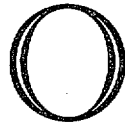


THE SINNER FINDS GOD

By GEORGE CROFT

UR LORD had more time for sinners than he did for the just. 'I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners', he said;¹ and again, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. It was not the pharisee, with all his tithes and legal righteousness, but the tax collector he despised 'who went down from his prayers in the temple at rights with God'.²

Christian reflection has returned again and again to these teachings of our Lord. We may recall how both in Christ's own visible presence on earth, and in the invisible workings of his Spirit, sinners have found grace and life and saintliness from out of their sins. It is clear that comfortable self-righteousness is condemned by our Lord. Christians have come to loathe the smugness of the pharisee, not only in others but also in themselves. One way and another, the pharisee in us christians, the interior task-master or super-ego as it has been called,³ has been exposed in its true colours. Moreover one considerable element of renewal which is taking place within the Church in our own day, on a scale as wide as the mystical body itself, is the rejection of pharisaic remains, the dead wood of ideas and practices which were once relevant and profitable, which may still appear good and useful, but are no longer alive. One such practice was to insist on sacramental confession before communion, irrespective of whether the person was conscious of having committed serious sin or not; which was useful enough when frequent communion was actively discouraged.

Yet the rejection of this pharisaism, the acceptance of the fact that we are sinners and in dire need of God's mercy, does not free a man from temptation, or automatically lead him into security about salvation. It can lead him to attempt to institutionalize, either for himself personally, or for the Church as a whole, his revulsion for smugness in some form of what can be called anti-pharisaism. Having observed that the sinful tax collector went down from the temple at rights with God, and having seen how sinners

¹ Mt 9, 13.

² Lk 18, 14.

³ Cf THE WAY, 3 (July 1963), pp 208-12.

have found God's merciful love, and having perhaps himself also been brought through and out of his own sinfulness to experience the need for salvation as never before, the christian may expose himself to a variety of new temptations. In principle, these temptations are suggested automatisations of divine mercy, in the same way as confession tended to be considered as an automatic purification for communion. For example, a person may be drawn to admit in the presence of all, and usually with a little defiance, that he has been a sinner; and that he is somehow content with this acknowledgement. He prefers this to the self-righteousness of the pharisee and does not hesitate to parade this fact. This tendency has been aptly named the 'pharisaism of the publican'.¹ Alternatively, he may be tempted to generalise from his own experience or that of others, and declare that it is *through* sin rather than *from* sin² that every man is called to God: an attitude akin to what has been called the 'mystique of sin'. It has not infrequently been portrayed in literature – the novels of Grahame Green and François Mauriac come readily to mind; and it finds its way, from time to time, into the attitudes of the confessor and pastor. It is worth noting here that our Lord's own pastoral technique, whilst refraining from condemnation – 'neither do I condemn thee', was to insist on the *fact* of liberation from sin, implicitly contained in the command, 'sin no more'.³ We are not directed to pray to be delivered *in* evil, but from evil. Christ 'was made sin for us'⁴ in order that we might become sinless; which is not at all the same as saying that we cannot be freed by the redemptive action of Christ except in the context of being held fast in our sin. This would be to deny not only the singular privilege of our Lady, but also the fact that the Church honours many of her children as saints, as models of christian conduct, because they have, in the call of Christ, lived singularly sinless lives. It is true that she also honours many saintly penitents: but this is for the sake of stressing the merciful love of God, which is entirely gratuitous and not a reward given to the sinless; and because in the strength of grace, these penitents have followed the call to 'sin no more'.

Both these tendencies are symptomatic of a lack of balance – the balance of christian hope, which is precisely what the pharisee lacked. They are two forms of apparent, and to some degree socially

¹ Monden, L., *Sin, Liberty, Law* (London, 1966), p 163.

² This distinction is important as having reference to the *experience* of the operation of the Principle of Double Effect. ³ Jn 8, 10. ⁴ 2 Cor 5, 21.

visible, conversion; yet at the same time we are left in doubt whether there has been the interior change of heart, which alone gives substance to exterior conversion. They are conversion substitutes: 'these people honour me with their lips while their hearts are far from me'.¹ They are still *in* their sins, not freed from them.

Yet our Lord came to save sinners. When we lay aside the twists of our human consciousness, by which we may be led falsely to disclaim sin in us, as did the pharisee, or falsely to proclaim it in the ways suggested above, we are faced with the inescapable fact that sinners were our Lord's special concern. Like the father with his prodigal son, God permitted Israel's 'waywardness of old' in order that his chosen people might experience what it meant to be separated from their Father, and thus recognise afresh their need of him. So too, our Lord's consciousness that he had come to save the lost sheep is reflected in knowledge of him as saviour, particularly in the moment when the sinner experiences separation from God and the need of his love and mercy. This moment of grace and of conversion each one of us has experienced for himself – not once, but many times; so that even when we cry 'out of the depths', our seeking is fraught with thanksgiving as we remember his past mercies. The more immediate the experience, the greater the 'feeling' of repentance; and here is the temptation to self-dramatizations, wherever this interior knowledge is outwardly expressed. There is a call to make manifest the everlasting love of God, even as there is an inner drive to acknowledge our sins for what they are. But that inward moment, in which we appear as beggars before the Lord, belongs to the divine almsgiving, which is so secret that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing. We can never say that it is in my sin, because of my sin, that I found mercy. Our reflection on the moment does not re-create it; it simply gives us cause for thanksgiving and hope. It is retrospective.

When St Paul speaks of his own conversion from out of his sins, he says, retrospectively: 'However great the number of sins committed, grace was even greater'.² Yet in sharing this knowledge with his converts, he also says, prospectively: 'Does it follow that we should remain in sin so as to let grace have greater scope? Of course not.'³ Similarly, our Lord's defence and acceptance of the woman taken in adultery was for the present and the past: 'Neither do I condemn thee'. For the future he says: 'Go and sin no more'.

¹ Isai 29, 13.

² Rom 5 21.

³ Rom 6, 1.

The fine point of the danger in expressing or dramatizing the divine mercy personally received by oneself or another is that this time focus, the moment of the present, may be lost thereby. It is useful here to compare the words of our Lord to the woman who has sinned – ‘Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more’, with the Baptist’s words to the pharisees: ‘You brood of vipers Bear fruits that befit repentance’.¹ It is as though he had said: ‘I do not praise you for the past and present; go and do good works’.

We have said that the two tendencies which we have called the pharisaism of the publican and the mystique of sin are posturations of the true conversion. Ultimately, they can be extreme examples of a human being attempting to lay hold of divine justice and divine mercy, leading him away from hope, and thereby dissuading him from sacramental confession. For it is clear that if guilt is released by a public confession of sinfulness, or if God’s mercy depends on a man’s realising his sinful condition to the extent that there is no call for him to shake it off, then he will certainly not experience any need for the practice of sacramental penance.

In these days, when the Church is calling for ‘the rites and formulas for the sacrament of penance to be revised, so that they give more luminous expression both to the nature and effect of the sacrament’,² there may be a danger that, in our attempts to find new and more meaningful outward or social expressions, we obscure the ‘private moment’ and leave the sinner in his sin, rather than help him to find his way out of it. In this connection, it is worthwhile considering some contemporary secular analogues of possible external forms of sacramental penance, in order to see if anything can be learned from them.

In some therapeutic institutions for the treatment of psychological disorders, new experiments are taking place. In the past there has been an exclusive emphasis on diagnosis by doctors of the disorders of individuals and individual treatment by a doctor, and only incidental dealings between the patients themselves. Today, therapeutic communities are being established. The idea behind the therapeutic community is this: patients and doctors together help a person to give open expression to his besetting difficulty, in the hope that the act of expression or formulation will help in the overcoming of the difficulty. So there are regular group meetings, even more than once a day, of doctors, nurses and patients

¹ Lk 3, 2-8.

² *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 72.

together. Discussion is initiated by the doctors, but then it is allowed to take its own course. It will concern the individual needs of the patients present, their own disorders and how they and others see these disorders, and the steps taken to remedy them.

It need hardly be said that in these community meetings there is a real openness about all aspects of personal difficulties, and, conversationally, the atmosphere is usually one of the greatest frankness. There is also a climate of mutual acceptance. At the same time, however, there is the danger of pressure toward openness, which does not exist in the traditional one patient – one doctor relationship: pressure which comes from the group as a whole – ‘tell us about your problems’, when, perhaps the individual has no wish to speak about his problems, because he thinks that they are too personal in a certain way. Again, in the group situation, incidents do arise which would not have occurred if the two patients had not been thrown together and presented with the occasion of forming a relationship arising out of having the same sort of disorder-problem, and a decision to try and solve it between them. There are other difficulties, as well, which make the more sober and critical psychiatric opinion rather chary of indiscriminate group therapy. It recognises, for instance, that in these experiments it is the more voluble who tend to hold the floor, whereas the reticent character scarcely says a word: and it is extremely difficult to verify whether the results really are therapeutic when they are followed up carefully.

These experiments obviously involve elements of what may be called secular group-confession; and the hope is that the experience will lead to a change of life, a kind of spontaneous remission consequent on the expression of experienced disorder. But again it is being recognised that persons who could profit from group dealings concerning their own disorder are not necessarily helped by learning of the disorders of another. The success, say, of Alcoholics Anonymous is made possible through the fact that all are labouring under the same difficulty. Where there is a variety of disorders, as happens in some of these group experiments, there is a real danger of positive teaching and learning of disorder, as well as, on the credit side, a growth in understanding of one's own difficulties and disorders. There is considerable difficulty, as well, in safeguarding the most fundamental thing of all, the

³ Cf Foulkes, S. and Anthony, E., *Group Psychotherapy* (London, 1951), pp 94-5.

inviolability of the individual conscience: the avoidance of coercion towards manifesting personal problems and disorders.

All this is, in a strange way, reminiscent of the history of the practice of sacramental penance as one reads it, say, in the work of Fr Poschmann; though the primary purpose of public penance, which meant the implicit, if not the explicit, admission of grave sin, was not the therapeutic value of the admission nor even the humiliation of the penitent, but to enlist the support of the faithful on his behalf. 'In addition to their intercession, the faithful had a practical part to play in the emendation of the penitent; they kept watch on the progress of his conversion, reported on it to the bishop, and themselves admonished him. In this context, there is an instructive sermon of St Augustine (En. in Ps. 61, 23) in which he brings a soothsayer (*mathematicus*), who had been admitted to penance, before the congregation and recommends him to their prayers, but also to their supervision'.¹ Forms of public confession or public penance which are not carefully structured according to these principles could well encounter the same difficulties as those conducting therapeutic community experiments: difficulties which the Church herself faced many centuries ago.

At the same time, there does seem to be some justification from contemporary secular experience for the claim that there is help to be given and received by people who are afflicted in some way with regard to individual failings. 'Alcoholics Anonymous' is one case in point; and socialisation problems seems to be another. It has been found that when patients are grouped who all experience difficulties in socialization, they can fruitfully help each other, where the difficulty is a shared and rather isolated one. But any kind of generalized expression of difficulties, that is to say, the putting together of all manner of disturbed persons, in the hope that, by expressing socially what they experience, they will all benefit from it, is a much more doubtful procedure. What evidence is available rather suggests that they do not.

In making this comparison between possible forms of the sacramental practice of penance and these community experiments, we must bear in mind that psychiatric experience concerns relatively severely disordered persons, whereas the sacrament of penance is meant for all. However, issues are raised by contemporary psychiatric practice which would be relevant if the outward form of the

¹ Poschmann, B., *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick* (London, 1964), p 87.

sacrament were to receive such social modification. So that whilst it is possible that the false socializations of conversion which we examined in the earlier part of this article, whether it be pharisaism, the 'pharisaism of the publican' or the 'mystique of sin' tendency, might be countered by carefully structured social expressions of penitence, much thought is required before embarking on experimentation in this direction.

What has endured, and what is still accepted as universally valid, is the ancient practice of private confession as a therapeutic measure in the direction of souls, granted the spiritual knowledge and rectitude of the director. As Fr Poschmann shows, in this function priests did not limit themselves to receiving their penitent's confessions, and giving them spiritual instruction; they also assisted the efforts of the sinner to obtain forgiveness from God by their constant prayer and personal works of penance.¹ Here is a form of participation and sharing which is bound to be fruitful whether in the immediate sacramental context or no. And it certainly makes good sense of the earnest recommendation made to priests by the Fathers of the Council concerning the 'repeated sacramental act of penance'.

For this sacrament, prepared for by a daily examination of conscience, greatly fosters the necessary turning of heart toward the love of the Father of Mercies.²

¹ Ibid., pp 120-21.

² *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 18.