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Is All Human Behavior Sinful?

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa

Sacred Scripture informs us constantly about the ravages of sin. Traditionally, from a scriptural perspective, the existence of death is one sure sign that sin is omnipresent.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refers to sin and its consequences in so many passages that it's almost impossible to count them.

Catholics begin each celebration of the Eucharist with the invitation to “acknowledge our sins,” after which we ask God to forgive us and make us whole again.

Sin is so obviously a part of the human condition and our spiritual traditions that it would be foolish to question its existence. But isn't it also possible to have a deeper conversation about sin, the human condition, and human behavior that doesn't immediately assume failure? Is all human behavior marked by sin? Are acts that express strong human emotion or feeling always sins to be repented? Might those strong emotions simply mean we're human?

Is anger always a sin? Is wanting something always a sin? Is accepting praise for a job well done always a sin against humility? Are sexual feelings and emotions always sinful? Are we ever permitted

to withhold the truth to protect someone's feelings? Does every random thought—even when disturbing in intensity—always indicate sinfulness?

In the not-too-distant past, most people probably believed that all of those examples involved sins of commission or omission. Today, many people believe that expressions of human behavior and emotion—even strong feelings—can be healthy. Some might go so far as to say that *not* expressing our emotions is the “sin,” because it's unhealthy and counterproductive for human growth.

When everything is a sin, nothing is a sin. We're overwhelmed with the idea that everything we do is sinful, so we either give up and discard the whole concept of sin or become so burdened that our quality of life is ruined.

Does that last one sound at all familiar?

On the other hand, a healthy understanding of human strengths and weaknesses contributes to healthy and joyful living. It's important to know—and accept—the difference between deliberately choosing a sinful action and simply making a mistake.

When another driver cuts in front of me on the freeway, I get angry. Anger can be triggered by fear, so my response isn't inappropriate. Adding a gesture toward the offending driver or speeding up to cut *him* off is inappropriate and dangerous, but is it sinful? The feelings are not sinful, but any actions that follow are.

Even more important than the "sin" is the lack of maturity and depth of anger triggered by the experience. It would be useful to accept the sin and ask, "What am I so angry about?"

Do strong feelings of attraction and desire automatically signal sin? No, not at all. God created us as sexual beings, and our thoughts and feelings are part of who we are. Even people in stable and loving relationships aren't immune from spontaneous attraction and desire. Strong sexual feelings can be nothing more than an indication that we're alive; they can also be confirmation of our relationship

and commitment. In both instances, what's important is not that we have the feeling, it's that we have a healthy understanding of who we are, what our responsibilities are, and what behavior is appropriate and inappropriate.

Sin is an essential part of our understanding of the world and human behavior, but it's not lurking under every rock or behind every shadow as people used to believe. Now we have a more nuanced understanding of human behavior. We feel and express our emotions. We respond to impulses and desires. We try, with God's grace, to grow in "wisdom and age," as Luke 2:52 reminds us.

In the process, we realize and appreciate more every day that life is not always black/white, nor is it always either/or.

More often than not, it's both/and.

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Reflection

The following is abridged and adapted from “Healing Waters” by Matthew Liptak, originally published in the September 2016 issue of *Liguorian* magazine
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When I went off to college, I was filled with excitement. I made new friends, enjoyed my studies, and took advantage of all-you-can-eat at the cafeteria.

But it didn't last. Unbeknownst to me, I had obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). By late fall I was coming apart, struggling to maintain focus while reading textbooks, compelled to go back over lines again and again.

My poor mental health affected my social life. I was a lost soul on campus. Friends abandoned me. My grades collapsed. I struggled like Peter trying to walk on water.

Instead of reaching out to God for help, I made a jump for shore—I dropped out. Eventually I was formally diagnosed, prescribed medicine, and given behavioral therapy.

When I was thirty-four, I went back to college. I heard about a university-sponsored 40-mile canoe trip in Canada and decided to go. It was grueling, but there were blue skies and pristine lakes lined with trees changing color, burning bright in the late October sun.

At the end of the first day of paddle and portage, it was growing dark. Our young and dauntless group forged on, paddling quietly across a glassy lake illuminated by only the stars and a single strobe light on each boat.

The canoes landed and docked on a steep outcropping of an island campsite. My canoe partner got out, attempting to pull the canoe farther up the boulder. It tipped, and in I went.

Dark, frigid water enveloped me. I swam to a nearby canoe, holding on, then swam from it to the boulder, thinking I could walk up its face. It looked picturesque enough above water, but it had murderous intent underneath. My boots couldn't get traction underwater. It was two steps up, three steps back. Cold and fatigue bored into me.

“Are you OK, Matt?” a classmate called in panic. No, I wasn't. From somewhere deep inside, I knew I might be down to one last attempt at survival.

Then something wondrous happened. A paddle appeared in the darkness. I grabbed it with all my strength. Students from shore on the other end of the paddle pulled, and the lake grudgingly gave up its prize. When I looked into the faces filled with concern and saw the smiles of relief, I saw the face of Christ.

I realize now that God has a path for me. I don't know how long I'll travel it, but while I'm on it I'll give thanks every day for his healing waters.



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Q *I have many unused Mass-enrollment cards. I send them to express sympathy when someone dies, but I have many more than I'll ever be able to use. Can I just throw them away? I feel quite wasteful.*

A Unfortunately, this often happens not only with Mass cards, but with other materials received unsolicited in the mail. The organizations that mailed you the cards understand that many people won't use them or respond with a donation, and they accept it as a cost of soliciting your support.

Just throw away the ones you think you'll never use. You have no obligation to use the cards or keep accumulating them—and you needn't send a donation if you didn't request the materials.

Q *Sometimes when I'm working on my computer or watching television, I have the urge to pray. Often I stop and say a little prayer, but sometimes I ignore the urge and keep doing what I was doing. Do I have an obligation to pray every time I have such a thought?*

A You're experiencing an impulse, a compulsion that is a manifestation of scrupulosity. It's actually best not to respond to the impulse and continue what you're doing. I strongly counsel you to pray only at the time you've determined is best for your spiritual practice and discipline. If you ignore the compulsion and continue your work, eventually these kinds of thoughts will disappear. But if you act on them, they'll only intensify.

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