very people who don't need to be there.* Their very celebration of this sacrament shows they're making a sustained, serious effort to live in relationship with Jesus and with the Church; they're simply struggling to make it a reality.

It's often the people not in line who are most in need of the sacrament.

Are the thoughts, words, and actions people routinely confess actually sins? Sin is something that significantly ruptures our relationship with God. Do each of these “sins” somehow separate us from God, or are they simply awareness of self in relationship with God and others? Are these things actually sin, or are they simply places where the grace of God is slowly forming us as we grow in relationship and community?

Why do so many people believe that a less-than-perfect fulfillment of a law or deviation from a norm signifies serious sin? Where do they get the idea that

we can somehow separate ourselves from God, break the bonds of his love and concern for us, and take a path that is not dependent on his life and grace?

The idea that we can separate ourselves from our heavenly Father simply by engaging in normal human activity is the ultimate fantasy, an essential misunderstanding of how we live, move, and behave each day. When we embrace this fantasy, we imagine ourselves as somehow separate from God—and that’s impossible.

It is possible to confuse separation from God with separation from the Church, from the wider community, and from the essential people in our lives. That kind of separation happens far too often, but is it sin? No. It’s serious and painful and is often accompanied by regret, missed opportunities, and emotions expressed in an unhealthy manner, but it’s not sinful if it doesn’t separate us from our primary relationship with God. Jesus’ parables make this abundantly clear.

So is there such a thing as sin? Yes. Human beings are far too creative for sin not to exist, but is it as rampant we fear? I think not.

I believe we’re presented with abundant opportunities to mature and develop. We often first experience these opportunities in weakness—in the struggle to grow as human beings—but once we recognize and embrace these opportunities, they strengthen us and become grace-filled moments of blessing.

I dream of a perfect day as a confessor. On this day, people celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation will speak about their awareness of God. They’ll speak about moments when they tried to pull away from God, compromise their relationship with God, or engage in the fantasy that God’s love must be earned.

On this perfect day, we’ll remind each other of God’s powerful grace and love. We’ll resolve to be more aware and more thankful each day for how we’ve been blessed and called to be fully aware of how gifted we truly are.

On this perfect day, we’ll seldom use the word *sin*, but we will often use words of thankfulness and praise.

Reflection

The following is abridged and adapted from *Summer Meditations*
by Fr. John Bartunek (Liguori Publications, © 2016).

Many people take some kind of vacation during the summer months. We need vacations. We need time to rest, to relax, to recover from the demanding physical, mental, and psychological exertions required in this world.

But have you ever ended your vacation feeling more exhausted than you felt at the beginning? Have you ever arrived to work Monday morning—after a weekend that is supposed to be restful—more exhausted than you were Friday afternoon? Most people have. This is because, at least in part, our culture has forgotten the art of playfulness. We no longer remember what healthy relaxation looks like.

Various studies have explored this phenomenon in different contexts. The basic conundrum seems to be that people are more stressed out now than ever before. The increase of tension and anxiety that goes along with this creates physiological problems (high cholesterol, sleep disorders, chronic fatigue) as well as psychological problems (breakdown of family unity, childhood and adult depression, substance abuse).

An inability to find and maintain the proper balance between hard work and healthy relaxation has become epidemic in our culture. More and more, we tend to be obsessive and extreme both at work and at play, crippling the true interior harmony that allows our souls to grow and flourish. There aren't any quick fixes for this problem. But we can't ignore it.

When we fail to set our work aside, we don't become more human. We become more like beasts or machines. The human soul is made for more than labor. We work to live; we don't live to work (though human work does have an intrinsic value and dignity).

The joys of interpersonal communion, the spiritual joys of appreciating beauty and simply feeling and glorying in the pleasure of being alive, of loving and being loved—these are the heart of worship and the secret to playfulness. If we can't find time for these, our work can become our god. When that happens, we'll end up worshipping nothing but ourselves.

Let's buck the trend of our culture. Let's abandon obsessive work and obsessive pleasure.

Let's relearn the art of living.



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Q *Is the absolution I receive in the sacrament of reconciliation still valid if I don't perform the assigned penance, not out of rebellion, but because I don't think it's appropriate or it's too cumbersome to carry out?*

A Yes, the absolution is still valid. Validity of the absolution is not dependent on your performing the assigned penance. As a baptized, adult, mature person of conscience, you may adjust your penance. This is an acceptable and not at all uncommon practice.

Q *In the June 2016 issue, you said it's OK to choose not to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation with a confessor I don't know. Isn't that unrealistic? If I don't know who the confessor is until I enter the confessional, I can't just turn around and walk out. That would be awkward.*

A It's true that sometimes you don't know who the confessor is until you enter the confessional, but that's unusual. The confessor is usually familiar. If you're not sure, ask who is celebrating the sacrament that day so you can decide before you enter the confessional.

You are not required to subject yourself to an unhelpful, anxiety-ridden, or confusing experience to be forgiven of your sins. When there is risk of this, postpone celebration of the sacrament until those conditions are no longer present.

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