Contemporary Understanding of Sin

— Gabriel Maliakkal

The current view on sin focuses its attention more on the inner aspect of the reality of sin as there is today a greater concern for what is interior to man. Mortal theology, in the past, was concerned more with the legal aspect of sin. If was rather object-centred and act-centred. But now it is becoming more and more person-centred, demanding a personal responsibility. “My sins are my unique choice”, says Leonard Foley, “and nobody else’s”. The personal ‘me’ must use mind and heart in deep awareness and decision. Besides, sin is not merely an individualistic affairs. It has its impact on the society. As there is the ‘communion of saints’, there is also the ‘communion of sin’. As the good and virtuous actions can influence others, so too, the sins can affect the fellow-men.

If the moral approach to sin in the past had a negative, prohibiting, sanctioning and punishing tone, now it is becoming more value-oriented. Efforts are being made to unearth more and more the positive implications of the Christian moral imperatives. The lack of emphasis on these has often been the cause of what we call the sins of omission imperatives. The lack of emphasis on these has often been the cause of what we call the sins of omission. Finally, the contemporary moral theologians speak about the possibility of introducing a third category of sins in the traditional division of mortal and venial sins, namely, the grave or serious sins.

Sin as Refusal of Love

Traditional moral theology defined sin as the deliberate violation of God’s law which is grave or light as the case may be. But the modern concept of sin is based on the understanding of the intimate, and personal relationship which exists between God and every person. “Our Understanding of sin,” says Fr. Foley, “will depend on what we think about God. Until we really believe that God so loved the world as to give His only Son to save it, we will not understand sin”. The malice of sin is better understood in the light of the sanctity of God, the majesty of His love and His will to save mankind. It affects the personal relation of a human person to God. Every person is invited to establish a personal relationship with God. Such a consideration is all the more important since many miss the religious dimension of sin and are inclined to look as sin as centred on man alone.

Hence, the contemporary understanding of sin, first of all and essentially, is rejection of God and His divine plan. It is infidelity to God. It is a turning away and a going against the Divine Person who wishes to meet us. “The most heinous of sins”, says Fr. Bernard Haring, “is to close one’s heart to the impulse of the Spirit of Christ and to alienate oneself entirely from Christ through
Infidelity. Louis Monden defines sin in these few words: “Not to love.” Sin becomes man himself in a relation of refusal to God’s love. Thus, it is not merely a material transgression. The true nature of sin is its theological character: refusing God one’s personal love. It is therefore, more appropriate to speak about ‘sin’ rather than sins, for sins are only the external expressions of the inner reality of ‘sin’ which is the infidelity to God and rejection of God.

So, sin is to be placed more in one’s heart rather than in one’s wrong deeds. It is to be placed in the core of the person. Sin does not stand so much in opposition to the laws, but in opposition to God’s offer of grace. Thus, sin is an inner attitude and disposition of oneself, making oneself a sinner. This inner attitude is worse than isolated acts of sin; e.g., certain words and gestures against charity may sometimes seem to be very light; but it is to be noted that behind those external symptoms there could be a hidden, uncharitable heart, if not hatred.

It is true, sin involves individual; concrete sinful acts. But far more important is the realisation that in sin one brings about a certain realisation against the plan of God. The individual acts of sin are only the manifestations on the surface of the inner sinful attitudes. There, precisely, is the central reality of sin. It is much deeper than just introducing a moral disorder in the world or violating a law. Pope John Paul II, introduces another element in this rejection of God, the forgetfulness of and indifference towards Him. It is an attitude which makes man feel self-sufficient, an attitude that makes him feel that man can be without Him. The Pope gives the example of the story of Babylon. It was more of an absence of God; whereas in the Eden event, it was an act of rivalry, a pretension to be like God. Finally, “the sin of the century,” says Pope Pius XII, “is the loss of the sense of sin.”

Thus, sin essentially is a rejection of God, and His divine plan. Such a rejection is manifested in different aspects. In sin, man refuses to accept his dependence on God; he denies the obedience which he owes God and disregards the law implanted by God in nature. He impedes also the growth of God’s kingdom. And in the last analysis, the sinner’s rebellion results in the separation from the love and communion with God.

Communion of Sin

All sins have a social dimension, although in some instances, it may be in a very subtle and indirect way. It is an undeniable fact that there will always be some innocent victims to bear the consequences of one’s sins so much so that no sin will remain confined to the sinner alone. Pope John Paul II looks at it as the negative aspect of the communion of saints. Both are based on the principle of solidarity. It means to say that every person that leads a good life attracts also others to virtue or at least others too benefit of his goodness and virtues. This is the law of ascent to which corresponds also the law of descent. That is to say, every person that lowers himself through sin drags down with him some other people. It can happen on three levels: (i) ecclesial body; (ii) neighbour; and (iii) various human communities.

(i) The Ecclesial Body: It must be noted that in a broader sense, the sin of an individual affects the Church and the whole world. “With greater of lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repressions on the entire Ecclesial Body and the whole human family.”
Towards One’s Neighbour: Certain sins affect our neighbour more directly. They have many concrete expressions: it applies to every sin against the love of God, against justice in interpersonal relationship, against the rights of the human person, human life and the physical integrity of a person, etc. Social sin includes the sins against the religious freedom of others, against their dignity and honour. It includes sins against the common good, extending itself to the wider domain of rights and duties of others.

Various Human Communities: In the third place, social sin refers to the relationships between various human communities, i.e., whenever these relationships are not in accordance with the plan of God, there is a social evil as it affects justice in the world, freedom and peace between individuals groups and peoples. Thus, there results class struggle, obstinate confrontation between blocks of nations, between one nation and another, and between different, groups within the same nation.

Social aspect of sin is immediate and direct as regards the sins of lovelessness and injustice, of scandal and evil co-operation. But it is indirect and subtle as regards the sins of desire and thought. Their social impact is not immediately felt at the moment they take place. Nevertheless, every inner disorder has the unfailing tendency to embody itself in action. Therefore, if one permits such dispositions and inclinations to develop within oneself, they will develop into concrete sinful actions e.g., feelings of revenge, hatred, jealousy, etc. In this way, the sinner offends his neighbour and the society.

However, an exaggerated importance given to social sins is to be avoided. According to this trend, the responsibility of personal sin gets diminished and in certain cases, even abolished, as it is argued that the particular systems, society, structures, institutions, etc., exert their influence on the individuals and the latter are not free to act according to their conscience and therefore, the individuals are not to be blamed for. It is believed that every sin is a social sin as it is the product of economic, social and political structures that are evil. Due to their vague entity and anonymous collectivity it is difficult to change such structures. And the individuals are helpless to act otherwise. This attitude contradicts the moral principles of the Church. Whatever may be the influence of the circumstances, the moral freedom of the individuals always remains.

Moreover, social sins are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins. In other words, it is the personal sins of certain individuals that constitute the social sins. Their responsibility lies in the fact that they either cause and support evil or exploit the situation. There are also individuals who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world and also those who side-step the effort and sacrifice required producing specious reasons of a higher order. The real, responsibility then lies with individuals. Therefore, the root of all evil lies in free and responsible persons who have to be converted by the grace of Jesus Christ and who have to be imbued with the love of neighbour, with a desire for justice, self-control and the practice of virtue.

Sins of Omission

In recent years, greater emphasis is placed on the evils that result from the neglect of the good which is to be done. These sins, though many, are now commonly known as the sins of omission.
Thus, besides the sins of commission, the sins of omission are drawing greater attention. From the point of moral theology, sins of commission consist in the performance of forbidden acts. They are always transgressions of negative precepts; e.g., “You shall not kill”, “You shall not commit adultery”, etc... By violating such precepts, one ‘commits’ sin; whereas the sins of omission are failure to perform obligatory acts. They are offences against positive precepts, like “Honour your father and mother”, “Love one another as I have loved you,” etc.... 18

It is not enough that one focuses one’s attention on the things one may not do or one may avoid. Emphasis of the negative alone is insufficient. There is the need to spell out what one must do and what one can and should do. In other words, the positive aspect of the Christian morality is to be stressed. Sins of omission go often unnoticed. For, it is more difficult to define them in precise terms because the positive duties of a person depend much on his personal character, his personal gifts, his concrete conditions of life, etc... Nevertheless, they can sometimes become more serious than those of omission, e.g., not looking after the aged and sick parents. It is true, it is easier to avoid sins of commission than to do all the good which one ought to do. Therefore, says Henri Peschke, “not to sin by omission presupposes a greater degree of perfection.”19

Sins of omission become culpable only if one has realised the duty to act. This duty is not always clearly perceived. From a merely legal point of view, one may be excused; but from the moral side, one cannot escape the obligation in conscience as regards the sins of omission. The parable of the good Samaritan is the clear proof it.20 The priest and the Levite had excuses to make. But they deserved reproof from our Lord. On the other hand, the parable imparts another lesson, i.e., the diligence in doing good and in avoiding the sins of omission. It demands from the people certain inconveniences in terms of time, money, personal interests, etc... However, when compared to the good that results, such inconveniences are often proportionately less.

**Serious or Grave Sins**

Christian moral theology, for centuries, classified the sins into two categories, namely, moral and venial; basing on two factors; i.e., (1) freedom of action and (2) seriousness of the matter. Thus, a mortal sin is committed when God’s law is transgressed in an important matter with full knowledge and full freedom; whereas a venial sin is committed when God’s law is violated either in a less important matter, though with full consent; or in an important matter but without full knowledge or without full freedom.21

It is not, always, easy in concrete situations to define in clear and exact terms to what degree a sin can be mortal or venial. Basing on the first letter of St. John, the Church has, for long, held the possibility of sin which leads to death.22 It is a question of the loss of true or eternal life. It is mainly in reference to the denial of the Son,23 or the worship of false gods.24 In other words—St. John intends apostasy and idolatry—both ultimately mean the rejection of God. Venial sin, on the other hand, does not deprive the sinner of sanctifying grace, friendship with God, charity and therefore the eternal happiness.25 “A just man shall fall seven times”.26 Although any number of venial sins cannot constitute a dynamic relation between venial and mortal sins. By committing venial sins more frequently man disposes himself to commit a mortal sin.

In the past, more attention was paid to the objective element. Contemporary authors like Joseph Fuchs, however, focus their attention on the subjective role. “A fully human ‘no’ to God or to
Christ is a mortal sin. The important matter in sin is not ten cents or a million dollars; the main element in any sin is a ‘no’ to God; if you really say ‘no’ to God, that is mortal sin.”

When a person involves himself as a whole in sinful action it is mortal sin. What one is doing is refusing one’s personal self-donation to God, and in so far as one is refusing to love God, one is in mortal sins. In venial sin, however, a just man does not really dispose of himself in relation to God. He remains a person who loves God whose fundamental liberty is still intact; being on a more superficial level, he is going in opposite direction. This new approach to sin does not diminish the importance of the objective principles; rather it is to show the prominence of the subjective involvement in sin.

Moreover, in recent years, there sprang up a third category of sin called ‘grave’ or ‘serious’ sin. Since mortal sins call for a total rejection of God so as to cause spiritual death in a person, they are rare. It does not signify that all the other sins are just venial ones. These two categories are extremes. Between these two extremes, there is a wide range of possibility in which a person can commit many serious or grave sins. They may not amount of mortal sins; e.g., an ordinarily practising Catholic missing the Eucharist on a Sunday.

The advantage of having inserted this third category into the traditional division is that it shows better the seriousness of many sins which were, for long, considered as just venial sins. But they are not merely trifles of light sins, e.g., character assassination. It has also the merit of having ‘lowered’ the usual concept of mortal sins. Some of the usually understood mortal sins will not be mortal e.g., not to observe fast on Ash Wednesday. Nevertheless, Pope John Paul II denies this new division and identifies the grave sins with mortal sins.

Thus, the contemporary understanding of sin has unearthed several dimensions of the reality of sin hitherto unnoticed. While keeping up the traditional notions, it has tried to go into the deeper elements contained in sin. Without giving up the usual concept of sin as the violation of God’s law, it has succeeded in showing the inner infidelity of a person which prompts him to violate that law. Nay, this personal involvement is worse than external, isolated acts of sin.

The individualistic concept of sin gets a broader view. Man, being linked closely with social life, can cause harm to his fellow-men through his sin. Every sin injures the person who commits it as well as other persons who are affected by it. It helps the sinner realize his responsibility also towards those innocent victims. Efforts made, in modern times, to show to the people their positive duties and to inculcate in them a sense of sin in case they fail to fulfil those obligations, mark a creative approach to Christian morality.

Finally, though rejected by the Magisterium, the concept of ‘grave’ sin had something important to teach. It did not deny the notion nor the existence of mortal sin. At the same time, it was cautious to brand every serious offence as mortal. On the other hand, the concept of grave sin tried to point out the seriousness of many sins which were generally ignored as just venial sins. The contemporary understanding of sin has, therefore, helped people to grasp the malice of sin from various aspects.

REFERENCES
2. Pope John Paul II, Reconcilatio et Poenitentia, n. 16.

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17. *Libertatis Nuntius*, n. 15.