

Sin - Personal and Social and The Work for Justice

Many of us were brought up with the idea of personal sin as a breaking of God's law. "Thou shalt not" was what we learned from our study of the 10 Commandments or some other lists of dos and donts. In other words we were told that sin was "doing what we shouldn't do and not doing what we should do". Many present day theologians give us another image of what sin is. According to them sin refers to the times we fail to be the kind of persons we ought to be. It is a selfish choice that we make which has destructive consequences. By sinning we choose the way of vice rather than the way of virtue while we are living out our commitments and responsibilities. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines personal sin as "an offense against reason, truth and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and our neighbour" (#1849)

Social sin is more complex. It is the sin committed against the rights and freedom of every human person. As long as there are people whose dignity is undermined or denied by our personal attitudes or the attitudes of society, as well as by the structures arising from such behaviour, then we are failing in our responsibility to love God and our brothers and sisters. The Link between faith and justice is the dignity of "the other". Our commitment to justice seeks to make this dignity a reality for every human person. When we fail to respond to the needs of asylum seekers, the homeless, drug addicts, travellers and all the marginalized in our society, then we are failing in our responsibilities toward our brothers and sisters. Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, Margaret Aylward and Frederic Ozanam recognized the human dignity of people who are oppressed and marginalised and spent their lives working to alleviate the sufferings of the poor of their time. They remind us to be faithful to our responsibility to care for our brothers and sisters, especially those whom society rejects, promoting the common good in a world where inequality is very evident.

Acknowledging our sinfulness and our need for forgiveness makes us feel more responsible to do something about the situation of social sin around us. We can do what little we can to help people who are the marginalized and oppressed of our society. But reflecting on our sinfulness should not discourage us because how we are and where we are is the only way we can reach God and God can reach us.