



# Boston Catholic Journal

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... LINGERING SHADOWS  
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**Think of the title of this article: "Lingering Shadows" ...**

It is an apparent impossibility. How can shadows remain after the object of which they are the mere shadows is gone? When you have stood under a late afternoon sun, your shadow long in the west — have ever you moved and seen your shadow remain where once you stood and now stand no more?

The only way to make what is impossible otherwise possible is to take a photograph of the shadow alone as you stand before it. You can then keep the photograph of what had been and is no more, and return to the moment that was, and like the shadow, is no more. The analogy is clear.

## **Attachment to Sin**

We have left the person, place, or thing —the occasion of sin — in which we once stood and have no intention of returning ... but for all our efforts a shadow remains even as we ourselves have gone.

The shadow lingers despite all the years and the fierce and even faithful resolution that never would the sun find us there again.

We are there no more, but inexplicably the shadow still falls over our hearts. It mocks us, either filling us with melancholy desire, or imbuing us with unremitting guilt. If it has been sinful love, then likely it will dog you all your days.

The sin is no more. The person is long gone. We soberly recognize that the occasion can never be recaptured even should the person remain. So much has changed! We have grown older even as our illusions have not. The landscape has changed even as it has remained immutable in our memory.

And even could it be again, it would not be the same again. We know this. After all, we have fled it, and those once desperate pangs seize us no longer. *Or do they ...?*

This is the predicament of what is called *attachment to sin*.

The concept of "attachment to sin", however, is so ... clinical, remote, even austere. In dealing with the human heart, it appears heartless. We have — and so often with great difficulty and immeasurable pain — left the sin, have we not? We have fled Egypt. And even now ... even now, after these many years, we are gaunt and even crippled by the effort. There is no calculus sufficient to the cost, but we have fled nonetheless, urged on by grace. Despite the prompting of our hearts to look back at the lissome and distant smoke rising from the flesh-pots of Egypt that we have left for a freedom that we have not yet found, we set our faces like flint against an unrelenting wind that would turn them back ... that calls us to remembrance. Still we wander in the desert, the Jordan an open dream before us, the Red Sea a closed memory behind us.

Resolutely we press on. There are yet a host of sins to come that we must drive out before us, but none prove so strong as the enemy we fled.

No Canaanite or king of Midian has the might of our own personal Pharaoh — who would call us back to slavery and servitude. We fled him but we did not defeat him. His chariots pursued us to no avail, and it was not by our power that they were splintered and still litter the banks of our dreams. The Midianites had chariots of steel, yes — and we left them strewn in the desert behind us! But Pharaoh had fire! Alike he kindled the fleshpots without, and the deep craving within! Grimly we watched towers burn in Midian before us, but with what longing do we still look upon the burning fleshpots of Egypt behind us!

## **This is our plight in our attachment to sin**

Spiritually, it is perhaps the most desperate, the most unrelenting, and in the end, the most deadly warfare of all. The victory is conclusive, but paradoxically the defeat is indecisive. The enemy has fled, but somehow his shadow remains. He has been subdued but not vanquished, defeated, but not put utterly to death. He is, in short, forever and irrevocably a threat: unleash him and he will contend with us to the death. It is true that he is no longer present, but it is equally true that by fault or misfortune he may find his way to us yet. As long as he lives his shadow falls over us, and nothing short of his death will free us from him.

Sin survives the sword. All your violence against the sin within will avail you nothing. Your flight from sin will not outrun its shadow. The root lies deeply within ... and it lives, and if allowed will spring to life again. *The very soil itself* must be subject to the furnace of holy love that leaves no seed of malice or sin dormant within, nor even its husk a scandal without.

You will never be free of the seed of death — which is sin — that lingers within you, *as long as you cultivate remembrance of sin* ... the very *soil* itself in which alone it takes root, thrives, and in the end throttles ...

It is not enough that we have left sin — the occasion, the intention, the act itself ... it is not enough and it will not suffice.

Unless our attachment to sin, our desire for what is sinful, is sundered to the last sinew, however tightly we bind it, it keeps us, in turn, captive. It is the proverbial wolf we hold by the ears, afraid to keep hold of it and afraid to let it go.

Relinquishing sin, especially that deeply personal sin (that deadly affront to God) that is unique to you in all history, must be a consciously total act. It is total war and one of you will die: the sin, together with your attachment to it, or you yourself ... who will die to God because you refused to die to sin. I say “unique in all history” because you are unique in all history. The time period, the place in time, the time in the place, and all the people who were affected by your sin and all the lives that they in turn touched and changed as a result of your sin — to say nothing of the person with whom you have sinned, or who brought you to sin, or who became the occasion

of your sin, and against whom also you have sinned. The web of sin is so taut — like a violin string tuned to the point of breaking, that who touches it at either end causes it to reverberate through the whole, leaving no fiber within it unmoved; its discordance affecting all, its dissonance touching every ear. Aware of our peril we nevertheless play upon it ... until it snaps and recoils upon us with a lash like a springing viper. *We* are wounded by our sin and it has wreaked havoc on all around us.

## **False consolation**

Do not seek consolation in the thought that many have sinned as you have, and attempt to excuse yourself by recourse to your human frailty and that inherent susceptibility to sin that we haplessly inherited from our First Parents in the Garden — rather, fear that it has the power to ensnare so many — from the most clever to the least, from the wise to the foolish, from the mighty to the most impoverished! All alike have fallen ... but not all alike have risen. God will give you the grace to resist sin, but you must accept it, seize it, hold firmly to it. **You** must wage the war. He will give you the armor, but **you** must strap it upon yourself; He will give you the weapons but **you** must wield them: Faith, Hope and Charity. Chastity, Obedience, Truthfulness, **HUMILITY. HUMILITY! HUMILITY!!!**

Understand this: your foes are three and each of them unrelenting: The World, the Flesh, and the Devil — Satan, that father of lies ( "*There is no devil. You are too enlightened, too progressive; too intellectual, too learned to acknowledge so ancient an enemy. 'I am a myth'*" ), he persuades you — **and this, too, is a lie!**" But he was a liar and a murderer from the beginning — and he seeks your immortal soul to bring that imago Dei, that image of God, that unutterably beautiful creation by God, to final despair, to endless torment and to utter ruin; to that frightful reality called the Second Death beyond which there is no rising to hope; to the reek of that charnel house that is the fume and fire of Hell ... his everlasting abode.

But understand this more: nothing and no one can withstand God and He Alone is your strength, He Alone your defender. "If God is with me, who can be against me?" And as though such help were lacking, there is more: the very Mother of God, Mary Most Holy, your Angel Guardian, the Holy Angels and the Company of Martyrs who intercede for you in your weakness and peril.

And understand this equally well: You cannot let go of sin, "a little". It is the commitment to the total repudiation of sin. As long as a thread remains to sustain it, sin will perch upon it.

Remember, that if you have not slain the wolf, you cannot hold him by one ear.

It is Lent — ***the acceptable time***. Accept it.

Editor  
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