

SIN AND THE FIRST WEEK IN OUR ACTUAL FAITH

After an introduction of the First Week in the dynamics of the Spiritual Exercises follows five existential dimensions to be reckoned with: lost feeling of sin, the biblical image of the human person, sin and guilt, personal sin and common evil, conversion and forgiveness. The article is transcribed in its original colloquial form as a conference given in Loyola, Spain in February this year.

Introduction: The First Week in the Dynamics of the Spiritual Exercises

Yesterday we covered the place of the First week in the whole of the Spiritual Exercises and the function of it in the dynamics of the Exercises. I will try to describe this once more in my own words.

The foundation can evoke in those who are doing the Exercises the feeling of owing God something and also the desire to a greater order of their life to meet the fidelity of God with their own fidelity. The aim of the First Week is to arrive at the merciful fidelity and love of God by going more deeply into your own infidelity. Awareness how great your infidelity is can give the love of God a deeper colour. That will be more intensified by growing understanding of the cosmic dimension of sin. The one who is doing the retreat experiences to be a part of a history of sin, a history bringing death, and he knows his solidarity with it. The aim of the First Week is the conversion of heart. The motive for that is most of all God's mercy given to us without our merit. The way of the First Week is: to arrive at God's fidelity by going more deeply into our own infidelity.

Forgiveness and mercy, God's love and fidelity, are central. What is important is not holding on to our infidelity, but admitting infidelity

deeply into ourselves, as the only way to understanding and experiencing God's fidelity. Therefore we have to admit infidelity and not disguise its elements. Altogether we must not forget that they are a "way". We don't occupy ourselves with it during the Spiritual Exercises to get stuck into it, but to deepen the experienced love of God and to give it an even more new real dimension.

Ignatius proposes this matter with the help of concepts like sin, hell and mercy. In the way he is doing that he certainly is determined by how people of his time experienced these concepts in their faith. Yesterday we were trying to understand by what way Ignatius will take us with him. Today we will deal with the fact that the concepts used by Ignatius are not self-evident for people of our time. What is the actual meaning of sin, evil, guilt, hell, contrition, conversion forgiveness? What is their place in our faith? In the description I gave of the characteristics of the First week I tried already to give an answer to this question. I will now go on with that answer. I don't have the pretension to give a brief complete theology of sin and evil. And even less to give a rough sketch of the development in the theological approach and the differences between the theology of the 16th and 21th century. What I will try is in a faithful reflection ask myself what is the meaning of sin, evil, guilt and forgiveness for me. By doing so I hope to penetrate deeper into the meaning of the First Week and to find points of recognition also for the one who is doing the Exercises today.

1. Lost Feeling of Sin

I think that we have to acknowledge that in the last decennia one has lost touch with the concepts of "sin" and "guilt". The word "sin" has for many people a connection with morality, not infrequently also restricted to sexual morality – all that is morally obliged or is just not allowed. Sin presupposes a religion that prescribes norms, a church that has a supervising authority and above all a God who is in charge and is judging and finding us guilty according to our obedience to his commandments. Sin is the violation of norms, the resistance to supervision and briefly the rebellion against authority. We have lost touch with such a understanding of sin.

But the core of what in Holy Scripture is the meaning of the concept of “sin” is the degradability of the relation with the life-giving God. Through the ages people discovered by trial and error that there are ways leading to life and others leading to death. The ways leading to life are called “commandments”, given by God to man to help him realise the wholeness of men and creation. We agree that God’s only desire is that every man comes fully to life.

Man is free to select ways that lead to life or to go other ways. Who goes other ways, cuts the ties with the God of life and the source of life. However much you are determined by your background and your history, you remain responsible for the way you chose. The words “sin” and “guilt” are used when you use your freedom in such a way that by your own acting the life of others and of the creation will be damaged.

When you do misuse your freedom, there is talk of guilt. This guilt you can feel. There is however a difference between morbid and hearing feeling of guilt. Healing feelings invite you to revise your conduct. There is talk of morbid feelings of guilt, when there is no real guilt regarding acts or events.

2. The Biblical Image of Man: Grace – Freedom – Guilt

I think that is good, before we follow this way of thinking, to see first what the faithful biblical description of human existence is. In the Bible we find the starting-point of a faithful vision on human existence in which questions are treated regarding grace, freedom and guilt. Especially the beginning of the book Genesis on creation, paradise and fall wants to affirm something not only about God himself, but the very first question is: who is man? That word about man has to be confronted all over again with the actual experience of existence and the self-understanding of man, in the concrete world in which he realises himself.

How does man appear in the oldest stories of creation? In the totality of his existence living out of the creative word of God; nevertheless free and autonomous, responsible for the existence and development of his word: but with a strong craving to refuse to give the right answer to God’s creative word, to reject God’s plan for creation and welfare of man and world. In short: the original election of man for the living communion

with God and the human refusal to accept this gift.

Paradise is the ideal of world without sin, the real life in the friendship and presence of God. In this world sin is situated not as breach of law, sin doesn't have a juridical meaning in the first place, but it is a rebellion against God, refusal to be with God, a human possibility to be against God. Such is the situation from the first beginning and therefore in principle: welfare and calamity, preferential love and unwillingness to accept.

In the story of the fall the inevitable connection and solidarity of all men in evil is portrayed. This story is not trying to give an explanation for the mysterious origin of evil. When we look at Adam, who in the language of Bible is the man of all times, we see in the first place what happens now, without explanation but very real. Man, modelled out of the dust of earth, that man is free, he gives names to his world; he receives another human being and there is love and recognition, and then, in this living together, evil happens. Evil comes into the world not

from God, but from man himself. From man to man evil happens, men are pulling each other along and are together responsible. "Original sin" has become the word for this solidarity in evil. Everybody has his place in that event. We all have dirty hands.

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In the faithful vision on human existence we don't have a description of historical facts, once happened, but it is like a constantly returning dynamics – as a spiral – in this human existence; God remains the one who is creative present, he remains faithful to himself, whatever happens. The frame-work of

the whole event remains the offered love, communion, relation. Therefore to harm this relation or even breaking off is not the last word. New acceptance is possible. Also the sinner does not fall out of God's hand. When he turns again to God, there is forgiveness.

3. Sin and Guilt

In the First Week the concept of sin is dominantly present. With the help of the biblical description of man we can also today understand what sin really is. Every sin is a form of being self-satisfied, by which man tries to bring about his own happiness instead of receiving it from God. It is an attempt to make yourself happy; but that is impossible and it is sin to even try it. The deepest values in human life cannot be produced: they can only be received. God is the only one who can give the ultimate development and inner peace, and man who is trying to produce these values on his own, is doomed to fail. We call it sin in this case.

We can consider sin on two levels. The first level is the level of our concrete actions like speaking ill, deceiving, stealing etc. These concrete actions however are the consequence of what is happening on a deeper level, where we protect ourselves from the love of God. On the concrete level we say that all sin is an attempt to fill a gap in our life; on the deeper level however we have to say that this gap is not necessary, because God is mighty enough to fill our heart. What really is happening is that we don't allow God to be the God of our life. By this refusal man is destroying his own existence. For God is the foundation of our being. Sin is indeed self-destruction.

It is good to consider sin not only a moral problem – our concrete actions– but also as a deeper distortion: being chained to the superficial and to appearance, so that one is not open for what is deeper in us. When love does not reach the deepest core of our being, the outside world becomes a threat. My situation and people around me don't give me enough space. I experience them as oppressing, as an estrangement. And that not only because they are bad in themselves, but because something deep in my heart is not all right. There lies the real root of evil. Because the world is a threat to me, I have to fight to keep upright and in that struggle I am committing many mistakes. That are the concrete sins.

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estranged from myself. It is clear that in that way I not only am harming myself, but I am also damaging my relation with others. There is a fundamental connection between our relations with each other and our relation with God. When our relation with God is disturbed, then also the relations with our fellow human beings will be disordered.

The grown-up Christian must leave behind all narrow-minded concern for his own little sins, violations of rules. He must examine himself on a much deeper level to discover how much he lacks love in his heart. This lack of love can also become fixed forms in structures and institutions and so become anonymous in a dangerous way, as a result of the fact that the deficit of love is perpetuated in structures for which nobody as an individual is responsible.

4. Personal Sin and Common Evil

That brings us to a number of conclusions regarding sin. Sin is therefore for us particularly a relational concept. You are not offending things or norms, but your sin is against people. Sin is the fracture of relations with others. The criterion for what is sin and what not, is determined by relation. But here it becomes concrete that also your relation with God is harmed. Yes, that is the root, although it is a risk to speak about cause and consequence. And finally your sin is not in the least also against yourself. In sin you are not yourself. You are guided more by menace and fear than by love. In love there is no fear. Love is the opposite of sin.

The place where this is experienced is the deepest core of the human person, is in his conscience. That is the contact-point, where the relation with God makes me feel or see what this relation is demanding from me. God is committing himself to man in and through conscience. There man is alone with God, but the fidelity to your conscience is at the same time the bond with other people in looking for what we have to do together.

Because sin has to do with the relations between men there is also something like a history of sin. What I am doing or doing wrong affects other people, has consequence for others. By I am doing I bring others into a certain situation. That situation determines others. It is true, they are not fully determined, they keep their free choice. And yet there is in our world by a chain of separate personal acts a growing common

situation. Man is born into that situation of the world by birth, he inherits that situation, whether he wants that or not. The situation of world becomes concrete for him in the individual situation in which he is born and that determines the circumstances of his life. What he is inheriting and where he is landing situates his choice. The personal choice remains his choice. He occupies his position in the history of sin by the personal choice, he is making in freedom. So there is a first sin, but in the dynamic view of the world this sin is rather the first in a series than the cause of all that follows. Although in a certain way also is true. Adam is rather “the man” than “the first man”.

Sin is therefore not only an act that concerns me in a strict personal sense. Because there is a history of sin, there is also common evil. Sin not only plays a role in small-scale relations, but we must see that many others are involved. Sin and evil can determine the situation in our world more and more. Sin can also accept the character of an act of complicity. In a concrete historical situation you are making the choice to take part in that situation, to give your contribution.

We have to learn to look and to acknowledge – that is the meditation on sin – in which social positions, in what system of relations we are woven, already before our birth, as man or woman, as white Westerner, as belonging to a certain social class etc. As it is increasingly recognised in the actual reflection of faith, You do not find the sinfulness of the world only in your personal sins, but also in the social evil. The sinfulness that has become fixed in the violent relations between groups, in misuse of power and prejudices forms the historical-concrete continuation of what we call in classic theology “original sin”. To express contrition regarding this universal social evil means to acknowledge the blindness and frustrations. You are yourself always part of a network of ambiguous misuse of power that you cannot avoid and of abuses in which you are born, as individual and as a group. You don't participate in an ideal society. That is a fact. You did not make your own free choice, you have grown up in it. Hence we hear very often the comment: but we are not an accomplice in all things! Why are we responsible for what we did not desire?

When we look at sin in this way a meditation on sin is a reflection on complicity by omission. The deepest sin is indeed not an act of the will:

I want to do evil, but an act of unwillings: I don't care about that, that is not my cup of tea. I don't want to look, to be touched. I only look for the things that are not frustrating, not demanding more than possible is for me. I omit to look at misery, at powerlessness, at utopian dreams, because that world disturb me in my balance that I have found with difficulty. I hold on to my position.

That also sheds a light on hell. Hell is not any longer a fire, a subterranean place, the underworld. Hell is a social fact, a permanent threat in our relations. Hell is the fixation of the state of affairs: everything must remain like it is now, you have to resign. Hell ends in cynicism. This fixation is the opposite of indifference. We are called to a reorientation of our concerns and of our attention: with whom do we want to associate and to whom do we want to look? That is a conversion, a change of attitude.

Here we must keep in mind the nuance. We must for instance be careful to speak about collective guilt. Collectivity can become a new form of doom-thinking which is not the alternative for a too extreme privatisation. Regarding sin there is always a personal contribution to the evil powers, which are oppressing us. Therefore it would not be enough to restrict sin to just large-scale, structural sin. In the Bible these two, personal and structural sin, are more connected with each other than in the tradition of the Church.

So hell is not only our resignation in the given situation, hell we do to each other; it is at the same time a reference to the possibility to loose or to refuse personally and permanently the deepest relation with God, which makes us what we are. It is something like eternal sin. God, love, goodness, communion does not have hold anymore over somebody. And yet man is created for all this. It is the total disruption: sin in its totality. The definitive confinement in yourself: no contact with anybody or with God.

Guilt is what remains after sin. It is the aftertaste. Guilt as the consequence of sin settles very deeply in man and it is very often the last what he will and can let go. He would like to do that, but it captures him. Many people are suffering pretty much from guilt. When guilt is removed from you, that is perhaps the deepest liberation a man can receive.

5. Conversion and Forgiveness

If sin is a choice we make in a freedom which is at least relative, we can also make another choice. Conversion is possible. Contrition is the desire to be converted and to stick no longer in sin and evil. Also contrition is a grace, man may receive it. You cannot “make” it and when that nevertheless happens, such a “made” contrition you can not keep alive. Real contrition doesn’t pull down, but gives perspective. Real contrition is something different from remorse or disappointment about yourself. You do not receive it by looking in the mirror, but by confronting your acting with the voice of your conscience, where you can hear what the relation with God is demanding. Real contrition can become the gate to forgiveness.

Man is always more than his guilt. That brings us in the neighbourhood of that miracle that we can call “forgiveness”. Forgiveness does not mean in the first place: let’s forget it, we don’t speak about it any longer. That is not real. Because our emotional life doesn’t accept it in the long run. Somebody who is forgiving me says to me not the first place that he will be merciful for me; but he gives me the feeling: there is more in you than is visible for the moment. Forgiveness neither is: you are good for nothing, but nevertheless you are accepted in grace. Faith in forgiveness means: to be conscious and experience that you are not pinned down to your weak points, but that a new appeal is made of what is good in you.

Who dares to believe in forgiveness will gradually also learn to accept himself, not in spite of but with his deficits. And you will become milder and more patient with others. Out of the deep experience that you are accepted and found again. The surprise will gain bit by ascendancy over all other, also bitter experiences. The feeling of guilt can bring you somewhere.

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is an incredible precious possibility that God has laid into our hands. It is the only way out of that deadly cycle of repaying evil with evil. Without that opening we remain once and for all prisoners of our past. Forgiveness prevents that what happened will grow in us as bitterness. Forgiveness creates the possibility to grow out into something new.

Forgiveness can become a total new experience of God. The real God is known in his forgiveness. Our infidelity reveals God's fidelity. The heart of the good news is that our God is a forgiving God. Sin and guilt don't frighten God, they don't stop him, but they are a way to God. If we place the sacrament of forgiveness in this context, it is not a juridical acquittal but a sacrament of the encounter with God.

The dynamics of grace, freedom and guilt brings us finally back to God who is giving life and who forgives. That is the all-embracing mystery that supports us. We are allowed to be happy sinners.

Conclusion

To conclude I am returning to the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises. I characterised that Week at the beginning of my talk with my own words and I let me guide in my wording by our actual faith. In the Exercises of the First week the concept of sin is an important issue I tried to clearly how we live today with this concept and in what context it has a meaning for us. On the one hand there is a clear difference between the way Ignatius is speaking about sin and the way we come to that. On the other hand just our actual faithful experience and interpretation of human existence offers more than one possibility to do justice to the real intention of Ignatius with the First Week also today.

Ignatius proposes to whom is doing the Exercises to look at the negative side of his life and to consider guilt and sin and their consequences. The First Week is about a conversion of the heart. It belongs to the process of the First Week that the sense of guilt, which for many people at first is limited to a hurt feeling of self-respect, is broadened to a relational experience: I am guilty towards you, towards concrete people, towards God and his creation.

But this leads to an exclamation of wonder, with intense feeling. Nevertheless may there, God keeps me alive. This NEVERTHELESS

supports also for Ignatius the whole First Week. Also today and for us the First Week is an indispensable way to a deeper and purer life with God.

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Loyola February 20th, 2004.

SYNTHESIS

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Introduction: the First Week in the Dynamics of the Spiritual Exercises.

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The word "sin" has for many people a connection with morality. It presupposes a religion that prescribes norms, a church that has supervising authority and above all a God who is in charge and judging. We have lost touch with such an understanding of sin. But the core of what in Holy Scripture is the meaning of the concept of "sin" is the degradability of the relation with the life-giving God. It is possible to cut the ties with the God of life. You can use your freedom in such a way that by your acting the life of others will be damaged.

2. The Biblical Image of Man: Grace – Freedom – Guilt

Man in the totality of his existence is living out of the creative word of God, originally elected to the living communion with God; nevertheless he is free and autonomous, responsible; but with a strong craving to refuse to give the right answer to God's creative word. Sin does not have a juridical meaning in the first place, but it is refusal to be with God. Evil comes into the world not from God, but from man himself. There is a solidarity of all men in evil. But God remains faithful to himself. There remains the offered communion. New acceptance is possible. When one turns again to God, there is forgiveness.

3. Sin and Guilt

Sin has two levels: our concrete actions that are an attempt to fill a gap in our life and a deeper level where we don't allow God to be God of our life. So sin is not only a moral problem – our concrete actions – but also a deeper distortion. Sin is the disintegration of relations. Estranged from God, I am also estranged from myself and damaging my relation with others. The grown-up Christian must leave behind all narrow-minded concern for his own little ins as violation of rules. He must examine himself on a deeper level. Every sin harms my fellow human being. We are responsible for each other.

4. Personal Sin and Common Evil

Sin is particularly a relational concept. The place where this is experienced is our conscience. There is alone with God, but the fidelity to your conscience is at the same time the bond with other people. Sin not only concerns me in a strict personal sense, but there is also common evil, because there is something like a history of sin. I am part of this history and of this historical-concrete continuation of "original sin". Hell is a reference to the possibility to loose or to refuse personally and permanently the relation with God. Guilt is what remains after sin.

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Conversion is possible. Contrition is the desire to be converted. Real contrition can become the gate to forgiveness: the deep experience that

you are accepted and found again This can become a total new experience of God. Our infidelity reveals God's fidelity. The heart of the good news is that our God is a forgiving God. Sin and guilt become a way to God. We are allowed to be happy sinners.

Conclusion

Our actual faith offers the possibility to do justice to the intention of the First Week. Also today the First Week is a way to a deeper and purer life with God.

For reflection and sharing: is this also your faith? Do you recognize my presentation?