

# IGNATIUS' MEDITATIONS ON SIN

## From Guilt to Gratitude

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THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES FORM PART of a theological and cultural framework that differs considerably from those that are familiar to us today. From this unsurprising truth it does not follow that the teaching formulated in the time of Ignatius has lost either its interest or its relevance. However, the deepest truths of Ignatius' meditations now come to us in a language and with a frame of reference to which we are no longer accustomed. This disjunction affects, among others, the reflections on *sin* that come in the First Week of the Exercises.

Clearly it would be a pity if we were so distracted by anachronisms—which are, on the whole, incidental and secondary—that we were to lose sight of the truly important aspects of the *Spiritual Exercises*, or if an insistence on textual fidelity were to prevent us from discovering the inner richness and validity of Ignatius' words. In either case, the experience that Ignatius had of the reality of sin would remain hidden and we would never arrive at a knowledge of its true value.

In what follows I shall first try to pinpoint those aspects of the Exercises that are most at variance with today's outlook, and which should not be stressed—especially since I would argue that they are also foreign to the content of Revelation. Next, I shall briefly consider some other problems that arise today in connection with sin, quite apart from the Spiritual Exercises. Then I shall underline what I consider the most fundamental and important lessons that can be drawn from the meditations on sin. Finally, I will suggest some lines of thought based on recent theological developments which may offer a positive contribution when presenting the subject of sin.

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***‘The First Sin, Which Was that of the Angels’ (Exx 50)***

Today we are much more wary than earlier generations of religious teaching that is not to be found in Revelation. While giving an honest interpretation of such material, we want to avoid introducing elements into the word of God that are not already there. And we also find it difficult to partake in opinions that are foreign to our own human experience; the culture of our historical period can play havoc with ideas that seemed quite logical and acceptable in another epoch. On both counts—theological and subjective—problems arise in connection with the meditations on sin in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Any biblical student is well aware that ‘angelology’, the branch of theology dealing with the angels, is not one that has been growing and developing over recent years. This fact suggests that scholars feel a certain reluctance about committing themselves to the study of ‘spirits’. Much of the available material on the existence, function and hierarchical position of angels comes from non-scriptural or secular sources; and similar beings appear both in the most ancient and



*The Fall of the Rebel Angels, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder*

primitive religious traditions and in the Old and New Testaments.<sup>1</sup> Contact with the religious thought of the Babylonians, along with the Assyrian invasions, undoubtedly greatly influenced Jewish ideas on the existence of angels—conceived as inferior to God but greatly superior to humans. But although the biblical authors used a framework of good and bad spirits common to other cultures, they insisted on a strongly monotheistic interpretation. They underlined both the transcendence of God in relation to any other reality, and God's overall providence for creation in using spirits to carry out God's plans and to overcome obstacles to those plans.

As tends to happen when a phenomenon is not visible, the human imagination has supplied a whole series of angelic features—not completely without basis, but with little or no relation to reality. Thus, given that angels are messengers of God and have to travel from place to place, they are supposed to possess wings to improve their speed. Similarly, since they are thought to have varied functions, it is presumed that some hierarchical differentiation between them must exist. But these are purely anthropomorphic elaborations, where no criterion exists to distinguish what should be regarded as dogma from what is best categorized as myth. In any case, 'the limited forms of human expression cause difficulty when one wishes to talk seriously about the role of angels'.<sup>2</sup> This observation should serve as a warning both against myth-making and against raising exaggerated objections to talking about angels at all: some recent theological dictionaries omit all reference to the topic.

But problems of understanding are at their most acute when there is talk of 'the sin of the angels'. There is a long tradition in the Church that 'devils' are angels who refused to obey God, and were condemned to eternal punishment. This theory was an attempt to explain the existence of evil in the world: given that the origin of evil could not be found in the will of the Creator, it was thought that the malice of these

<sup>1</sup> Compare Henri Cazelle, 'Fondements bibliques de la théologie des anges', *Revue Thomiste*, 90 (1988), 181–193. There is a good commentary on the 'sin' meditations of the Spiritual Exercises in Santiago Arzubialde, *Ejercicios espirituales de S. Ignacio: historia y análisis* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1991), 125–170.

<sup>2</sup> German Episcopal Conference, *Catholic Catechism for Adults* (Spanish translation published by BAC: Madrid, 1988, 115). This text also states: 'Undoubtedly the Sacred Scriptures are very imprecise when teaching about angels and use a mythological language in accordance with the mentality prevalent at that time' (114–115).

creatures was responsible for human sin. Their most malign influence lay in the lying seduction by which they separated human beings from obedience and submission to our origin and foundation. The new *Catechism* includes this opinion (§§391–393),<sup>3</sup> but it has never had a firm foundation. It clearly relies on elements from the apocryphal writings, which vary considerably in content and reflect a diversity of traditions.<sup>4</sup> Any reasonably well-educated person may justifiably feel a reaction of rejection, if a meditation is offered based on something that has so little biblical foundation.

### **‘On the Sin of Adam and Eve’ (Exx 51)**

It is well known that the sin of Adam cannot be understood in a literal way. From the first pages of the book of Genesis, what is envisaged is God’s plan for the whole of humanity. These ancient tales are not to be approached from the perspective of scientific and historical fact concerning the origin and development of human life. The Bible is neither a scientific treatise nor a historical synthesis; it cannot supply answers to today’s questions about our beginnings.

The account of creation given in Genesis is a literary exercise which ties itself to no particular scientific theory, but rather tries to communicate a theological truth: God is present at the very start of all history and displays creative kindness so that whatever exists may be seen to have a relationship with God as its source. This account requires faith in a creator who is at work in all the multiple interventions that human beings make in history and that scientists may discuss.

What the believer adds to such discussion is that, at the dawn of that first beginning, there is to be found not some simple chance but a love that wanted to set in motion both the world in which we live and many other unknown worlds about which we are still ignorant. Such a belief cannot be negated by any scientific theory; nor does this belief negate any of the possible hypotheses that science may envisage. It can,

<sup>3</sup> However, it is significant that, in the recent synopsis of the *Catechism*, this account was omitted, perhaps because of the criticism that greeted its inclusion in the official text, or, at least, because it is no longer considered of great importance.

<sup>4</sup> A full account is given by Mathias Delcor, ‘Le mythe de la chute des anges et de l’origine des géants comme explication du mal dans le monde, dans l’apocalyptique juive. Histoire des traditions’, *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions*, 190 (1976), 3–53.



The Fall of Adam and Eve, by Michelangelo

however, give any explanation greater coherence. 'In the beginning ... God created the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1:1) is the great truth which recalls the believer to his or her religious roots.

Nevertheless, the troubling question remains: if we have been born out of an act of love, why is it that life on this earth is so linked to sin? The early pages of the book of Genesis provide an account which explains our present human situation as the consequence of one particular sin. There was a test, and disobedience to a divine law brought about the punishment of our mortality. We now suffer the consequences of not having wanted to remain faithful and obedient to God's command. Even if God had compassion on our failure, and once more offered us friendship, it seems as though God does so now with less generosity than at the moment of creation. It is as if the Creator's original dream had been destroyed by human malice, and God had to accept a change of plan.

The account just given has been prevalent in a great deal of Christian catechetical teaching, but there is no reason why it should be presented as the only, nor indeed the most convincing and acceptable, explanation. Theology today does not accept the biblical teaching on the earthly paradise as a historical or scientific account of the beginning of the world and of life.<sup>5</sup> These passages have to be treated as an

<sup>5</sup> For example, Raymund Schwager, *Banished from Eden: Original Sin and Evolutionary Theory in the Drama of Salvation*, translated by James G. Williams (Leominster: Gracewing and Inigo, 2006). (The German original was published in 1997.)

attempt to understand better in symbolic and mythical language the existence of human life.

**'The ... Particular Sin of Any One' (Exx 52)**

The last point of the meditation—on an individual 'who for one mortal sin is gone to Hell'—is nowadays quite incomprehensible. Possibly in other historical periods this thought was a source of scruples and tortured imaginings, a constant threat that could hardly be borne. But today it is simply unthinkable that the 'Infinite Goodness', to which Ignatius refers in this very paragraph, could be waiting for some first transgression for which to inflict eternal punishment.

It is possible that even when Ignatius was working on the first version of his *Exercises* this difficulty was felt. In the first Latin translation—which may have been made by the saint himself, or at least had his approval—a 'perhaps' (*forte*) has been added, giving, 'who perhaps has gone to Hell', thus softening the remark. And when André des Freux (known as 'Frusius', the Latin version of his name) produced the official *Vulgata* translation he introduced the word *forte* on two occasions—though he also changed the reference from a single individual to 'perhaps many'.<sup>6</sup>

But one has to acknowledge that the difficulties in this area do not arise only because of the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Today's culture has become excessively deaf to any talk of sin. Pope Pius XII remarked, 'The sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin', a remark repeated by John Paul II.<sup>7</sup> It is as if the picture of sin had become blurred and could no longer be recognised. For many, 'sin' has become a museum piece, which evokes past customs but has little to offer to today's world. And many of the criticisms of the concept—if sometimes exaggerated—contain a kernel of truth: some of the more significant deserve to be briefly presented here.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The version given in MHSJ gives the different translations in parallel columns (281–283). A short commentary in Gaston Fessard, *La dialectique des exercices spirituels de S. Ignace de Loyola*, volume 2 (Paris: Aubier 1966), 99–100, n. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Pius XII, 'Address to the Catechetical Congress held in Boston (1946)', quoted by John Paul II, apostolic exhortation: *Reconciliation and Penance*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> For a fuller account by the author of this article, see Eduardo López Azpitarte, *A vueltas con el pecado: responsabilidad, culpa, conversión* (Madrid: PPC, 2003), which has an extended bibliography in Spanish.

***Problems Today with the Notion of 'Sin'***

It is obvious that, over the years, a whole multitude of things have been categorized as sins, and that this eventually caused a strong backlash which either entirely rejected their sinfulness or adopted an attitude of complete indifference. One need only glance at the manuals of moral ethics published before Vatican II to find evaluations that look ridiculous today. As John Paul II remarked: 'From seeing sin everywhere, nowadays it is not to be found!'—the pendulum has swung, with a vengeance. At the same time, today's culture makes much of personal autonomy and freedom; it rejects any form of authoritarian pedagogy unless sensible reasons can be given for what is imposed. Any believer wanting to lead an adult life has the right to ask why some particular form of action is to be considered as humanly inappropriate, even if in the past such explanations have been notably lacking in pastoral practice.

With the acceptance of the role of the unconscious, the idea of straightforward personal freedom of choice has, with reason, become more complicated. But in the process we have lost the sense of guilt. Guilt is now considered to be simply something produced by the Christian faith. Even if some evil is committed, one is not justified in accusing or condemning a particular person: he or she is regarded as suffering from a delusion or as the victim of error or of an unfortunate accident—brought on by circumstances and interior pressures—but surely not as guilty. A person is made in a certain way, and cannot change, or avoid certain actions. The only sin is to persist in the patterns of thought that produce a bad conscience.

Moreover many people today experience great uncertainty and insecurity. There is a multiplicity of arguments and justifications to support any moral position that may happen to appeal to them. In such a context it is not surprising that many are drawn to scepticism or indifference. With such a bewildering variety of choices, there is no strong reason to choose one moral option rather than another, and it is easy to slide into whichever appears to be the least taxing.

The stress on an individualist concept of sin has also helped to facilitate the rejection of sin as such. So much effort was formerly focused on determining the guilt or innocence of the individual that, if an evil situation continued to exist despite my own innocence, I could conclude that it was the fault of others who were not living up to

correct moral standards. As someone with a clear conscience myself, there was no need for me to have any moral preoccupation with things beyond the limits of my own actions. I could worry about my own impure thoughts, while remaining completely oblivious to the structural and collective evil surrounding me. Such a hypocritical view of sin has become increasingly difficult to accept.

Ignatius makes much of certain feelings—‘shame and confusion’ (Exx 48), ‘intense sorrow and tears’ (Exx 55), ‘hatred’ (Exx 63)—which make one feel ‘as [if] exiled among brute beasts’ (Exx 47); but these expressions are not exempt from a certain ambiguity and have more than one meaning. After all, the hurt one feels about a wrong action may be linked not to its wrongness but to its painful consequences.



*Detail from The Last Judgment, by Michelangelo*

Or there may be a deep personal dissatisfaction over the failure to attain some goal that was expected both by oneself and by others. This failure is felt as shameful, not because of the harm that may have been done to others, but because one's own narcissistic self-image has been shattered, and it is this that humiliates us unbearably. Remorse often plays a part: one wishes that a fault had not been committed, that things had been different, that one did not have to suffer for something that cannot now be changed. There can be a futile lament, the lament of someone for whom all consolation is useless because he or she is faced with what has no



remedy: a cry for help that is doomed to fail because it is made without hope.

All of this brings home the fact that it is possible for guilt feelings to exist in the psyche which are without any real basis, as in the case of someone suffering from scruples. At other times objective sin may evoke no feeling of guilt, if a person has become insensible and calloused, deliberately hardened so as not to feel responsible. A sense of sin and guilt may also be felt even if the roots of the feeling lack maturity and evangelical justification. At times such feelings are a warning that unconscious forces are at work within us, affecting us much more than we realise. When Ignatius places at the heart of the *Exercises* the soul's need 'to rid itself of ... disordered tendencies' (Exx 1) he is trying to throw spiritual light on such phenomena.

For despite everything that has been said so far, the fundamental message of the First Week remains intact. If we deny the existence of sin, nothing is left of the message of God's revelation. The whole thing collapses like a building whose foundations have been destroyed with dynamite.

### ***The Wager of Faith: A Prior Condition***

If one admits that God has revealed Godself in history, as both the Old Testament and the Good News of Jesus of Nazareth show us, then there is a reason to be sure that Someone is seeking free contact with us as humans. The awareness that there is a God, who loves us so much as to reveal Godself in the shadow that hides God's incomprehensible immensity, is sufficient to allow one to take the leap of faith. To have faith is to trust in God's love and God's word, and to understand that it is worth pledging our whole life for this option. In a wager we may risk all of our money on a throw of the dice. But believers wager their whole lives, trusting in the promise of God. Inevitably there is an edge of obscurity which can only be accepted, in the confidence of faith, as a tribute which the believer is willing to pay to the mystery of God. To desire the removal of that darkness is to try to slip under the covering veil of faith. It is no wonder that Jesus had to remind his disciples after the experience of the resurrection, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe' (John 20:29).

Faith implies placing God at the centre of our existence, so as to recognise the subordination of our whole being to God as dependent

creatures (as the Principle and Foundation insists). The one indispensable condition for such an encounter with God is the recognition that we are in need of being saved. The essence of being a Christian is the intimate conviction that one is sustained by the mercy of God. There is a force beyond our own capacities which has placed us on a level of being that is radically different from anything to which our own personal merits would give us a right.

Grace is not the result of our own efforts and merits, but rather a gift from God, who can only give it to those who acknowledge their need and their impotence. Any trace of self-sufficiency makes us impermeable to the experience of the gratuity of grace. Thus, 'perfect' individuals make themselves quite incompatible with God; their very virtues risk creating a barrier to cut them off from God's free and merciful love. The prayer of the Pharisee, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people' (Luke 18:11), wells up in their hearts, sometimes imperceptibly, blocking any authentic and true justification.

The danger of acting like a Pharisee does not have its source directly and primarily in religion as such. Its real roots are to be found in our earliest childhood experiences. As children we learn that obedience and good behaviour receive the rewards that we desire: the affection of our parents; esteem from those around us; the joy and peace of a good conscience. In the same way, many other experiences lead us to discover that transgression and bad behaviour can bring about rejection, condemnation and inner remorse. We may grow accustomed to receive love as a prize for good conduct. This recompense is won by effort and merit; likewise rejection and condemnation are merited whenever we fail to maintain the standards required of us. We assume that a bad person loses all right to feel loved.

Love can be felt not as free gift but as a prize to be won by good conduct—to the point where an injustice is felt to have been committed when love is granted to someone whose merits are not seen to have deserved it. There is a general unconscious tendency to reduce relationships to the level of commerce: they become matters of what is justly owed, leaving no space for what is freely given. The good and obedient may demand what has been won by merit; while for the wicked and disobedient the only possible outcome is just punishment and condemnation. Any other outcome would transgress one's most primitive sense of objective, legal justice.



*Pharisees, detail from Christ accused by the Pharisees, by Duccio di Buoninsegna*

It is quite understandable that such experiences, which are so much a part of our education and have become integrated quite naturally into our psyches, should intervene in our relationship with God. However, as long as we remain convinced that we can merit God's approval and friendship by our own effort and good works—and conversely that when we have done wrong the opposite is true, and that God cannot possibly love us freely without any merit on our side—pharisaism necessarily follows.

### ***The Purpose of the Meditations: Overcoming Pharisaism***

The purpose, therefore, of the meditations on sin is to root out the pharisaic tendencies deeply embedded in the human psyche. There is no better way of doing this than to recognise from the start our own finite nature and our fragility. As I explained above, theology today does not interpret the biblical teaching on the earthly paradise as a historical or scientific explanation of how the world and life began. The purpose of that teaching is to give a theological explanation of the human situation: its starting-point and final destiny are the love of the Creator. We were born from the 'dust of the ground': this symbolizes that our existence comes to us from without and that we must return to the

womb of the earth. But the message is, nevertheless, that our final home will not be there.

Our frailty and our finite nature were in the divine plan from the beginning. God did not have to adjust his programme to restore order to the chaos caused by the creature's fault. From all eternity, God's dream was of an imperfect world, where self-salvation was not possible, but within which Jesus, the great salvific Messiah, would always appear. The creation that came from God's hands is imperfect by its very nature.

Thus, although it can be explained in many different ways, what we call 'original sin' is the acknowledgement that human beings are born into the world incapable of doing good by themselves. Original sin is a force that enslaves us to such an extent that we cannot free ourselves from its influence except through the promise of salvation in Christ. Jesus has come to sow this new seed of freedom in the world. It is already possible to do good, even if our salvation is not yet complete, and even if our struggle against evil continues and we are never exempt from the wounds of our own fragility and cowardice. But we cannot do good unless God provides us with salvation in Jesus.

It is this reality that Ignatius invites us to discover in the meditations on the first two sins: the sin of the angels and the sin of Adam and Eve. Although they may not correspond to concrete facts, the two accounts reveal what happens when creatures rupture their relationship with the Creator and attempt to live out their lives autonomously. When human beings break off communion with God they find themselves condemned to loneliness and failure: they are incapable of feeling solidarity with one another and are wounded by their own wills and desires. Genesis is full of allegorical details intended to fill out the consequences of sin.

In the meditation we see this overall picture from outside with the eyes of mere spectators, but it presents itself as a threat from within our own life histories, when the tragedy that began in others is also present in our own hearts. This is why the meditation on our own sins is so important. One of the characteristics of a wrong action is that it tries to justify itself. Precisely because we are sinners, we fail to have the lucidity needed to recognise our own personal failings. There is always a tendency—more or less conscious—to disguise what we do not want to

acknowledge, because it may run counter to our narcissistic leanings.<sup>9</sup> St Ignatius invites us to gaze deeply into ourselves so that we may see clearly the disorder behind our actions. This means bringing to the surface what we would prefer not to know, what our deepest desires are seeking to hide from us. It is this that Ignatius wants us insistently to ask for in the preparatory prayer (Exx 46, 55, 62), so that all our doings may be set in order and our guilt may not be distorted by other factors.

### ***'What Ought I to Do for Christ?' (Exx 53)***

In order to make sense of the reality of sin today we have to accept that we live in a very different cultural climate from that of earlier times. Many older people have negative memories of the Exercises as encouraging fear, anguish, terror and disquiet. The image of God as a Judge who saw and examined all that was done, allowing nothing to escape His control, provoked an unbearable and destructive obsession with God's all-seeing gaze. Like so many other distortions of the Christian life, this was a far cry from St John's invitation to live in God's presence with full confidence, even 'on the day of judgment' (1 John 4:17). The real image that should be constantly before us is that of the Crucified: then we will never lose sight of his gigantic love. Faced with such love our only thought can be to reply with the greatest generosity possible. The question, *what ought I to do for Christ?* represents the only desire that we can depend on for the future.

Relying on that fundamental response to Christ, we need not be afraid to face the truth about ourselves: to feel 'personal shame and confusion' (Exx 48), 'intense sorrow and tears' (Exx 55), and 'abhorrence' as I 'feel the disorder in my actions' (Exx 63). I can even 'look at myself as though I were a running sore' (Exx 58), or see myself 'as if exiled in this valley among brute beasts' (Exx 47). There is no room for bitterness or disillusion when, underlying everything, there is Christ crucified. If someone feels caught up in negative reactions it is because that person has failed to gather the fruit of the First Week.

With these considerations in mind, a number of recommendations can be offered when the theme of sin is being presented.

<sup>9</sup> See Jean-Claude Sagne, 'L'excuse et l'aveu', *Christus*, 210 (2006), 136–147.

### ***The Complexity of Guilt***

There is a danger of insisting too much on the inner malice of sin, as if it was always a gesture of rebellion and perverse rejection by a creature claiming independence from its Creator. Experience shows, however,



Christ Saviour of Mankind, school of Lucas  
Cranach the Elder

that the majority of sins are committed, not from some such attitude of perversity, but on account of deception. We often commit sin because of a failure to discover its true nature, which is veiled and disguised under superficial appearances that may well be more kindly. Before committing the sin, we become convinced, in one way or another, that it will really do good, or, at least, that such conduct is not as negative as has been made out.

The situation is one in which complete purity of intention does not exist, nor does complete clarity of mind, but neither does open malice. We can make use of half-truths and manipulate the facts in our favour in order to do what we want without having too bad a conscience. We may look for some specious justification which will allow us to do what we should not out of a false conviction that prevents us from thinking lucidly. A blame-worthy action requires an initial self-deception by our own lies, rather than wickedness. We want to convince ourselves that

what we are doing is not as bad as we thought it was, even if we cannot completely silence the reproaches of conscience.<sup>10</sup>

Under these conditions, ethical judgment is more complex than is usually thought. The obligation to declare all one's grievous sins, duly numbered and tabulated, created an urgent need to evaluate, with almost mathematical precision, the knowledge and freedom that one had in committing certain acts. However, a human being nearly always acts out of a mixture of light and darkness, of cowardice and sincere effort, of constraints and of freedom: the boundaries are seldom clear. On such occasions the attitude that keeps most closely to the Gospels is one that embraces with joy a situation of *docta ignorantia*, one that is both humble and sincere. One is not afraid to acknowledge before God that one does not know where one is. Only God can penetrate our dark and mysterious world—where good and evil are intertwined in different proportions depending on different cases and circumstances—which is nearly always too opaque for our own understanding. An effort is needed to place ourselves before God in complete sincerity, neither condemning ourselves excessively nor excusing ourselves too naively. In the last resort, we do not know what we are. We trust in God's pardon and we are open to loving and thanking God. The truth is that we are all, at the same time, both sinners and saints.

In this way the traditional clarity in the classification of sins becomes somewhat hazy. It is a problem, not of mathematics, but of a complex evaluation which does not always result in easy explanations.

### ***The Social Dimension***

One final step is to overcome the excessively individualistic approach to sin. Formerly even the social consequences of an action were examined from the perspective of individual culpability or innocence. Questions of scandal, complicity, financial probity, and social and political responsibility were all judged in relation to subjective intention. The individual had to know which were his or her indispensable obligations, the fulfilment of which left one with a clear conscience. For if our conscience was clear, we had no reason to be

<sup>10</sup> For an illuminating explanation of the 'first sin', compare Eugen Drewermann, 'Anguish and guilt in the Yahvist account of the Fall', *Concilium*, 113 (1976), 369–381.

morally preoccupied with the evil around us, because that evil was not a matter of our own conduct.

It is now becoming increasingly unacceptable to ignore the importance of the political and social dimension to our morality. Somehow this too has to be integrated into the individual's sense of responsibility. It is not possible to keep one's hands clean, even if there are no personal faults, when one lives in a world that is rotten with injustice and iniquity. To claim innocence—putting the blame on social structures or on other people—is a defence mechanism designed to convince us that we are not implicated. But our loyalty to what we have received from the past, our complicity in the present, and the compromises we accept with a view to the future make it impossible for us to feel entirely innocent.

It is not possible here to analyze how deeply we are implicated in structural sin.<sup>11</sup> Responsibility frequently slides into guilt because of our attitude to such sin. As John Paul II rightly declared:

It is a case of the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world and also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of higher order. The real responsibility, then, lies with individuals.<sup>12</sup>

This is an invitation to acknowledge our tacit complicity, in so far as we calmly accept unjust situations or fail to do all that we can to change them.

### ***The Mystery of God***

Ultimately there always remains the mystery of a God whose will it was to bring this creation into being, in this way, when there were so many other possibilities. We have no right to expect God to justify his unfathomable designs. St Paul offers the best response to assuage our

<sup>11</sup> Eduardo López Azpitarte, *Hacia una nueva vision de la ética cristiana*, (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2003), 320–344.

<sup>12</sup> *Reconciliation and Penance*, 16.



disquiet and doubt: 'but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more' (Romans 5:20). He is saying that, in face of sin, decrepitude, death, pain and failure, there rises up an ever stronger affection, generosity, love, and utterly gratuitous salvation. For anyone who experiences this overwhelming God, no other explanation is needed.

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