

SIN: THE SOCIAL, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS

By PETER McVERRY

IN THE LAST fifteen years or so, two developments in the Spiritual Exercises stand out for me as especially important: one is the emphasis on a return to the original sources and the consequent appreciation of how our giving of the Exercises had been influenced by later, often unhelpful adaptations; the second is the growing appreciation of the contribution that psychology can make, with consequently a growing willingness and ability to watch for the unconscious at work within a person, influencing his responses and even reducing his freedom to respond in particular areas. Today, I think we are being faced with a third development of equal importance to the giving of the Exercises, the growing awareness of the reality and significance of structural sin.

The exercitant's awareness of the reality of structural sin

The terms 'social sin', 'sinful structures' and 'institutionalized sin' are being used with increasing frequency in theological discussion. What is implied in these terms, it seems to me, is a radical expansion of our consciousness of sin. We are used to applying the word 'sinful' to individual acts when such acts are (a) harmful to oneself or others (i.e. violate the law of God), and (b) done freely and with full knowledge. When we apply the word 'sinful' to structures, it is obvious that we are using it in a different sense.

The word 'structure' refers to 'a formal set of relationships which are somehow distinct from the individuals who are related in them'.¹ Sinful structures are those formal sets of relationships which result in the oppression of groups of people, while enabling other groups of people to benefit from that oppression, even without those benefiting fully knowing or freely consenting to the oppression.

For example, if I hit José on the head and take his money so that

he and his family go hungry, such an act is a sinful act (there is a high probability that I am acting knowingly and willingly!) But if United Brands Inc. buy up José's land to pay off his debts to unscrupulous suppliers, and use it to grow high protein foods for export to USA, while José and his family go hungry, that is just as harmful — indeed even more so — to José than the first incident. Such a situation is therefore called 'sinful'. This is not to say that *every* aspect of United Brands's activities is sinful, or that its directors are acting in bad faith. But it does say that José's hunger is a situation displeasing to God, and that it is due, not just to the malevolent action of certain individuals but to actions that are the result of a set of relationships involving directors, employees, shareholders and consumers. This set of relationships is distinct from the persons who are related in them — in time, the individual directors, employees, shareholders and even consumers may change, and new people will fill their places, but the situation continues. I participate in that sinful situation by such 'neutral' acts as investing in United Brands or buying its products, for such an act contributes to maintaining José's hunger. It is not the direct cause of his hunger, but it is a contributing cause. If I cease to consume United Brands's food, or if I withdraw my investment, it will not alleviate José's hunger unless my action is co-ordinated with the similar action of thousands, or perhaps millions of others; yet by refusing to act, I am contributing to his hunger.

For a person today, the concept of sin as a deliberate transgression by an individual of the law of God, done with full knowledge and full consent, is too limited to be adequate. No doubt we all sin in this sense too, and I do not wish to minimize the importance of acknowledging and repenting of such acts. It is also true that structural sin is often founded and erected on such acts. But the reality of structural sin cannot be *reduced* to such acts: José's hunger *today* is due, not only to the original, perhaps malevolent, act that took his land, but also to the thousands of individual, uncoordinated acts of consumers, investors, employees and directors throughout the world. Consequently, a change in the situation will not be produced solely by identifying and converting those key personnel in United Brands who make the decisions that maintain the situation.

Again, the communist party's control over the lives of ordinary people in the Soviet Union is an oppressive structure; the individuals who occupy the various positions in the hierarchy of the party may change, but the dominance of the Party over people's lives

continues. No single individual's actions within the Party will change that situation; yet each individual action helps to maintain it.

Again, the educational system in Ireland ensures privileged access to higher education — and consequently to a more secure, better paid higher status employment — for particular social groups. This necessarily results in limiting access for other social groups. This situation is maintained by the individual decisions of those in privileged social groups to secure the best possible education for their children (an excellent desire) in fee-paying schools which are necessarily socially restrictive, and by the decisions of those in government and in religious orders to provide and support such schools. A person's decision to send his son or daughter to such a school contributes to preserving the system which limits access to higher education for some groups, yet his decision not to send his son or daughter to such a school will change nothing (except his son's or daughter's opportunity for access to higher education). The decision of a Provincial to retain such a school in such a form contributes to restricting access to higher education for some social groups, yet his or her decision to close the school or change its nature will probably change little (though it could well contribute to the conscientization of many, thereby leading in the future to significant change).

Again, a large multinational company may be considering closure of one of its plants in a small town, with devastating effects on the quality of life of the whole community. The managing director of the company may be faced with a situation where his competitors have re-located to Indonesia, where average wage levels are some thirty times below those in the U.K. or Ireland, and are dramatically undercutting his price. In such a situation, he may also have to decide to re-locate abroad or go out of business altogether. No directed retreat can alter the situation — although he might elect to remain and perhaps reduce his profit margins as much as possible, in which case he will, in all likelihood, be sacked by his board of directors, on the justification that they are responsible to the shareholders, who have invested with a view to likely (high) dividends. The pain and suffering in that township cannot be avoided by an appeal to the conscience of the person whose decision will be the direct cause of that pain. The most he can do is to make a prophetic gesture by resigning, knowing full well that such a decision will change nothing except the quality of his own life.

Unless our consciousness of sin has expanded to include an aware-

ness of our participation in sinful structures, we would have little to say to the vast majority of those who are suffering injustice today, and little hope to offer them. Yet the limited concept of sin is what Ignatius presents in the Exercises. I cannot see how we can remain within that concept today. If the exercitant has not some experience of the suffering of the poor, the unemployed, minorities, etc., that has deeply touched him, if he has not reflected on how their situation is maintained by the structures of his society, then his experience of the First Week may well be unreal. Would it not be important for him to be, at least, in touch with such experiences as he meditates on sin? The First Week cannot be, of course, a 'Companions for Justice' workshop, but nevertheless if such an experience of injustice has been absent from the exercitant's life, then it will be impossible for him to converse adequately with the Lord about the sin of the world, or his own sin. At worst, it may only strengthen his notion of privatized sin and make a fuller appreciation of the total reality of sin even more difficult in the future.

It may be argued that this should be part of the preparation of the exercitant for the Exercises, but in that event, the numbers of those to whom we could actually give the Exercises today would, in my opinion, be very limited and a new criterion for entry into the Exercises would be applied. But if the experience of the First Week is to recognize my sinfulness for what it is, to see it as it were from God's point of view, so that I am moved to grief and a desire to serve Christ better in the future, then I think it is legitimate to use the First Week to open the exercitant more to an appreciation of the reality of structural sin. (The fruit of the First Week may well be the resolution to seek later a fuller analysis of the situation as a prerequisite for action in the future). In such a case, an essential element in the First Week would be a deeply moving experience of the suffering of others which is imposed on them by the way in which our society is organized — that is, some form of contact with the poorest would be, for many, an integral part of the First Week.

The exercitant's awareness of his complicity in structural sin

An essential aspect of the exercitant's meditation on structural sin is his awareness of his own complicity in that situation — his sinfulness.

Recognizing his sinfulness means acknowledging his responsibility for bringing about change, and his failure to exercise that responsibility sufficiently in the past. He may well have to work through

feelings of guilt and feelings of powerlessness to come to recognize that, while he remains a sinner, he is yet forgiven and called to discipleship in the power of the Lord and not in his own power.

The exercitant's complicity in the structures which oppress others arises fundamentally from the fact that he has benefited from them. Whether it be the cheaper goods that multinational companies can make available (for which others pay the price in human suffering and exploitation), the luxury goods that expand his freedom of (consumer) choice (resources that could have been channelled into unmet basic needs of others) or the privileged opportunities and increased status and power that result from maintaining the *status quo*, the exercitant will recognize that the core of his inertia in seeking change lies in the fact that he is a beneficiary of those structures under which others suffer. *Any structural change which relieves the suffering of the poor will necessarily involve a lowering of the standard of living and/or a reduction in the power, status and opportunities available to the rest of us*, including exercitants and directors. Any real structural change will have the two-edged thrust of the Magnificat: 'He has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly; the hungry he has filled with good things, the rich sent empty away' (Lk 1,52-53). It is this that prevents the First Week from being a meditation on something 'out there'. To recognize my sinfulness for what it is, is to face this reality squarely: my participation in the struggle for change will adversely affect my own living standards, my own access to opportunity; the more successful that struggle, the more I will be affected.

This could well be the context for the later meditation on the Two Standards. There we seek to become aware of how the attraction of possessions and worldly status can so easily lead us to aid the work of Satan, even while believing that we are really following Christ. A recognition of the root cause of our inertia, the material gain or increased social position or leverage that accrues to us from the *status quo*, could well be a valuable form of the Two Standards meditation for our day.

It also places the Principle and Foundation in a new context: unless we are indifferent to all created things, we will be so defensive that we will not recognize the real nature of our complicity in the unjust structures of our society — we will fail even to recognize our sinfulness. To counter our defences and our rationalizations of our participation in such sinful structures, we must question ourselves in the light of the Three Classes of Men, and actually beg the Lord to

admit us to that state where the benefits of the *status quo* are removed from us.

But besides recognizing the root cause of his complicity in the structures of his society, the exercitant will recognize also those forces which encourage his complicity.

In the first place, he will recognize his isolation from the sufferings of others. The division of many of our cities into private and local authority housing estates is a very efficient way of ensuring that our awareness of the problems that others have to face is kept to a minimum. Many of those who live in private estates have little conception of what life is like in Brixton or Toxteth or Finglas. Their main source of knowledge is the occasional documentary on television, sandwiched between *Dallas* and the *Incredible Hulk*, and perhaps even punctuated by advertisements extolling the benefits of the good life which the viewer in his private house already enjoys to some extent. Or it may be the daily newspaper with its emphasis on crime, riots and social welfare abuse, helping to impress on him the contrary view that in fact *he* is the victim of a disordered society and not *they*. This housing policy is not accidental, it is planned — though not necessarily intended. It gives rise to and is supported by the objections raised by some community groups in well-off areas to the prospect of a local authority housing estate in the vicinity; the flight of white residents from an area where coloured people are increasingly settling; the growing pressure for removing from society not only those who represent a threat to society but even those petty criminals who could only be described as a nuisance to society. The desire to shield ourselves from the effects of the sinful situations in which we find ourselves is sometimes quite explicit.

Too often we are insulated from any real contact . . . with the hard everyday consequences of injustice and oppression. As a result, we run the risk of not being able to hear the cry for the Gospel as it is addressed to us by the men and women of our times.²

This planned attempt to shield the reality of structural sin from our sight and mind is a problem the exercitant will have to face, to avoid the risk of being like the seed that fell on patches of rocks:

The one who receives it on patches of rock is the man who hears the word and welcomes it with joy. But he has no root in him, he does not last; let some trial come, or some persecution on account of the word, and he falls away at once (Mt 13,20-21).

In view of the inevitable conflict that faces anyone who is involved in the struggle for change, perhaps Matthew's parable is particularly appropriate in this context. That the exercitant should make an option for the poor, expressed in some on-going tangible way, perhaps even in a radical way if that is what he hears the Lord saying, is the issue that may arise in reflecting on his isolation from their pain. The exercitant may have to work through the fear that he will almost certainly experience, at the prospect of having to leave, again and again, the comfort of his own social class and customs and conventions to encounter the poor directly and hear their cry.

A second force that seeks to co-opt the individual into complicity with the unjust structures of his society is an ideological one. An ideological justification of the *status quo* can come either from the right or the left. On the right, the attempt to portray the present situation as a regretful but necessary stage in our progress towards a better life for all (the conservative view of the present unemployment problem) removes the urgency for action from us. The need to concentrate wealth in the hands of the rich so that increased investment will ultimately provide full employment and end poverty even suggests that to work for a more equal society is itself a sinful act in that it will only postpone the alleviation of the suffering of the poor! The poverty of the Third World, often portrayed as due predominantly to under-development or over-population, seeks to remove the problem from the moral sphere to the purely technical one.

An even more insidious form of ideological conservatism is that which lays the blame for the effects of oppressive structures on the victims themselves. The distinction between the 'deserving poor' and the 'undeserving poor' (sometimes meaning the 'poor who do not threaten our position' and 'the poor who do') falls into this category. The cause of their plight is portrayed as laziness, irresponsibility, lack of initiative; the poor are parasites in an otherwise healthy society. Again the call to action is defused at its source.

The ideological justification can also come from the left. The call for violence as necessary for achieving a more just society, the temporary but necessary repression of human rights in order to deal with reactionary forces in society, the aloof insistence that the situation in the Third World is entirely the responsibility of former colonial powers, do no service to the creation of a more just world.

Ideological positions are deep-rooted in us; they result from a long, slow assembly of experiences — necessarily limited experiences

— into a world-view that holds all those experiences together in a rational way. To call into question my ideological justification for inaction, or at least for avoiding the urgency of action, can often be a profoundly disturbing experience. It requires a conversion that calls into question our deeply felt beliefs.

The First Week of the Exercises is an ideal opportunity for such a process to occur. There is no question of the exercitant meditating solely on 'structures-out-there'. There is a constant dynamic linking the exercitant's recognition of the sinfulness of the world with an unease at what has been going on in his deepest self.

We must bear in mind, however, that our efforts on the social and structural level are not sufficient of themselves. Injustice must be attacked at its roots in the heart of man by eradicating those attitudes and habits which bring forth the structures of oppression.³

The exercitant's image of Christ

The First Week, for Ignatius, was to be centred on Christ crucified. The expansion of our consciousness of sin raises the whole question of the exercitant's image of Christ. An excessively privatized or spiritualized image of Christ has to be discarded. Such an image can allow the exercitant to avoid questioning the structure of the world and his own society. We are only just beginning to emerge from centuries of such privatized faith.

Certain false images of God which prop up and give an aura of legitimacy to unjust social structures are no longer acceptable. Neither can we admit those more ambiguous images of God which appear to release man from his inalienable responsibilities. . . . We must find a new language, a new set of symbols, that will enable us to leave our fallen idols behind us and rediscover the true God.⁴

Such images might include that of a God who is more interested in what we think than in what we do; or a God who is more interested in what we do in the bedroom than in the boardroom; or a God who requires submission in the face of (avoidable) suffering and not protest. Or the image of a Christ, who as peacemaker, wishes all conflict to be avoided; or a Christ who was interested only in people's souls and not in the economic, social and political realities within which they lived their lives. Each of us has his own image of God and of Jesus, his Son. That image, while it derives in large part from our reading of the gospel, is nevertheless filtered through the

different experiences and world-views which we bring to that reading, reflection and prayer. Our ideological lenses condition what we read and how we interpret it.

My image of Jesus is of a man full of *compassion*. His compassion for people's inner suffering and searching did not in any way diminish his compassion for their physical suffering and pain. The disabled, the sick, the lepers, the mother's grief for her dead son, the hunger of the crowd who followed him into the desert, these were the encounters that drew from Jesus his untiring compassion. There is no indication that meeting the 'spiritual needs' of those he encountered was considered by him to be more important than meeting their material needs; indeed he even got angry with the pharisees for precisely such an attitude (Mk 3,1-6).

Jesus's compassion for the total needs of those he met was matched by an *angry indignation* at all in the society of his time that failed to meet those needs or, worse still, that helped to perpetuate them. The law forbidding work on the Sabbath, when it sought to prevent him healing, he frequently broke and sometimes in the most provocative way (Lk 13,10-17). He denounced the existence of wealth in the midst of poverty (Lk 16,19-31); he publicly called the lawful religious authorities of his time hypocrites, because they used their power, not to serve those who depended on them, but to gain privileges for themselves (Mt 23,5-7); because they were more concerned with keeping the allegiance of the people (Mt 21,23-27) than with being true shepherds of the flock. He did not want the way in which political authority was exercised to be the model for his followers (Mt 20,24-28).

In his compassion for the sufferings of the poor and the sick, he did not flinch from *conflict* with those whose power and wealth were not being used to relieve that suffering; indeed, in exposing their hypocrisy he sometimes deliberately invited conflict (Lk 16,14-15). He knew all along that they would have to get rid of him (Lk 9,22), under the pretext that he was a threat to the security of the state (Jn 11,48-50). In reality he was only a threat to their own positions of power and wealth, undermining as he did on every possible occasion their justification for maintaining the *status quo*.

He was a man who *questioned everything* — the traditions of his faith (Mt 15,1-9) as they had been handed down to him, the law he was expected to observe (Mt 12,1-14), the actions and attitudes of the political and religious rulers of his time. He tested everything by the criteria of his own deepest human feelings and instincts, for these

could not be in conflict with the will of God (Mt 7,15-20). His critical questioning of what was the accepted wisdom and teaching of his time shocked many (Mt 15,12). Even the apostles found him, at times, too radical (Mt 19,25).

He was a man who constantly called others to conversion. The central core of that appeal consisted in asking for an attitude of the *most profound respect for every human being*, without exception. Indeed it was those who were least respected in this world who would have the places of honour at the banquet in the kingdom of God (Lk 14,15-24). Those who look down on them will get a surprise on the last day (Mt 21,31). Respect for all, especially the most despised, is a more basic element in Jesus's call for repentance than prayer or sacrifice (Mk 12,33; Mt 5,23). Indeed he so identified with the deprived and despised that he will not accept from us any honour or tribute or gift that we offer, unless it is also offered to the most despised in society (Mt 25,45). On our treatment of the deprived — and only on this — our salvation depends (Mt 25,31-46).

Such would be part of my present (ideologically coloured) image of Jesus. Our image of Jesus will support or discourage certain directions of thought as we contemplate the crucified Lord and ask: 'What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What will I do for Christ?'. If the exercitant has blocked out certain essential aspects of the life and teaching of Jesus that limit the area of his response, then the director will have to help him unblock them. This could lead him into very radical decisions, suggestive of the Two Standards and the Third Degree of Humility. A businessman may very well decide that he can no longer continue his employment with a multinational firm, resulting in real hardship for himself and his family; such action would be for him a real martyrdom, a following of Jesus to the cross, in that, like the crucifixion, such an action will have no tangible results that can be foreseen (the multinational firm will simply replace him and continue as before) except the sacrifice that he personally will suffer. (The bishop of one of the dioceses in Texas, where the production facilities for nuclear weapons are located, has offered the support of the christian community there to any employee in the nuclear factories who feels in conscience called to give up his job). Or one may feel called to withhold a portion of one's taxes in response to one's decision to oppose military expenditure. Or one might decide, in conjunction with one's family, to live a much simpler lifestyle in a poorer part of the city. Or to campaign actively in favour of an itinerant site or

Simon Hostel in one's neighbourhood (which will lose you a few friends!) Such decisions, if one feels called to make them, arise not just from meditating on 'structures-out-there' and what one might do to change them; the intermediate step, of meditating on one's own values and attitudes which promote complicity in those structures, in the light of the gospel, is the critical one which gives depth to the experience of the First Week and gives roots to (difficult) decisions.

This implies a real following of the suffering Christ; for a person who decides to involve himself in the struggle for change is guaranteed to bring trouble to himself and his family. Not only may decisions be required which affect (adversely) his standard of living, but they may also bring conflict and hostility from those who oppose change; even his best friends, while admiring perhaps his idealism, may feel 'he's totally unrealistic'. 'When his relatives heard of this, they set out to take charge of him, convinced that he was out of his mind' (Mk 3,21).

Finally, it would seem to me that if such a concept of sin were to replace the concept of privatized sin which we find in the Exercises, it would be essential that the director himself be committed to it. This implies that he: (a) has already experienced, at gut level, anger at the structures which maintain the suffering of others, through *direct exposure* to their pain; (b) that he has some knowledge of *social analysis*, which allows him to understand the causes of that suffering better; (c) that through his own meditation on his own values and attitudes that maintain his complicity with those structures, he himself has made some — probably radical — decisions in this area.⁵

NOTES

¹ Havanek, Robert: 'The reluctance to admit sin', in *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, May 1977.

² 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, 'Our Mission today', 35.

³ 'Our Mission today', 32.

⁴ 'Our Mission today', 26.

⁵ The author wishes to thank the other staff of the Centre for Faith and Justice in Dublin for help in writing this article.