

Catholic

UPDATE

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Understanding Sin Today

When we sin, we fail ourselves and God. In order to rise above it,
we must open ourselves to the presence of redeeming love.

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Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been quite some time since my last confession. Sound familiar? The above confession reflects an understanding of the moral life and sin that prevailed among Roman Catholics for centuries. But lately in our culture, many changes have been occurring in the way we think about morality and sin. These changes have resulted in part from new ways of understanding what it means to be human. They also come from rediscovering old ideas that the Bible and Jesus taught about how we ought to relate to God and to one another.

SIN AS CRIME

There was a time when Catholics thought that living morally was mostly a matter of obeying the law—the divine law or the commandments of God, the ecclesial (Church) laws, or the natural laws expressed in the moral teaching of the Church.

Sin was like a crime, a transgression of the law. It was akin to breaking the speed limit on the highway. The law is what made an action sinful. Where there was no clear-cut law (no speed limit), there was no question of sin (go as fast as you want).

Catholic theology has since come to realize that the legal model for understanding the moral life and sin is deficient. For one thing, the demands of being a faithful follower of Jesus, of living according to the vision and values of the gospel, stretch

us further than what can be prescribed by law.

But laws cannot possibly cover all the decisions that we have to make.

The legal model of the moral life too easily makes moral living a matter of repeating the same old behaviors even though we—and our world—have changed. The legal model also tends to focus too much on the actions that we do as being sinful or not. Did I miss Mass? Did I cheat on an exam or on my taxes? Did I disobey my parents?

Laws by themselves don't address the important realities of the heart, such as our attitudes, intentions, and ways of seeing things. Jesus reminds us that what comes from the heart is what makes one sinful.

SIN'S NEW LOOK

A new look at the moral life has been informed by the biblical renewal in the Church and by some philosophical shifts within the Church and within our society.

For example, the biblical renewal has given us covenant, heart, and conversion—not law—as our primary moral concepts. Responsibility has replaced obligation as the primary characteristic of the moral life. Shifts in philosophy have emphasized the dignity of persons and the value of sharing life in society. Together, these shifts in theology and philosophy support a relational model of the moral life. The relational model emphasizes personal responsibility for protecting the bonds of peace and justice that sustain human relationships.

Contemporary theology admits that sin is very much with us and touches us more deeply than we realize. Greed, violence, corruption, poverty, hunger, sexism, and oppression are too prevalent to ignore.

Sin is just as basic a term in our Christian vocabulary today as it has been in the past. Its root sense means to be disconnected from God through the failure to love. In sin, we simply don't bother about anyone outside ourselves. Sin is first a matter of a selfish heart—a refusal to care—before it shows itself in actions. Because loving God and loving our neighbor are all tied together, sin will always be expressed in and through our relationships.



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SIN

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