

VIRTUS 23
EDUCATION OF THE
SENSE OF GUILT

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OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

- Some definitions:
- **Sense of Sin** is the judgement of the conscience by which we judge as an offense against God those acts which are opposed to the moral law.
- **The feeling of guilt** is the regret which overcomes us when we recognise ourselves as authors of such a transgression. This often comes as a biting of the conscience which we will call remorse.

INTRODUCTION (2)

- **Conscience:** A judgment of the reason by which we apply our moral knowledge to the particular acts, which manifests their goodness or malice.
- **Three moments:**
 - Antecedent: regards the future, possible acts and whether to do them or not
 - Concomitant: regards what we are doing right now
 - Consequent: regards past acts already committed, both approving or reproaching us for them

1. THE SENSE OF SIN

- ... is our sensibility towards sin, or rather, the adequate perception of it (in all three moments of our conscience).
- Influences (but no more, i.e. they're not conditioning) are: culture, education, religious formation, voluntarily acquired good or bad habits
- Thus we can have four types/degrees of conscience (and senses of sin):

1. THE SENSE OF SIN (2)

- The delicate conscience is that which rightly judges the morality of the human acts attending to the utmost details. It sees sin where it really exists, and as it actually is.
- The lax conscience, under futile pretexts, regards as lawful what is unlawful, as venial what is serious. It is caused by lack of vivid faith and the loss of the sense of sin. Sensual life, disregard for prayer, excessive desire for worldly goods, a frivolous atmosphere, the habit of sinning and lust also contribute to this.
- The cauterized conscience, due to the habit of sinning, does not mind sin, and gives itself over to it easily and remorselessly.

1. THE SENSE OF SIN (3)

- Scrupulous conscience. The scrupulous conscience is that which - by insufficient reasons – believes that there is sin where there is not, or regards as serious what is venial.
- The pharisaical conscience is a combination of the scrupulous and the lax conscience; it makes large of the little and vice versa; it may worry excessively about unimportant accidental things, and at the same time, it may remain unmoved by serious actions (for example: the Pharisees who were scandalised at Jesus' healing on the sabbath, but had not the least scruples at getting Pilate to crucify him...; similarly we might get agitated about having forgotten 1 of the 10 Hail Mary's in a decade, but will not understand why someone is offended by our harsh words).

1. THE SENSE OF SIN (4)

- It has to do a lot with our sense of reality, of perceiving things as they are, also sin: as an offense against God and as either grave or venial, ...
- An analogy is our sense of humour: we find things funny, because we have an adequate sense of reality, and something is out of order, is not according to esthetic standards, ...

LIKE IN THESE PICTURES:



1. THE SENSE OF SIN (5)

- Biological (basis of) conscience: the body corresponds positively or negatively (contraception, suicide attempts, abortion)
- It is the Voice of God: it is not the author of morality, or the laws, but manifests a given norm, and is the voice of its author, who is God
- Newman: The conscience is the first of all the vicars of Christ.

1. THE SENSE OF SIN (6)

- Our age is classified by the lack of the sense of sin
- **Pius XII**: “Perhaps the greatest sin in the world today is that men have begun to lose the sense of sin.”
- **St. John Paul II**: “Is it not true that modern man is threatened by an eclipse of conscience? By a deformation of conscience? By a numbness or 'deadening' of conscience. Too many signs indicate that such an eclipse exists in our time.”

1. THE SENSE OF SIN (7)

- It is connected with our sense of God = mutual growth/loss
- St. John Paul II: “When the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to **lose the sense of man**, of his dignity and his life; in turn, the systematic violation of the moral law, especially in the serious matter of respect for human life and its dignity, produces a kind of **progressive darkening** of the capacity to discern God's living and saving presence.”
- Pius XII: “To know Jesus crucified is to know **God's horror** of sin.”

1 THE SENSE OF SIN (8)

- Causes
- (from outside of the Church) **Ideologies** (psychologism, sociology, ethical historicism, cultural anthropologism, ...)
- **Ecclesiastical deviations**, e.g.
 - **counterreactions** to previous extremes (sin everywhere vs nowhere; mercy which does not correct/punish, ...)
 - “**respect**” which suppresses the obligation to tell the truth...

1. THE SENSE OF SIN (9)

- Obscuring the sacrament of confession: “These include the tendency to obscure the ecclesial significance of sin and of conversion and to reduce them to merely personal matters; or vice versa, the tendency to nullify the personal value of good and evil and to consider only their community dimension. There also exists the danger, never totally eliminated, of routine ritualism that deprives the sacrament of its full significance and formative effectiveness.” (*Reconciliatio et poenitentiae*)
- K. Rahner: “We can never know with ultimate certainty whether we really are sinners.”

1. THE SENSE OF SIN (10)

- But we know: “When we say we have not sinned, the truth is not in us.” (1 Jn 1,8)
- St. John Paul II: “Once all reference to God has been removed, it is not surprising that **the meaning of everything else becomes profoundly distorted.** ... By living "as if God did not exist", man not only loses sight of the mystery of God, but also of the mystery of the world and the mystery of his own being. Man can build a world without God, but **this world will end by turning against him.**”
- As Dostoyevsky puts it on the lips of one of his characters, Ivan Karamzov: “If God doesn’t exist, then *anything* is permitted.”

1. THE SENSE OF SIN (LAST)

- From this stems our current “Culture of death”: “The loss of the sense of sin is thus a form or consequence of the denial of God: not only in the form of atheism but also in the form of secularism. If sin is the breaking off of one's filial relationship to God in order to situate one's life outside of obedience to him, then to sin is not merely to deny God. To sin is also to live as if he did not exist, to eliminate him from one's daily life.” (*St. John Paul II*)
- It is impossible to completely lose/kill these two senses: it will manifest itself in other ways, e.g. feeling as an orphan of a God, whom his sins do not allow to see; or looking at God as the enemy of his sinful conscience, i.e. having a threatening sense of the divine justice.

2. THE FEELING OF GUILT AND THE REMORSE OF THE CONSCIENCE

- What is...
- **Guilt:** Consists in being conscious of having infringed upon the moral order and that I am the responsible of this infringement.
- **Remorse:** Is the regret and the anguish that ordinarily accompany such a conscience and memory. It may manifest itself apart from anguish, also as pain or unease for what has happened, in itself, not the so much the consequences.

2. THE FEELING OF GUILT (2)

- Since the conscience is the Voice of God, this is his calling, an illuminative grace. Its lack in the cauterized is a fearsome punishment.
- Remember St. Ignatius' first rule of discernment: "In the persons who go from mortal sin to mortal sin, the enemy is commonly used to propose to them apparent pleasures, making them imagine sensual delights and pleasures in order to hold them more and make them grow in their vices and sins.
- ***The good spirit uses the opposite method, pricking them and biting their consciences through the process of reason."***

2. THE FEELING OF GUILT (3)

- It is not the same in all persons, which leads us to a first distinction between remorse and repentance:
- in some it is the first step towards conversion (by humility, like the Prodigal Son)
- in others, it leads to despair (by their resistance, like Cain and Jude)

2. THE FEELING OF GUILT (4)

- There is another difference: in degree
- A normal, equilibrated remorse is
 - in **proportion** to the sin (including all the circumstances; hence the saints because of their great love for God had great remorse even for their venial sins)
 - solely for **one's own** sins
 - ordered to help one be perfectly conscious of his sin and thus **repent** of it (*past*), purify himself by **confession** (*present*), and make **amends** for the *future*.
- It usually disappears with the forgiveness (though the sorrow for having offended God may persist).

2. THE FEELING OF GUILT (5)

- F. Sheen: “Sin is not the worst thing in the world. The worst thing in the world is the denial of sin.... If I deny that there is any such thing as sin, how shall I ever be forgiven? The denial of sin is the unforgivable sin, for it makes redemption impossible.”
- Hence there is, even for the greatest sinner, as long as he has some remorse, and hasn't completely killed God's voice, always hope. Even if the sinner is dead to God's love, he may still be alive to divine fear, which can bring about his return to a conscientious life.

2. THE FEELING OF GUILT (6)

- Two aberrations (exaggerations) of remorse
- In the positive, exaggeratedly strong:
 - either because it continues after forgiveness (hyper-morality),
 - or because it regards something unreal (dismorality, typical of the scrupulous)
- 19th century literature said: “even the guilty are innocent”, whilst 20th century said: “even the innocent are guilty”
- It can cause:
 - psychical sickness (e.g. MacBeth)



2. THE FEELING OF GUILT (7)

- It may also cause existential anguish/angst.
- M. Luther: when he thought of God's justice or wrath he would have attacks of anguish that nearly brought him to death. Once hearing proclaimed a Gospel reading of a possessed person, he fell to the ground shouting: "I'm not possessed!"

2. THE FEELING OF GUILT (8)

- On the other hand, exaggeratedly weak: typical of those with affective coldness, insensibility, lack of compassion, even in people who may from the outside appear extrovert, sociable and funny
 - Amorality: lack of sense of guilt, of duty, and of remorse
 - Immorality: + egocentrism, up to crime
- Today culturally massive, characteristic of our culture of death, i.e. cauterized (to be seen in the systematic violation of most fundamental laws)
- Feed-back of silencing the conscience (justifying, down playing), creating an ever more hardened personality capable of ever worse acts

2. THE FEELING OF GUILT (9)

- Examples:
- The Bolshevik
 - “All that helps the revolution is moral; anything that hinders it is immoral.”
 - Fr. Fuentes says that Stalin’s conscience reached a hellish emptying of principles and emotions.

2. THE FEELING OF GUILT (10)

- Dostoyevsky: “I maintain that if the discoveries of Kepler and Newton could not have been made known except by sacrificing the lives of one, a dozen, a hundred, or more men, Newton would have had the right, would indeed have been in duty bound ... to eliminate the dozen or the hundred men for the sake of making his discoveries known to the whole of humanity. ... It’s remarkable, in fact, that the majority, indeed, of these benefactors and leaders of humanity were guilty of terrible carnage. In short, I maintain that all great men or even men a little out of the common, that is to say capable of giving some new word, must from their very nature be criminals—more or less, of course.” (*Crime and Punishment*)
- J. Watson: “If a child were not declared alive until three days after birth... the doctor could allow the child to die, if the parents so chose, and save a lot of misery and suffering. I believe this view is the only rational, compassionate attitude to have.”

2. THE FEELING OF GUILT (11)

- The influence of our habits (vices):
- They may corrupt to certain degree the will's disposition as regards its end, so as to make it tend "naturally" towards its evil ends.
- To get to this, one must elaborate new selective judgments, by which those evil ends, under the appearance of good, become chose-able.
- **Vices condition to some degree our judgments, hence the saying: "if you don't live like you think you'll end up thinking like you live."**

2. THE FEELING OF GUILT (12)

- If conscience, the Voice of God, cannot be deleted/eliminated, some try to explain it away, eluding the responsibility:
- Freud: reduces it to an interior, unconscious and purely natural impulse, whose origin he cannot explain; to him it's simply a fear without either moral content or foundation
- Sartre: it's the effect of the reproachful look of the others (confusing remorse with shame)
- Luther: considers it to a dirty trick of that "evil beast" (conscience), our implacable enemy who tries to convince us of sin
- Marx: it's an alienation of capitalist society
- Nietzsche: it's a sickness transmitted by society

2. THE FEELING OF GUILT (13)

- They all dilute the reality of sin and want to solve the remorse by some therapeutical explanation,
- end up creating monsters, who are insensitive to their neighbours' pains, embittered and hardened in their vices, indifferent towards their eternal destiny, exploiters of other people's weakness, ...
- ultimately creatures of clay whom they have convinced to be pagan half-gods, living marked by the tragedy of the profound despair caused by the disaster of the immoral principles they profess...
- And to think, that a single tear well shed could purify so much misery!

3. THE SENSE OF FORGIVENESS

- If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.
- If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1, 8-9)
- If our hearts condemn us: God is greater than our hearts.” (1Jn 3,20)
- It is a grace meant to bring us to experience the mystery of divine forgiveness, by making us admit our sin and that we are sinners (responsible of our misdeeds).

3. THE SENSE OF FORGIVENESS (2)

- The merciful Father of the parable of the prodigal Son doesn't put any conditions on him, not because of a false, absolutely unconditional super-mercy, but because the son has already complied with all the necessary conditions to receive mercy and forgiveness.
- If Jesus had changed the story and made the son return with some of his girl-friends, in doubtful relationships with them, wanting to turn his father's workshop into a casino, surely he would also have put other words in the Father's mouth, ... without him ceasing to be the merciful Father!
- It is not mercy to allow a child to have a crocodile in its bed, nor is it hardness of heart to demand that he should put it back where he found it.

3. THE SENSE OF FORGIVENESS (3)

- When equilibrated, healthy remorse comes from God, although it may lead to anguish, it leads ultimately to salvation, deleting its cause: sin! It does so by condemning it, repenting from it, and asking forgiveness. Thus it is not opposed to hope.
- Only they who refuse this supernatural light close themselves totally in themselves.
- But God, who has infinite power for cancelling the sins of men offers his forgiveness:

3. THE SENSE OF FORGIVENESS (4)

- Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. (Is 1,18)
- Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? (Ez.18,23)
- Say to them, As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ez 33,11)
- Pius XII: “Sin’s guilt could be washed away only in the precious blood of God's only begotten Son become man.”

CONCLUSION

- The restoration of a proper sense of sin is the first way of facing the grave spiritual crisis looming over man today. But the sense of sin can only be restored through a clear reminder of the unchangeable principles of reason and faith which the moral teaching of the church has always upheld.
- There are good grounds for hoping that a healthy sense of sin will once again flourish, especially in the Christian world and in the church. This will be aided by sound catechetics, illuminated by the biblical theology of the covenant, by an attentive listening and trustful openness to the magisterium of the church, which; never ceases to enlighten consciences, and by an ever more careful practice of the sacrament of penance.