



Where Is the Sin?

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Answers to questions I gave to one SA member over the last few months fill this month's column.

The questions are not necessary to illustrate my point, and my answers do not reveal facts that could identify the questioner.

Each paragraph answers one question. As you read my answers, rather than try to guess the "sin" that might have prompted each question, identify your feelings as you read each response. Better yet, pinpoint the stew of feelings you feel as you go along.

"There is no sin in any of this. You are exchanging ideas you found useful. They are not your ideas. There is no assumption that you generated them. It is only a conversation."

"So, you were upset with how you were perceived, and you expressed it."

"The key words are that 'you fear.' That is what is going on. Not sin."

"Bad smell, certainly. Sin? Not a chance."

"No. There is nothing remotely wrong with this."

"It was not and is not a sin. Beauty is a gift from God."

"Would you have reacted in the same way if the men were not black?"

"Fear is an emotion. Your inclination is something different. I do not believe it was a racist act but simply being overcautious."

★ "Not really. I would advise that you do not try and figure out the meaning of your past events. That is not helpful and will only open a can of anxiety, doubt, and worry."

★ "Perhaps, or it could just be concern for your son."

★ "Again, what would the sin be? Curiosity?"

★ "The only 'sin' you are committing is the refusal to let go and release the forgiveness of God into your life. You are pestering and pecking yourself to distraction and anxiety."

★ "Just because you feel bad about something does not indicate sin. A feeling is a feeling."

★ "No. They do not need your approval or your disapproval. What is expected is nonjudgmental respect."

★ "No. It is a hug."

★ "Again. Feeling uncomfortable does not mean you have sinned. It just means you are uncomfortable."



"No, they are not. Here is a challenge for you. Could you provide me with an example of a real sin that you committed? Not something that you feared or imagined but a real sin that needed to be confessed."



In answer to one of my responses, the person replied, "It appears I can't tell the difference. Situations come up all the time and I remember past things that I have done. They appear to be sins to me, otherwise I would not be a bother to you. Reconciliation and improving is a theme talked about in church. There is no blame here, and I wonder what other parishioners are doing....Believe me, this is difficult."

I replied, "I have no doubt it is serious, and I take you seriously. I believe you know what a real sin is. Please share with me what you believe because I think it would be helpful."

After this exchange we returned to the established pattern of questioning and answering. The reader has offered no example of what a

real sin might be, not from a sense of bad will or obstinance but because of genuine confusion, in my view. This confusion is not rooted in catechetics. I am pretty sure this person knows the meaning of venial and mortal sin.

Instead, I believe this person has a disorder that confuses feeling with sin and seems to allow for no natural human response or behavior. This sort of thinking often includes a vision of a "gotcha" God, where life is a never-ending series of traps and obstacles intended to trip up the person and send that person to eternal punishment. No amount of vigilance on the individual's part is ever enough.

The constant in each of these questions and responses is that they were prompted by a feeling. The warning sign of the possibility of sin for the individual seems to be at least partially rooted in the feeling and the emotion. A person with scrupulosity should not approach such feelings catechetically. You cannot learn, research, or memorize your way to helpful management of scrupulosity. What is required is a serious reordering and understanding of human feelings

and emotions. A medical intervention of some type might be a good first step; not the only step, but a good first step.

A final thought. This short reflection illustrates that responses to questions by a priest, a confessor,

or a friend do not help a person with scrupulosity. Answers only provide temporary relief. There will always be another question. Real healing needs another path. ✨

In the Midst of Noise

The Christmas scene is so well-known to us that it's difficult to say anything new about it. In some ways, this is a disadvantage, since familiarity breeds contempt. Most of us lost the wonder and surprise it should inspire long ago.

However, it's worth making the effort not only to see the well-known events, but also to ask ourselves why. What message was Christ trying to send us by being born in a cave or stable because there was no room in the inn? What a humiliation this must have been for Mary and Joseph who, like parents everywhere, had probably been carefully preparing for his birth. Why should this have been wished upon them? And why, on this momentous event in human history, are the only people who knew about it a handful of simple, uneducated shepherds who happened to be watching their flocks nearby?

One of the answers to these questions is contained in the word *poverty*. Jesus chose to be born in poverty and seeming abandonment to teach us that God does not need human means and resources to do his work.

But Jesus does call us to join him in his work of bringing love and salvation to the world. To do this, we have to rely not on ourselves, not on wealth, influence, possessions, or

any skills we may have, but on God working through us. The more we allow this, the more we do it in his way, the more effective we will be.

In choosing to be born poor, Jesus was not trying to glorify poverty for its own sake. The Bible condemns and rejects poverty as a scandal. God gave the earth and all it contains to everyone. Freedom from poverty is one of the signs of his kingdom where the hungry are blessed because they will have their fill.

The fundamental reason Jesus chose to be born poor, live among the poor, and die owning nothing is that love the theologians call *kenosis*, the emptying out of oneself, as St. Paul describes in Philippians 2:6–8:

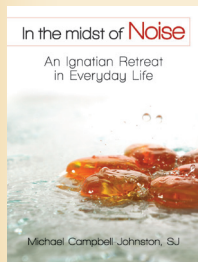
Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

And it was because of this that “God greatly exalted him” (Philippians 2:9).

In 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul sums up and explains admirably why Jesus chose to be born poor:

For you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sake he became poor although he was rich.

Let us consider how we are rich out of his poverty. ✨



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Q. *Every year during the holidays my mailbox becomes filled with premiums from various charities. It is impossible for me to send a donation to all of these groups. What am I required to do with the unsolicited premiums I receive with the appeal?*

A. If you find a premium useful, keep it. If not, throw it away or give it to someone who may find it useful. You have no other obligation, and you certainly are not obligated to give money to the organization that sent it to you. Premiums that charitable organizations send with their pitch for donations is part of the fund-raising “gift and take.”

Q. *With COVID-19 still a concern, is there any obligation to attend Mass on Christmas Day? If it works out like it usually does, these Masses are packed with people. I do not see how attendance would be safe. I am quite concerned.*

A. Your local bishop and pastor should make you aware of the options in your diocese. In a pandemic, “one size does not fit all.” Individual Catholics may dispense themselves from the obligation to attend Mass for a serious reason. Your

concern reflects your reasoning and the physical and psychological conditions in which you find yourself. To me, that suggests you have more than fulfilled the obligation required for an individual dispensation.



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