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Sin and Life

INTRODUCTION

The counselor listened to the story he had heard so many times before. The mother and father told him how their teenage son had gone on picnics with them in his early years, how he had gone to church each Sunday and even stopped into church for special visits, how he had brought his friends home and played in the yard and how he had hated to see his father smoke. Now he no longer wanted to join the family in outings, they never met his friends, he never went to church, he left home early in the day and returned late at night, he skipped school, and not only did he smoke, but he also began to drink heavily.

The reason the family came to the counselor hinged on an event that happened just a week ago. The boy had cursed at his mother when she asked where he had been, and the father, when he heard the boy swear at the mother, slapped the boy so hard that he stumbled across the room and tripped over a chair. In a tirade of angry words and in tears, the boy slammed out the door and did not return until the next morning. The parents came to the counselor in an effort to seek help in relating to their son.

The counselor tried to explain to the parents how children often rebel as they grow. In some cases, the rebellion takes form in simple laziness, irritability, and a desire to get their own way, while others make a complete and tragic rejection of their families. The child has to break away from the nest, and for some this becomes more violent than for others. The counselor advised the parents never to break with the boy no matter what he did; at the same time they must continue to keep before the boy's eyes the fact that he must learn to live in a mature society which demands that he give as well as receive. Hopefully, the boy would return in some way to the lessons of his youth.



Sin

When Jesus speaks in his parables of the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, of the woman who looks for the lost coin, of the father who goes to meet and embrace his prodigal son, these are no mere words; they constitute an explanation of his very being and activity (*God Is Love*, 12).

1. What is sin?

Sin is a weakening or breaking of a love relationship between a person and God.

Life is filled with relationships. We relate in one way to the person who works at the grocery store; we relate in another way to our friends; and we relate in an even different way to our families. These relationships are based on some degree of love. We know that God loves us deeply, and so we can claim a deep love relationship between God and ourselves. The parents in the introduction love their teenage son, and they see him weakening or breaking that love relationship. Their son is moving away from them, and they feel his alienation. Because the relationship is growing weaker, they seek the help of a counselor before the relationship breaks completely.

When we sin, we act in a fashion similar to that of the son in the introduction. We either forget about God's love for us or we ignore it; at times, we might completely reject God's love just to have our own way. Whenever we ignore God's love for us or reject that love, we commit sin.

As the parents in the introduction will never stop loving their son, so God will never stop loving us. We are the ones who choose to break that love relationship or weaken it, and so we are the ones who commit sin.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus speaks of his helplessness as the people of Jerusalem refuse to respond to his love. In the face of this rejection, Jesus tells them, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing" (Luke 13:34). Despite their rejection of him, Jesus will continue to reach out to the Judean leaders until his death.

This sin occurs when we hurt our neighbor.

The author of the First Letter of John reminds us that we cannot love God unless we first love our neighbor: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment

we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also" (1 John 4:20–21).

When someone asked Jesus who his neighbor was, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25–37), which ends with a question from Jesus: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" [The man] said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'" Our neighbor is all around us. As we relate to him or her, we relate to God. As we hurt our neighbor, we hurt God, and as we love our neighbor, we love God. Whenever we weaken or break a love relationship with our neighbor, even an unknown neighbor, we weaken or break a love relationship with God. In this way, we commit sin.

We sin even when we hurt ourselves.

God has made us a most precious part of creation and has even commanded us to love ourselves: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind: and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Love of self differs from selfishness, which is often destructive of self. When we accept our dignity as special creations of God and strive to develop our gifts in a proper fashion, we show love of self. When we abuse the gifts God gives us or allow them to be destroyed by our own laziness or negligence, then we hurt ourselves and weaken our relationship with God, who is deeply and lovingly

concerned for us. The parents of the boy in the introduction agonize over their son as they see him engaging in destructive behavior. So it is with God. As the parents seek the good of their son, so God seeks our good. To truly love oneself consists in living with an appreciation of the gifts God has given us, with the realization that God truly loves us.

We are closest to God when we love, and we are farthest from God when we lack love. In the First Letter of John, we have a summary of the need for love in our lives if we wish to remain aware of God's presence within us. The author writes, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 John 4:16). Since God is love, we cannot truly know God unless we love.

2. How do we explain sin in the world?

We do not know how sin began in the world.

In the story of Adam and Eve, we read that human beings are responsible for sin in the world. God granted them many gifts and only one small precept: "'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die'" (Genesis 2:16–17). A serpent tempted Eve to eat the fruit, and Eve enjoyed the taste so much she ran to share the fruit with Adam, who also ate it and sinned. By this action, they broke the love relationship between God and themselves. They covered their nakedness with

leaves, which symbolized their need to hide their true selves from each other. They also tried to hide themselves from God. The love that once bound them together in an open, free way was destroyed by their disobedience to the God who loved them. The message of the story tells us that human beings, not God, had broken this love relationship and brought sin into the world.

The early stories of the Book of Genesis following on this sin share the message that sin gradually gained a grip on the world.

After Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden of paradise, the story of Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve, told of another sin being committed. God was pleased with Abel's gift, and Cain, in his anger, killed Abel. In this destruction of his brother, Cain broke his love relationship with God. Shortly after this, the storyteller drew a story from mythology. Just as the gods of mythology married human beings, so the storyteller wrote, "When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose" (Genesis 6:1-2).

Finally, in a world filled with sin, only Noah and his family were found worthy of salvation. Noah built the ark and saved his family and all the animals from the terrible flood that covered the Earth. No sooner had the ark landed than Noah's son, Ham, committed sin by looking upon his father's nakedness and ridiculing his father. (See Genesis 6-9 for the complete story of Noah.)

These early stories end with the building of the tower of Babel by which these people attempted to reach God in their own way. The tower would soar to the dome of heaven and give vainglory to its builders. Because of the pride of these people, God mixed up their languages so that they could not work together. Instead of using their common gift for good, they sinned through this gift. By the time we come to the end of Chapter 11 in Genesis, we have read through the stories that tell of sin gaining a grip on the world. When Abraham comes on the scene, sin already controls the world.

The grip of sin in the world is called Original Sin, since it stands at the origin and base of our creation.

With the sin committed by the first human beings, Scripture tells us that sin began to inundate the world. This buildup of sin in the world has never ceased, even to our present day. Whenever we accept sinful attitudes that become part of the thinking of society, we contribute to Original Sin (see CCC, 418). The acceptance of racism, excessive profits, abortion, and "taking care of number one first" are all attitudes of sin existing at the very base of our creation. By the "base of our creation," we simply mean those sins that have rooted themselves in a people, a society, or a culture. Nowhere in Scripture do we have the expression "Original Sin." The term seems to have its birth somewhere in the early centuries after Christ. When we speak of being born in Original Sin, we not only refer to the

sinful attitude of the world that surrounds us, we also refer to our own inability to confront and overcome this sinful attitude. Through the Resurrection of Jesus, we are able to share in a new strength and new life that enables us to do our share in overcoming sin. Christ came to confront the grip of sin on the world, and he successfully overcame it. Now, through the gifts of Christ's Resurrection, we too are called to do our part in overcoming the sinful attitudes that surround us. In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us of the power of Christ over sin when he writes, "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (Romans 5:18).

3. What are some examples of actions that are sinful according to the Ten Commandments?

In the Old Testament, we read of the Commandments given by God to the Israelite community.

The Ten Commandments still have importance and value, and as such the Church teaches them today. When a man asked Jesus what he must do to merit eternal life, Jesus told him to keep the commandments and referred him to the Ten Commandments when he stated, "'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 19:18-19).

The first three commandments of the Old Testament Law touch on our relationship with God, while the rest touch on our relationship with one another.

- 1. *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.*** The First Commandment warns against idolatry. The people of Israel were forbidden to make images of the one true God. Some believed that carving an image of God would lead to idolatry, while others believed that an image of a god captured the spirit of the god within the image. Idolatry can take many forms, such as greed, materialism, power, and so on. These false values can become so strong for people that they center their lives on them, as though they were gods. Idolatry can also involve devil worship, spiritism, witchcraft, indifference toward God, or a denial of God.
- 2. *You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.*** The Hebrews had such a great respect for the name of God that they were not allowed to speak the Hebrew name for God, even when they prayed. In place of the name of God, they would use the term "Lord." Only once a year did the high priest use the name of God in Hebrew, and this was on the feast of the atonement as he made an incense offering in the Temple. To speak the Hebrew

name for God, even in prayer, was considered blasphemy, that is, taking the name of God in vain (see CCC, 2148). Christians especially should have a reverence for the name of God or Jesus, even in moments of sudden anger or surprise, to show respect for God. Making a false oath in God's name is also sinful, since it is calling upon God to witness an untruth.

3. *Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.* The Israelites celebrated the Sabbath as the Lord's Day, to commemorate the day when the Lord rested after his six days of creation. From ancient times, the Sabbath recalled the Lord's work in creation, the Lord's guidance and protection in the history of the Hebrew people, and the covenant made between the Lord and the Hebrew people.

The Sabbath (seventh day) became so sacred to the Israelites that they made many strict rules concerning the limitations on such daily tasks as walking a distance, cooking, and working.

Most Christians celebrate Sunday as the Lord's Day, because tradition holds that Sunday is the day of the Resurrection of Jesus. For early Christians, Sunday actually symbolized the "eighth day," that is, the new era in which Jesus was raised from the dead. The Third Commandment calls us to keep holy the day of the Lord, to set aside a day for the visible worship of God. It calls for a day of rest and worship, that we may grow more aware of God's presence in our lives and respond to that gift. The center of the Lord's Day (Sunday) for Catholics is the Eucharistic celebration.

Special holy days

In addition to Sundays, Catholics assemble for special occasions known as holy days at six other times during the year. Each of these holy days has a special significance in the life of the Church. The feasts may differ from country to country, although most countries retain the number of six. In general, Catholics are required to participate in the Eucharistic liturgy on holy days.

The six holy days are:

1. The Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God, celebrated on January 1
2. The Ascension of Jesus, celebrated on the fortieth day after Easter or the following Sunday
3. The Assumption of Mary, celebrated on August 15
4. All Saints' Day, celebrated on November 1
5. The Immaculate Conception of Mary, celebrated on December 8
6. Christmas Day, celebrated on December 25.

The Fourth Commandment addresses respect for one's parents, which was a major concern in Israelite history.

- 4. Honor your father and your mother.** After the first three commandments concerning our attitude toward God, we have the command to honor our parents. The placement of this command in the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) shows the importance of parents in the Israelite culture and God's special concern for parents. For the Hebrew people, dishonoring parents was the worse sin someone could commit against another, worthy of expulsion from the community. When Noah's son, Ham, ridicules his father, Noah calls down a curse upon Ham and his descendants.

The Fourth Commandment seeks to strengthen the family and direct the proper attitude toward one's parents. In our day, when so many elderly must depend on their adult children for support, this commandment has special meaning. The Fourth Commandment also calls for respect of all rightful and morally good authority, and it calls for civil authority to have respect for families.

The Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Commandments are listed in order of importance and concern actions towards others.

- 5. You shall not kill.** The Fifth Commandment warns against the killing of another human being. It seeks to develop a deep respect for human life, from the womb to

the tomb (see CCC, 2258). This commandment does not exclude a legitimate defense of one's life, but even in war, it forbids unjust and random killing.

Human beings have a right to life from the first moment of conception until the point of natural death. For this reason, the Church teaches that direct abortion, suicide, and euthanasia are grave sins. (Note: these issues will be treated more at length in Chapter 15.) In addition, the fact that the death penalty has mistakenly been imposed on some and that the poor are more prone to be punished with the death penalty than the wealthy shows it is not just and equal. In a homily given in St. Louis in 1999, Pope John Paul II labeled the death penalty as "both cruel and unnecessary."

- 6. You shall not commit adultery.**

This commandment seeks to strengthen the true meaning of the proper use of sex within marriage. It seeks to protect the family and foster the true meaning of sexuality and love within the community. This commandment also calls for chastity and self-control in regard to illicit sexual relationships. (Note: family issues and sexual sins will be treated in the context of marriage in Chapter 13.)

- 7. You shall not steal.** The Seventh Commandment warns against stealing, which involves taking the property or goods of another without the right or permission to do so. This can mean stealing another's possessions, but it also involves stealing another's labor or time without just compensation. The Seventh Commandment

calls for the practice of justice in the administration of the world's goods, and for the proper and charitable stewardship of the goods of creation.

In our world today, we encounter numerous forms of theft. Through the use of modern technology we now have copyright theft, computer theft, identity theft, embezzlement, and a number of scams used to cheat people out of their possessions. Overpricing, not fulfilling a contract, destroying another's property, purposely not paying debts, and paying unfair wages are sinful actions also included under the heading of stealing. Stealing not only hurts individuals but it also hurts communities by making innocent members of the community bear the cost of the offense.

- 8. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*** The Eighth Commandment warns against bearing false witness against a neighbor's good name. It seeks to protect people from rash judgments, slander, lying, or the ruining of someone's reputation. There are some truths we may know that can cause harm to another if we shared these truths with others who do not have a right to them. We are sinning against this commandment.

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments deal with our attitudes and intentions.

- 9. *You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.*** The Ninth Commandment warns against lust or coveting someone who we cannot or should not form a relationship with. This commandment

demands respect for the spouse of another, and the avoidance of all immodest proposals, innuendoes, or actions that would offer an invitation to sin.

- 10. *You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.*** This commandment encourages us to avoid greed, envy, injustice, and avarice. It demands an attitude that calls for sharing one's gifts with others. Jesus told his followers to avoid greed in all its forms, which means that we should avoid the unreasonable desire "to have it all." It warns against an inordinate attachment to wealth, which may control our thoughts and actions, and also warns against envy, which causes us to unjustly seek another's possessions.

3. What does Jesus say about sin in the world?

Jesus gave a new law to his disciples.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Chapters 5 to 7, we learn of a new law founded in the reign of God and based on love. The author of the Gospel of Matthew links the new law of Christ with that of the Old Testament commandments. Just as Moses went up the mountain and received the Ten Commandments from God, so the disciples went up the mountain and received the precepts of the reign of God from Christ. Whereas the commandments gave specific laws (mostly in a negative way, by telling people what to avoid), the message of Jesus centered more on an attitude or way of thinking. Some writers today

use the Ten Commandments as a framework for moral law, and they interpret the Ten Commandments from a Christian perspective. In this manner, they are able to make the Ten Commandments more applicable to a Christian audience.

Many of the basic ideas of the new law given by Jesus are found in the Sermon on the Mount, as presented in the Gospel of Matthew.

In his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called his disciples to have an attitude of mind that reflected the presence of Christ in the world. The Beatitudes depicted in the Gospel of Matthew (5:1-12), express the attitude of mind that should mark all Christians (see CCC, 1717). Jesus' life perfectly reflects the Beatitudes and calls all Christians to follow his example.

These are the Beatitudes:

- *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* The poor in spirit are those, rich or poor, who recognize that all of creation belongs to God. They are willing to share their goods with others because they recognize them as coming from God. Because they are actually living with an awareness of the reign of God on Earth, theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.* Those who mourn reject the evil rampant in the world, and find comfort in God's presence.

Those who constantly ask and seek will be heard.

- *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.* "Meek" does not refer to those who are weak, but to those who are patient, slow to anger, trusting in God, and charitable towards others. Because they are concerned about others, they are heirs to God's reign on Earth and in heaven.
- *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.* Righteousness often refers to God's plan, and so we might read this Beatitude as, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for the fulfillment of God's plan, for they will eventually recognize that God's plan will triumph."
- *Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.* The merciful are those willing to pardon their neighbor. They are people dominated by love. They will find love in return, often from their neighbor, but especially from God.
- *Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God.* The pure of heart are loyal to God. Because they are conscious of God's presence in their lives, they "see" God in all things, and are especially conscious of God's reign here among us.
- *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.* The peacemakers are those whose love of God's plan and love of neighbor coincide to bring real peace to the world. They are children of God because their actions identify them as such. They will share in the future reign of God as God's true sons and daughters.

- *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* The righteous live in conformity with God's will. For this they will often face ridicule and persecution in the world, but their joy lies in the promise of an eternal reward.
- *Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* This more lengthy beatitude is based on the memory of the prophets who were reviled and persecuted, yet who found favor with God. The reward of the prophets is great, as shall be the reward of all those who withstand ridicule and persecution for Christ.

Jesus calls his followers to recognize that his new law builds upon the old law and fulfills it.

Jesus was true to the Law of Moses but his mission went beyond it, to the fulfillment of that Law.

- Where the old law forbade killing, the new law forbids any destruction of the dignity of another, whether by abusive language, actions, or words. Reconciliation is central to the message of the reign of God.
- Where the old law forbade adultery, the new law forbids any form of sinful or lustful glances or thoughts that destroy the dignity of others and makes them objects. The new law calls for personal sacrifice of some kind to overcome any sinful tendencies.

Precepts of the Church

The precepts of the Church are minimal Church laws that put into words those ideals to which we commit ourselves at our Baptism. They center mainly on the proper worship of God (see CCC, 2041–2043).

1. You shall attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation and rest from servile labor.
2. You shall confess your sins at least once a year if you are in a state of serious sin (*Code of Canon Law*, 984).
3. You shall receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist at least once a year during the Easter Season, which includes Easter Sunday to Trinity Sunday.
4. You shall observe the prescribed days of fasting and abstinence. (The days of fasting and abstinence will be addressed later in this book under the topic of the Church year.)
5. You shall help to provide for the needs of the Church.

- Where the old law allowed divorce with a written notice of divorce, the new law states that a divorced person commits adultery in a case of divorce and remarriage. (This will be explained at length in the chapter on the Sacrament of Marriage.)
- Where the old law stated that people should avoid false oaths, the new law states that no one should take an oath lightly. Honesty should be so much a part of a person's life that there should be no need of an oath to convince another of one's truthfulness.
- Where the old law allowed equal retribution for an offense, the new law calls for total forgiveness of those who offend us.
- Where the old law called for love of the people of one's nation and allowed for hatred of one's enemies, the new law calls for love of all: enemies, persecutors, and those who dislike us. The central law of Christianity is to love God and our neighbors as we love ourselves.

As Christians, we are called to share our goods with those in need. As such, Jesus warned his followers against seeking earthly rewards or praise for their actions. Almsgiving from one's need is seen as an act of virtue and a great source of blessing from God. But the person who gives for the sake of praise has already received his or her reward.

Christians are also called to pray with simplicity, perseverance, trust, and patience. Prayer should be done not for personal praise, but for the sake of honoring and praising God. Those who constantly ask and seek will be heard.

Christians are called to fast and perform works of penance. For Catholics, Friday becomes a special day of penance in union with Jesus, who suffered and died on a Friday. The season of Lent, which recalls the suffering and death of Jesus, is a special time for doing penance in union with the suffering Christ. In fasting, people should not seek the praise of others, but should fast in such a way that no one knows of the fasting. In this way, God will reward them.

Jesus calls Christians to a total attitude of trust. They should seek the things of God rather than the things of the world, and they should serve God, not the needs of the flesh, as their true master. Jesus, although he encourages people to use their talents, cautions them against being overly concerned about material needs. They should trust God.

The true Christian has no right to judge others. Because we cannot know the motives behind their actions, we have no ability to judge. We look only to the surface, and our judgment is often wrong and unfair. There are, however, occasions in our society when we are permitted and even have an obligation to judge the actions of another, such as serving on a jury.

Jesus warns that others will come with new laws and ways of acting, but we should avoid these. They will have an appeal about them, but their call must always be measured against the guidelines of the New Testament message. A person's basic way of thinking—his or her fundamental option—will be betrayed by his or her way of acting. Jesus tells us, "In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears

bad fruit....Thus you will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:17, 20).

To be a true and firm Christian in the world, we must take these words of Christ and put them into practice in our lives. Our call as a Christian is to be a light to the world, reflecting the presence of Christ through our words and actions.

4. Are some sins more serious than others?

The seriousness of a sin depends upon a person's basic attitude or fundamental option in life.

By basic attitude or fundamental option, we refer to the underlying stance a person continually takes toward life—in other words, a person's common way of thinking. When someone marries and dedicates his or her life to loving and respecting a spouse, that person has a basic attitude of love and respect. If someone marries and still feels free to date other people whenever he or she wishes, that person has a basic attitude that lacks love and respect for his or her spouse. A person who seriously strives to show love and respect for God's presence in life has a continual way of thinking that seeks to live out this love and respect. On the other hand, if a person chooses his or her own will over the will of God, that person's fundamental option is toward oneself and against God.

For the seriousness of a sin, we do not look to the individual actions only, but rather to the fundamental option that guides a person through life. We must remember,

however, that our actions flow from our basic attitude; they are signs of our fundamental option. In speaking of good and bad actions, Jesus said, "The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45).

A Vatican document on sexual ethics recognizes the idea of fundamental option, but it rightly warns that we should not go to the extreme of saying that an individual action, especially if it results from a series of lesser sinful actions, cannot change one's basic stance. The document states, "In reality, it is precisely the fundamental option which in the last resort defines a person's moral disposition. But it can be completely changed by particular acts, especially when...these have been prepared for by previous more superficial acts. Whatever the case, it is wrong to say that particular acts are not enough to constitute mortal sin" (*Vatican Declaration on Sexual Ethics*, 10). In the same way, we can say on some occasions that an individual act of love can totally change a person's fundamental way of thinking, from one that rejects God to one of totally loving God.

A serious or mortal sin is a fundamental option to seek one's own will and to reject a love relationship with God.

When a person consciously decides to follow his or her own will in life, this person rejects God and commits a serious sin. This is a continual way of thinking, a fundamental option to choose oneself over God. Just as

we cannot say that one act of love always makes a person a loving person (although there are cases where this does happen), we cannot say that one unloving act always makes a person an unloving person.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of the individual by means of "a grave violation of God's law" (CCC, 1855).

Social sin

Social sin concerns society, and it is a topic that has been addressed in many letters on social justice written by Popes over the last two centuries. Social sin includes oppression of certain groups of people because of their race or religion, or sins that oppress the poor, working class, or people living in countries who are deprived of basic freedoms (see CCC, 1869). In many cases, oppression demands a response, not through maiming or killing but through peaceful demonstrations or a call for justice.

When Oscar Romero was chosen as archbishop of El Salvador, he was suddenly confronted with the many injustices faced by his flock. He called upon the army to stop the bloodshed in El Salvador, pointing out that they were killing their own countrymen and women. In doing so he alienated many of the government officials and influential people who had once been his friends. As Romero's popularity and support grew, there were many death threats made against him. He said that they could kill him, but they would not kill his message. On March 24, 1980, Archbishop Romero was assassinated while celebrating the Eucharistic liturgy, but his work on behalf of the people of El Salvador eventually led to major change in that country.

Other martyrs followed. In 1980, on a dark road in El Salvador, a group of men raped and killed three nuns (Sisters Ita Ford, Maura Clark, and Dorothy Kazel) and a laywoman (Jean Donovan). Because of their dedicated work for the poor and oppressed, the four had become targets of some in the government. Nine years later, early one morning before daylight, armed men broke into the Jesuit residence at the University of Central America in San Salvador. They executed six Jesuits along with the community's cook and her daughter. As a result of these deaths, which brought international pressure on the country, the Salvadoran people eventually experienced some peace. But the struggle still continues in many countries of the world.

The lives of Archbishop Romero and the other martyrs of Central America underline the importance and danger of confronting social sin in the world.

A less serious or venial sin occurs when a person retains an attitude of loving God, yet at the same time commits an individual action that weakens or eventually could lead to the breakup of a love relationship with God.

A person could love and respect a marriage partner yet, at times, have some very hurtful arguments with that partner. If a person continues to prolong these arguments, he or she could be weakening the fundamental attitude of love and respect toward the partner. By seeking an early reconciliation, the partners can admit they have hurt each other while at the same time admitting that their love and respect remain. By delaying the reconciliation, the couple could seriously hurt their relationship.

When we speak of less serious sins, we realize that some sins happen quickly and are reconciled quickly. They do little harm to our fundamental option of loving God. Other less serious sins may seriously hurt our fundamental option; such would be the case if a person continuously steals more and more from a neighbor until he or she has completely broken the love relationship and disregarded any concern for his or her neighbor. The fundamental option that says, "I don't care" gradually takes over. Then the person is living with a fundamental option that could be seriously sinful (see CCC, 1863).

All of us must struggle with weakness in our lives, and we easily find ourselves performing those very

actions that we do not wish to do. Even Paul, the great Apostle to the Gentiles, complained about this weakness in himself when he wrote, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do....For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self" (Romans 7:19, 22). Although he recognizes these small faults within himself, Paul eventually proclaims that it is Christ who will save him and us from this power of sin.

5. What is necessary for a person to commit a serious sin?

In order for a person to commit a serious sin, the offense itself must be serious.

A serious offense against love of God, neighbor, or oneself is a serious sin. The Ten Commandments enable us to recognize the gravity of sin by listing those offenses considered serious. Paul reminds Christians of their call to perfection when he lists serious offenses against God in his letter to the Colossians. We read:

"Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator."

(Colossians 3:5–10)

Although these listings cover many sinful actions, they do not cover all sinful actions. They can, however, enable us to understand the types of actions considered seriously sinful.

For people to sin, they must freely and consciously choose actions they know to be sinful.

The actions mentioned above are sinful because they are contrary to the good order of God's creation. But if the person performing the action does not know it is wrong, then that person is not guilty of sin before God: "Mortal sin requires *full knowledge and complete consent*" (CCC, 1859). If a cannibal believes that the killing and eating of a young warrior is a form of worshiping his gods, the cannibal is not responsible for any personal sin in the eyes of God, even though the

matter is grave. In the same way, a person cannot commit a sin if a person does not know right from wrong. There is, however, an obligation to search out what is right. The Church serves as a guide in this search to understand right and wrong in God's creation.

A person who loses his or her mind is not responsible for his or her actions. Some of the things he or she does may be objectively wrong, but because he or she does not do these actions freely and consciously, they are not personally sinful actions. The person must also be physically capable of avoiding sin. A person sitting at a beach house with a broken leg cannot go running down the beach into the water to save a drowning child. There is a big difference between "I don't care," and "I am not physically able."