

Sin

We are destined for life with God, and we begin living that life now by learning to live with others and growing in our relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The single greatest obstacle to both of those important activities is sin. Doing what we ought not do, or failing to do what we ought to do. Sin is not a happy topic, but it is important to try, not only to understand it, but to do what we can to fight against it. There cannot be genuine freedom, nor sustained happiness, for the person who tolerates sin.

Sin has been a problem for every member of the human race since that fateful day in Eden when our first parents disobeyed God's command not to eat the fruit of the tree, having been tempted by the serpent. Though the account of the "Original Sin" in Genesis 3 seems to many to be just a story, and though the Church teaches that the biblical author may have used "figurative language" to describe the event, she also affirms that something actually happened in our history that dramatically impacted every one of our first parents' descendants, as well as our relationship with God.

For believers there is a certain consolation amidst the tragedy of that failure in the garden, for it explains in some way the common human experience that St. Paul so frustratingly described in his letter to the Romans: "What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate." (Romans 7:15) In each of us there is an inner struggle, a certain "disordered desire" to do what we know we ought not do, or the sometimes equally strong desire to avoid what we know we ought to do. The primary consequence of Original Sin is the loss of our relationship with God, the loss of sanctifying grace, but it is the secondary consequence of the "concupiscence" St. Paul describes that we experience most. Original Sin answers for most of us that fundamental question, "Why am I so messed up?!"

Penance addresses Original Sin's second consequence, Baptism addresses the primary consequence of Original Sin, the loss of relationship with God, symbolized by Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden. In Baptism, the divine life that God had shared with them, what we call Sanctifying Grace, is restored to us. And thus, though we speak of the water of Baptism "washing away" Original Sin, we can perhaps more accurately speak of it as the "pouring in" of Sanctifying Grace. The Sacrament of Reconciliation provides the same restoration of divine life for those of us who have sinned mortally after Baptism. Original Sin helps us to understand why we have a certain tendency to sin, and while that tendency is not our fault, when we give in to temptation, or do not do as much as we can to counter it, the sin that we commit as a result is our fault, and has tragic and unhappy consequences for us.

Our first parents, made in the image and likeness of God, had received the “God-like” gift of free will, a powerful and potentially dangerous gift that most of us take for granted, but one that had to be tested if its users were to learn to use it well. Life without free will would not be much of a life at all. But life with free will brings its own challenges. Every time we choose the good that we ought, over the good that we want, we have the opportunity to undergo the kind of test that makes us ultimately more free to become what we were made to be. In the next video we’ll discuss an approach to this daily test.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines sin as “an offense against reason,” namely, sin is most clearly sin when we do what we know we ought not do, and so it really does not make sense. Unfortunately, that does not always stop us from doing it. The unreasonableness of sin perhaps becomes more clear when we consider the relationship between freedom and law. We often think of freedom as the ability to do whatever we want, and laws as those things which limit our freedom. The one who exercises his freedom to eat whatever he wants, eventually becomes overweight or unhealthy, and thus less free to do whatever he wants. True freedom is always found within the law, not apart from it. The laws of God, which we break through sin, were given by God to make it possible for us to live more freely, not less, and so knowingly breaking them never makes any sense. Freedom is the ability to do what we ought, not to do what we want. That kind of freedom is generally only achieved with the help of penance.

The Catechism’s definition of sin also tells us that sin is a “failure in genuine love of God and neighbor.” When we pass on a little bit of gossip, or make fun of the person who is different, we are obviously choosing what we enjoy at the expense of another, an act of selfishness, and a failure to love. But God does not hate sin so much because it offends Him or even the other, but rather He hates sin because it destroys us, and keeps us from being what He made us to be. When we sin, we generally do not choose something bad, but rather we choose something that we enjoy.

We are sometimes able to overcome the sin by our own sacrifice and penance, but progress on the road to holiness is made most rapidly when the disciple grows in relationship with God enough to say, “I enjoy my sin, but I love God more. I am not going to do this thing.” The disciple who is serious about the battle against sin, begins by growing in love of God through study, prayer and acts of charity. Finally, the Catechism tells us that sin is “caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods.” Sin is addictive and progressive, once we do it, it becomes easier to do again, and much more difficult to stop. Little lies turn into bigger lies. With any addiction, we become attached to things that are either not good for us, regularly staying up too late so that

we are not rested enough to give our best to our school, work or family responsibilities, or things that are not bad in and of themselves, use of social media or electronic games and entertainment, which when overused, keep us from doing what we ought to do. These “attachments” are difficult to break and make us more likely to sin again.

The word that the biblical authors use for sin comes from a term used in archery and literally means “missing the mark.” Usually when we sin we do not intend to do evil, we are just not strong enough to overcome our attachments and bad habits enough to do what we ought, and thus fall short or “miss the mark.” We are too weak to hold our tongue when snubbed, to resist another helping when we have had enough, to get out of bed when the alarm goes off, to get off social media when it is time to work, to help another when we are comfortable watching TV. Certainly there are occasions when we sin with “malice,” we plan to get revenge on the one who mocked us, sins which call for serious correction, but most of our day to day battle is with sins of weakness, we simply “miss the mark.” These sins, habits, and attachments that can only be overcome by strengthening ourselves with sacrifices, fasts and penance.

Augustine was no stranger to sin before his conversion, and much of his Rule is directed towards the embrace of humility and the avoidance of sin. Augustine knew from personal experience that the battle against sin is difficult and often quite painful, but the rewards for progress are a peace and freedom that can be obtained in no other lasting way. The Church has many tools to help us overcome sin. Jesus waits to meet us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, don't delay the opportunity to see Him there. At every Mass there is the chance to be forgiven of smaller sins during the Penitential Rite. Begin the habit of preparing for this Rite by doing a brief examination of conscience before every Mass. If you are struggling with a particularly persistent sin or habit, try making a 3 week “mini Lent” and give something up. And when you make this kind of sacrifice, include a prayer intention to help motivate your penance. Join the Church in remembering our Lord's sacrifice on the cross by making every Friday a day of penance in some small way. Most spiritual experts recommend a nightly examination of conscience before bed, a practice that is preserved in the Night Prayer of the Church, and recommended to all of her members. Our tendency towards sin is here to stay, and so must be our efforts to resist it.