



# Boston Catholic Journal

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## MORTAL SIN



## and HOLY CONFESSION

### The Antidote of Death

## First, Mortal Sin ...

Our excuses are numberless. In fact, they are as numberless as our sins, none of which are now deemed by us (and, for sorrow, by many priests) grievous enough to preclude our receiving the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion. Most often they are reducible simply to this: "I have not committed any mortal sin".

Indeed.

For Catholics who have never been taught the difference between Mortal and Venial sin — which is to say, the entire last generation of Catholics — we must be clear about the notion of sin, especially the distinction between two kinds of sin, before we can proceed to even understand the necessity, as well as the inestimable value of Holy Confession.

Only one analogy suffices to make this distinction clear in a way that is particularly accessible to Western society (I do not say "civilization", for that has ceased). Let us look at the matter somatically, that is to say, through our bodies, or more likely than not, the bodies of others upon which we are, in one way or another, sexually fixated. Perhaps this will provide a visual cue, some imaginative element, to an otherwise immaterial reality:

The distinction between a Mortal Sin and a Venial Sin is akin to the difference between a minor wound ... and death. Is that succinct enough? Are you still unclear about the difference?

In other words, you may accumulate many minor wounds and still live, although each is an impediment to your health and, while small, if left unattended, may yet contribute to something more serious, something more debilitating. It is a small laceration ... awaiting infection.

Mortal wounds, on the other hand, may be many, but any *one* of them alone will bring you to death. It is not the case that, inflicted with a mortal wound, you *may* die —the wound is called "mortal" precisely because, as a consequence of it, you in fact *will* die. In fact, we most often understand it in a posthumous context, in the past tense. The person is already dead, and that is why his injury was called "mortal".

It is of the nature of wounds that they are either the one or the other, although the non-mortal wound may be sufficiently grievous to cause lasting deformity or mutilation even if it does not culminate in death.

## **Physics, Bodies, and Bullets**

Clearly, we wish to avoid both, but failing this we immediately tend the wound, see a physician, and apply the recommended remedy. The medicine may be bitter, or the therapy arduous, but we do not curse the doctor for that, still less the laws of physics brought to bear upon human anatomy, in the way, say, of projectiles and the like. Bullets do those things. We do not like it, and we would that bullets behaved otherwise, but the reality is that, however regrettable the result, we cannot, for that reason, alter the path of the bullet nor make it less fatal to the body. The consequences of this concatenation of events are not within our will to change. I believe that we will all agree on this. We may argue that the bullet ought not have been shot, but having been shot we understand the inevitability of the result given laws inherent in physics, bodies and bullets.

That the trajectory of a projectile corresponds to a given amount of energy expended over a given distance — and intersected by the human tegument through which it subsequently passes causing death, is a terrible occurrence to be sure, but not one, in and of itself, that we are likely to imprecate. We do not rage against the laws of physics. Indeed, we would find such indignation ... odd, to say nothing of futile.

The laws inherent in physics and the constitution of the human body, are simply not amenable to our will, and we recognize this. We do not despair over it, but become terribly practical given this recognition: we avoid bullets. However great our outrage, we will not find a sane individual standing long in disputation against it ...

The reality we wish to avoid, the reality avoided at all costs at the pulpit, is that Mortal Sin is deadly. You *die* as a result of it. Oh, not to yourself, and certainly not to the world. You will breathe and move and the world will applaud your posthumous existence. But you die to God — your life in God ceases. The fact as little pleases us as it pleases our preachers — sin has real, most often empirical and always inevitable consequences. The ability of sin to harm, and yes, even kill, is as real and as indifferent to our wishes as the laws of physics that impinge on our bodies.

In our post-enlightened, post-modern pretension to sophistication, we frankly find such a notion abhorrent to our effete sensitivities, social sensitivities that we have so delicately honed upon the touchstone of correctitude.

On the one hand, we concede the notion of crime and punishment but somehow never quite attain to any correspondence between sin and condemnation on the other. We attenuate our clemency in the courts of men, given the gravity of the crime, but do not attain to that same rigor in the tribunal of sin ... given the gravity of the sin. There are, apparently, no capital offenses in the city of God, even as they abound in the City of Man. A mortal life is held to be forfeit for a crime, but life immortal is not held forfeit for a sin.

It is an odd state of affairs that few of us believe that we can abolish crime, while most of us appear to believe that we have virtually abolished sin.

Crime, of course *can* in fact be abolished.

"How?", you ask.

It is simplicity itself. *Legitimize* what is criminal. Account nothing a crime and you abolish the notion of crime itself — even as you leave the consequences intact.

"But that is absurd!", you exclaim.

In very deed ...

A cursory review of civil legislation over the past 30 years reveals that, not only is it not absurd, but attains to *policy*:

- Abortion
- Sexual Deviance (homosexuality, lesbianism, transsexualism, transgenderism)
- Homosexual "marriage"
- Cohabitation
- Pornography
- Prostitution (England, Scotland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Philippines, offhand)

Few of us, I assume, would seek recourse to such a solution and for good reason. Legitimizing crime does not indemnify us against it — however much we hold ourselves to have abolished it. Yes?

We can say as much of sin.

In fact, we have said as much. Unlike the immediate consequences of crime, the consequences of sin — even temporally — are often deferred, less immediate ... and because we apprehend them as remote, as distant, as impending only, we dismiss them for we fail to immediately see the terrible consequences they entail, consequences so terrible, so far-reaching, so much beyond our ken, that they have become effectively mythical, brooding like demons on some distant bourne that we obscurely perceive and never quite forget, an escarpment lost in light and shade where life quite suddenly drops off that abrupt precipice to death. We know it ... because we know that we dance on the dead.

## **And now, Holy Confession ...**

I am about to state something with which you are likely to disagree, and for good reason: my Parish Church is the holiest in all of Christendom; not just in the Archdiocese of Boston, but in all Massachusetts; very likely all New England — perhaps even the entire world.

You will disagree.

In fact, you know your own Catholic Parish to be holiest, perhaps the most sinless parish in the world, and we will both appeal to the same reasons for making this remarkable statement: during Holy Communion the pews are literally emptied.

There is not a sinner among us; at least no sinner guilty of **Mortal Sin which prevents our going to Holy Communion**, since — as all Catholics know — we add the tremendous sin of *sacrilege* to whatever mortal sin we carry if we receive Holy Communion while not in a state of grace — which is to say, free of mortal sin.

But as I ponder the empty pews, the stigma of being the sole sinner in the parish heavily upon me as many look askance at my kneeling while all others scramble to make their way to communion — I at least wonder. Do Catholics, do all Catholics, do most Catholics, do some Catholics, even know what a mortal sin is any more? Do they know the difference between a mortal sin that sunders the soul from God, and a venial sin that merely impedes its union with God?

Since the entire congregation have had at least 8 years of Catechism, or Religious Education — 8 to 10 years — surely so simple, so basic, so fundamental a concept as the difference between serious sin and sins far less grievous in nature, is clearly apprehended.

A very clear analogy may be to the point: in the civic world, all of us know (probably because the penalty is clearly comprehended, immediate and forthcoming) the difference between grievously unlawful, or capital offenses such as murder and grand larceny, and misdemeanors, like receiving a speeding ticket or maliciously destroying a neighbor's property. It is a no-brainer. We do not think twice, or rather, we *do* think twice in a given situation about the sanctions and penalties involved. It is, we are told, the means by which we maintain a "civil", a mutually responsible society. We acknowledge the concept of justice and understand very clearly why it is maintained and what penalties are incurred if it is violated. We have no problem with that. After all, the law is not some gratuitous abstraction, and you are a fool if you think that you can trifle with it and walk away. If the breach is serious enough you are clapped in irons, removed from the community, and deprived of your liberty until justice has exacted its tribute, until you have "paid your debt to society". By and large we are grateful for the severity of the law, even as its rigors make us uneasy. "There, but for the grace of God, go I ..."

We all recognize that our own behavior has not always been unimpeachable ... if not clearly actionable. We do not personally legislate parallel laws that contravene the laws of the state and hold, at any point of divergence, the private to abrogate the public law. It is the opposite which is true. We may find the laws of the state repugnant to us, unamenable to our own inclinations, even contrary to our own convictions — in which case we are confronted with three clearly distinguishable alternatives: we can absent ourselves from the polity and choose to live elsewhere, under a constitution that more closely corresponds with our desiderations and convictions, if such exists; we can continue to enjoy the collateral benefits in the present state that constrains us to abide by the laws through which it is defined and by which it is governed — or, we can seek to amend the law through the venues afforded us by the state.

What we *cannot* do is to enjoy the prerogatives of the state while either acting in defiance of it, or while subverting it. We understand this, and in fact underwrite it through maintaining our citizenship within it. We understand this broadly as a "Pledge of Allegiance".

In any event, we cannot construct a private and parallel universe of statutes and anticipate that the public universe of affairs will honor our privately legislated laws. If we choose to abide only by those laws of the state that we do not find disagreeable to us we have not attained to personal freedom, but to arbitrary license; not to civility, but to anarchy. We become both legislator and law. In such a solipsistic "society" the legislature and the corpus of law are as numerous as the individuals legislating them.

Well and good.

## **But what of *God's Law*?**

Why, we must ask ourselves, is ***God's Law*** somehow less important, less pertinent to our behavior, why does it have less bearing upon our responsibilities and our choices — and, most especially — within Church? Is the Divine Law, are the laws of the Church, no more than pious and ultimately indolent sentiments — rather than clearly articulated precepts with very real corresponding sanctions and responsibilities — in other words, coherent *laws*?

Do we give tribute to Caesar but withhold it from God? Is the Fasces mightier than the Cross?

We are indeed a generation which had been nurtured on defiance to authority — only seeing now, in our own children, the fruit of that unbridled defiance which we nurtured in them even as we pretended to "deplore it". Our children were ... "independent" ... not defiant, and we were proud — until we began to detoxify them, to rehabilitate their behavior, to trade notes with our neighbors on "good analysts". Our kids still get the keys to the car, no matter how grievous their transgression ... their money for the mall — just as we still get Holy Communion, no matter how grievous our offenses against God. We are as blind to our sins as we have made our children blind to their own. After all, a "good parent" "spares the rod" and does not descend to "atavistic behavior" such as punishing the child. And if we are such "good" parents — how much "better" God? Surely, there is no sin, no offense so grievous, or so trite, as to offend Him ... *nothing* we can ever do or say such that we would ever forfeit our "right", not to the keys of the car but to the Kingdom, through the Bread of Angels ... Holy Communion — that you as arrogantly insist is as much your *right* as the keys to the car ...,

Still pondering the empty pews, it would seem so. Perhaps it is the case that all the parishioners are in fact guiltless of civil crime, however petty (for these, too, are the stuff of Holy Confession) — as well as sin.

The truly defining question appears to be this: to whom, we must genuinely ask ourselves, do we owe more — to God or man? To the City of God or to the city of man?

On your blithe way to Holy Communion, ponder this — especially given *the ultimate sanction* placed before us by no less than Saint Paul:

"Whosoever shall eat this bread or drink the chalice of the Lord unworthily, **shall be guilty of the Body and of the Blood of the Lord.**" (I Cor. 11:27)

...are you prepared to add *sacrilege* to your your sins?

Or has the notion of *sacrilege* itself gone the way of mortal sin ... also?

Go to Confession. *You must go.* It is the only antidote of Mortal Sin, and thus the antidote of death.



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