
MAN AND HIS SINS (1)



In practically all periods of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, believers have pondered the serious consequence of speech and action. At certain points there were even catalogues made so that particular penances could be imposed on the repentant sinner. But, what of today?

SMOKING OR DRINKING?

Judging from the most important legislation which our society has, to determine the gravity of [social] sins, we could easily believe that smoking and drinking are among the worst crimes. In such a context we can more easily determine what is a sin and what constitutes a crime, in our society. A crime is an act, an offense against the society's particular values, against a particular country's legislation. Thus, a supreme court can declare non-criminal activities relating to abortion and euthanasia: the court does not judge the sinfulness of a deed, it judges crime, and crime according to the particular country's legislation. Sin, on the other hand, is situated in the context of a person's covenant story with his or her God; sin is seen as a lack, a weakness which the believer recognises in his or her relationship with God.

THE DECALOGUE

To the Chosen People, the legislation attributed to Moses is a major development of awareness and knowledge: on Mount Sinai, a new covenant was established between Yahweh and the liberated people. The more the people realise the freely given nature and the greatness of this covenant, the more do the believers realise the seriousness of a possible fall. It was not by a whim of sudden authoritarianism that led God to demand that His people keep from stealing, lying, and killing... As the Creator, God had obviously deposited in the heart of man and woman a knowledge of good and evil, but the sin of Adam and Eve had brought on such darkness. that a new covenant had to be made, there had to be a new beginning. Another love story between God and humankind unfolds; so many sacred pages have been written on this subject! But it was because of the covenant of love made between Him and His people that God will ask that He alone be worshipped and loved with all one's heart and one's strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself. And the prophets will bring into sharper focus the notion of sin, among the believers: sin first rises in the human's heart and turns one away from the Creator.

THE GOSPELS

"Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News": this was one of the first prescriptions of Jesus' preaching. He does not do away with the law and the prophets, but he brings a new light to shine on the dignity of all men and women, with whom he identifies. "What you have done to the least of these, you have done to me." It is to this major reference to the mystery of Jesus' incarnation, to this new commandment of love he proclaims, and this new covenant to be sealed in his blood, that sins will now be judged more or less serious... It comes as no surprise that three of sins were seen as particularly heinous: murder, adultery, and apostasy, since all three bring into question the covenant made between God and the believer.

STILL TIMELY

These three sins weigh heavily on a community, when they occur: they put at risk the lives of both individuals and communities. Apostasy is not always 100% present, but if indifference prevails more and more, the risk is great that life will not be lived as it ought. If infidelity gains ground, human relationships can but deteriorate and become something else altogether. If adultery is trivialised, other human relationships will be weakened. If human life is not respected, the risk is great to make things worse; the non-respect of one individual can lead to the denial of that person's most basic human rights.

STRIKING CONSIDERATIONS

It is very important to consider what it is that ties us to our God. If we are baptised and confirmed, we must consider all the bonds that tie us together. It is a wonderful contract between God and each one of us, a one-of-a-kind-in-the-world contract, much more in our favour than we would ever think. True, this contract also creates obligations for us regarding our neighbours, but we are not alone in trying to keep our part of the bargain, to respect the obligations of justice, love, and mutual help. The more we become aware of the clauses of this contract, the more will we want to live up to all its clauses. Truth, love, freedom, and justice are the foundation of the contract which leads us to unthought-of solidarities, and, according to each period's sensitivities, there is a greater stress on one clause or another, of the contract. In this way our modern world is very attuned to questions of justice and equity, and our conscience will most likely be open to such basic values. Other times, more awareness will be given to environmental questions, and we shall be led to more respect for what comes to us from the Lord.

WATCHFULNESS AND RECONCILIATION

May our 2003 Lenten season, which is fast approaching, be for us a wonderful time to acknowledge the unique covenant between Jesus Saviour and every human being. Called to holiness despite our limitations, we shall be able to respond, because of his great love for us.

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