

Sin and Forming a Christian Conscience

Tonight I'm not going to tell you anything you don't already know. Instead I'd like to help you come closer to understanding God's dream of who you can be.

Let me start out with a story.

I was out in California, in a town called Indian Wells. I had spent the weekend camping and hiking in the high desert with two of my sisters and on Sunday morning, I went to the Church of St. Francis of Assisi with my sister Elise. The Church was an exact replica of the Church of St. Francis in Assisi, Italy. I've been to that church and it's an extraordinary experience to be where one of the greatest souls of all time lived. During the preparation of the gifts, when the priest collects the water, wine and bread offered up from the assembly and prepares these gifts on the altar, a solo of *What Wondrous Love is This* was being sung by the cantor. She had a strong and beautiful voice and, for *me*, was exploring the depths of emotion in the song by moving from one key to another. I was literally being transformed by the beauty of the moment: I was in a beautiful church, I was with my sister, I was at mass, I was listening to a beautiful, heartfelt song. All this, when in the pew in front of me, a man turned to the person next to him and let out an exasperated sigh. For him the music was a roadblock. I'm presuming here, but I guess he was at mass to receive communion, and his focus was solely on getting to the reception of the host. In my opinion, he was blind to the reception of the grace of the moment. And in fact, his exasperation led me to fall out of my transformation into a state of uneasiness about his reaction, and ultimately to a sense of tension.

Did he sin? And if so, what was his sin?

I think his ultimate sin was his inability to say "Yes" to God in the moment.

Remember two weeks ago when I talked about the Teaching of the Definitive Encounter. I talked about how we form a habitual way of responding to God through each of our actions here on earth. I even said that those people who are able to consistently say "Yes" to God, end up meriting additional graces that bear themselves out in the fruits of grace: Faith, Hope and Charity.

Those people are able to see this world in a substantively different way than the rest of us. They are open to God in every moment and see that the Kingdom of God is upon us. There's a song by a defunct Scottish rock band called The Waterboys. One of their songs has the stanza: "I saw a rain laden valley, you saw Brigadoon. I saw the crescent, you saw the whole of the moon." The real effect of sin is that it prevents us from seeing God in every moment. It prevents us from seeing our part in God's plan and saying "Yes" to it.

Let's talk about it a little more specifically.

So first off, what is my definition of sin? Not saying "Yes" to God.

Not an issue of classification of sins, like mortal or venial, that takes our eye off the ball. It's an issue of why sin at all?

What are we missing out on when we sin? How does it limit our perspective on the goodness of the world? How does it limit our participation in the Kingdom of God? How does it prevent us from seeing the whole of the moon?

There's a consistent maxim in ethics and morality which says "Do good, avoid evil."

Too often, when we talk about sin, we focus on avoiding evil. We talk about the 10 commandments, which if you don't remember say:

1. I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery. You shall not have other gods besides me.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.
4. Honor your father and your mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

For those of you who want, I have a hand out of how the Catechism of the Catholic Church ties these 10 commandments into a consistent way of acting.

Another way of focusing on the "avoiding evil" part of morality is found in the 7 deadly sins

- **PRIDE**
Unrestrained appreciation of our own worth.
"inordinate self-love is the cause of every sin (1,77) ... the root of pride is found to consist in man not being, in some way, subject to God and His rule."
- **GREED**
Immoderate desire for earthly goods.
"it is a sin directly against one's neighbor, since one man cannot over-abound in external riches, without another man lacking them... it is a sin against God, just as all mortal sins, inasmuch as man contemns things eternal for the sake of temporal things." (2, 118, ad 1)
- **LUST**
Hankering for impure pleasures.
- **ANGER**
Inordinate desire for revenge.
"the name of a passion. A passion of the sensitive appetite is good in so far as it is regulated by reason, whereas it is evil if it set the order of reason aside." (2, 158, ad 2)
- **GLUTTONY**
Unrestrained use of food and drink.
"Gluttony denotes, not any desire of eating and drinking, but an inordinate desire... leaving the order of reason, wherein the good of moral virtue consists." (2, 148, ad 1)
- **ENVY**
Sorrow over another's good fortune.
"Envy according to the aspect of its object is contrary to charity, whence the soul derives its

spiritual life... Charity rejoices in our neighbor's good, while envy grieves over it." (2, 36, ad 3)

- SLOTH
Laxity in keeping the Faith and the practice of virtue, due to the effort involved.
"sluggishness of the mind which neglects to begin good... [it] is evil in its effect, if it so oppresses man as to draw him away entirely from good deeds." (2,35, ad 1)

But I think we over do our focus on avoiding evil, and miss the first part of that moral imperative: "Do good." Here we can look to 3 passages from the Gospel to see that this is what Jesus, himself, focused on.

- Golden Rule
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.
- Matthew 25:31-40
- Beatitudes
*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

This leads to why the church calls you to follow your conscience, because the well formed conscience sees the whole of the moon and understands how to say "Yes" to God better than any rule. Now let me do a brief explanation of this because it's often misinterpreted.

We need our conscience to help us determine what is right or wrong in a particular situation. In fact, the Church believes that we must follow our conscience at all times. There may be times where we know what we are called to do not because of the Scriptures or the Revelation of the Church, but because of our conscience. God can reveal a right course of action in particular situations through our conscience. There's a great paragraph from the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. It says: "*In the depths of his conscience, we detect a law which we do not impose upon ourselves, but which holds us to obedience. Always summoning us to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to our heart more specifically: do this, shun that. For we have in our heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of humankind, according to it we will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of us as a person. There we are alone with God, whose voice echoes in our depth.*"

But, our conscience must be well informed. We can't simply make decisions based on a whim.

If we find that we are making a decision that is not based on the revelation of Scripture or Tradition, then we are obligated to seriously investigate, if at all possible, before acting. This means finding out the what's and why's of the perspectives of Scripture and Tradition. It means examining the particular situation closely to understand it more completely. And only then should one act from a conscience that is in disagreement with Scripture and Tradition. And if we find ourselves making too many decisions in disagreement with Scripture and Tradition, then perhaps we should question if we're in the right Church.

So the goal of tonight is to help you reflect and start seeing your place in God's plan and to say "Yes" to it. To see that the Kingdom of God is upon you.

Let's look at an example of what we're missing out on by not always saying "Yes" to God my trip into work today:

Sped into work

Got in left lane at exit toll booth

Then cut into right lane right afterwards

I missed an opportunity for time to enjoy the Now

What other avenues of sin are there in our lives?