

# THE SENSE OF SIN IN THE MODERN WORLD

By ROBERT O'CONNELL

THE modern world, we are often told (with something like a note of triumph in the tone of the telling) has lost its sense of sin. Often enough this becomes a signal for hand-wringing and head-wagging, in an effort to sound sad about it all. Perhaps there is even an unspoken prayer of thanks that *we* are not as modern man? The temptation has to be mentioned, so that we may be alert to avoid it. We belong no less to the modern world than do those whom we are tempted to criticise. And that world, whether we like it or not, exercises a subtle influence on our own standards and evaluations: an influence that must be faced objectively, and with some degree of sympathy, if we are to be critically aware of it in our lives.

Perhaps we Christians have not always been entirely lucid in our preaching – not to mention our practice – of the Christian morality. It cannot be taken for granted that modern man's sense of sin is inferior to that of generations that went before him, or that he has nothing to tell us Christians of the perennial notion of sin which our tradition brings down to us.

## *The Guilt-complex*

The modern world's sense of sin is usually identified, by many Christians as well as non-Christians, with what the psychologists describe as the guilt-complex. It is as well known to the confessor as to the psychiatrist. The penitent who glides airily through the first five commandments of the Decalogue and then slams into the sixth commandment like a Mack truck into a stone wall, is not untypical. In the mind of such a person, the entire Decalogue reduces to the sixth and ninth commandments, for all practical purposes. Like the painters of the film advertisements, our penitent thinks that sin and sex are convertible terms; all the rest is secondary. All feeling of guilt, it so often happens, seems to have centred in the area of sexual sins; it has tied the penitent into knots; he (or

she) finds confession of these sins an agony, carries around the consciousness of them with a paralysing sense of shame, inferiority and something very like hatred of self, of his body, of his entire incarnate condition. He is closed in on himself, cramped, stiff in his relations with others, likely to outbursts of impatience or aggressiveness of all sorts. Sanctity is something he longs for: but the sanctity of some disembodied angelic being. If asked why sins of impurity bother his conscience, he replies in such terms as 'dirty', 'shameful', 'soiling', 'disgusting'. What is their connection with the love of God and of his neighbour? The answer is liable to be far from illuminating.

The results, paradoxically, are often, if not always, exactly the opposite of what the penitent would wish. He finds himself so obsessed with the infernal circle of his failings in this regard, that they become even more difficult, if not impossible, to avoid. The sickening round of temptation, fall and temptation again renewed spirals him downward into discouragement, despondency, and the growing conviction that he can never tear himself out of this morass.

So often the penitent makes life one long purgatory for those about him, conveniently putting out of mind repeated reminders that charity is the fulfilment of the whole law. He frequently takes refuge in scrupulosity, that mask of self-deception, which permits a semblance of delicacy of conscience in one area of activity, while maintaining a hard crust of insensitivity in another area – often the area of charity!

There is nothing more unhealthy than this situation, the psychoanalyst warns; and by dint of a facile equation of such guilt feelings with what the Christian means by the sense of sin, his conclusion is firm: away with it! A recent book written by a French psychoanalyst reads like the moral Magna Carta of our day: *Morale sans Péché*, morality without sin!

But how does such a guilt feeling originate? The psychoanalyst is there with the explanation: it comes from the action of the super-ego. In layman's language, this amounts to saying that society, represented by the parental authority, teachers, companions more generally, imposes certain norms on the conduct of the child, from its earliest moments of awareness. The child is made to feel, since it is incapable of understanding, that the satisfaction of certain of its drives is forbidden, taboo. Dire threats are added to the proclamation of this taboo, and a deep feeling of inferiority, rejection, insecurity, attaches to the action in question, or even to the image,

the desire of that action. And yet, since the drive is still there, since the child has not the ghost of a notion *why* it is wrong, no permanent resolution of the desire-situation is achieved. Man's natural reluctance to face unpleasant truths about himself then forces the memory both of the forbidden act (or desire) and the related feeling of insecurity, down into the Unconscious, and the irrational guilt feelings well up from that pit to produce neurosis in later life.

The sociologists, anthropologists, historians and others fill out the background picture. In different societies and at different evolutionary phases; they assure us, different norms of acceptability apply. And the conclusion is that all norms, whatever their nature, are merely relative to the society in question. The Decalogue of the Bible, for instance, is nothing more than the basic law of Israel at a certain stage of its historical development, cloaked with the authority of God to make its binding power on the individual Hebrew the more effective!

In accepting these explanations of the 'sense of sin', modern man finds a number of moral positions possible to him. Let us sketch out just three of them here, and then ask if there is any fundamental note in his moral consciousness.

### *Indifferentism*

The first of these moral attitudes has to do with sex principally, for this is what first comes to the contemporary mind when the term sin is mentioned. For convenience, we can label the attitude 'indifferentism'. The act of sexual intercourse, as one author puts it, is as indifferent as drinking a cup of coffee. Sometimes the position is buttressed by a naturalist supposition that the good life for man, as for any other animal, consists in the satisfaction of his instinctive drives; sometimes it can be given the anti-Manichean label, which announces that the body is good and that this drive in particular is not the evil thing such dualisms would make of it. Any taboos in this area, therefore, are to be rejected. If it is pretended that they draw their origin from God, then little time is lost in putting this God out of the picture as well. If nothing is wrong with the instinct, then a God who would forbid such an innocent thing simply does not exist. Here modern man assumes the role of the little boy whistling past the graveyard, - 'ain't no ghosts here, no sir!'

The irony in all this is that a tendency which started out as anti-Manichaeism has been sucked into a Manichaeism of another form. Our culture, which Bergson so aptly labelled 'aphrodisiac', with its constant attempt to make sexual satisfaction the centre, if not the essence of life, beckons us into a round of pleasures which eventually reduce sexual activity to a sheer, irresponsible enjoyment. Life becomes a series of casual encounters; when any two animals concerned tire of each other, let them seek out another partner. All connection with the ends of life, all moral character is bled from the act; its relation to the power of an enduring human love, 'stronger than death', and the corollary of fidelity which follows from that relation, is ignored on grounds that this is just 'doing what comes naturally'. The soul is for loving, the body for pleasure. The Manichaeans never did better at splitting up the two. And scholars tell us that they drew one of two conclusions from the split: either that sex was dirty and to be despised, or that it was perfectly indifferent, neither good nor bad, just 'there': a 'fact of life' and nothing more.

The modern world may deride sexual taboos. But their merit lies in the acknowledgement that this act is something special: an encounter in which, mysteriously, the springs of life and of human love coincide. *Terribilis est locus iste*, 'a fearful place, this', cried Jacob, in a situation more analogous than modern man is prepared to admit.

### *Determinism*

Often connected with it, determinism is nonetheless a distinct animal from indifferentism. Psychological determinism (the most common form today), informs us that all our actions, despite our illusions of freedom, are in fact dictated by the drives, urges and complexes that lie buried in the dark pit of the Unconscious of each of us. A typical form is the pan-sexual one of popular Freudianism: despite our efforts to explain it away, even to ourselves, even the highest forms of human activity, artistic, religious, heroic, are just sublimations, that is, masks or camouflages, for the achievement of a satisfaction which is, in the final analysis, sexual.

Some sociologists insist that a large measure of determinism issues from the pressures of society. None of us, we are assured, can escape the influence of the 'collective consciousness' and its evaluations. It was just such a collective consciousness that was guilty of

the Second World War, for example; and the bridge is established to a theory of collective guilt such that an entire group is pronounced guilty *as a group*.

### *The cult of liberty*

The reaction against this determinism finds its term in present-day existentialism with its tenacious proclamation of man's liberty. The authentic individual, we may summarise, is the one who is conscious of liberty as man's typical property. He is the man with the courage to resist the temptation of taking the easy way of conformity to the patterns of his day or society. He becomes a human being in the full sense only when he assumes the terrible responsibility of freely constructing the design of his existence. Right and wrong and good and bad suppose a set of norms received from outside, antecedent to man's action. They suppose a structured human essence which antedates freedom's intervention. But man's essence lies in the future, not in the past; it is the result of his free activity, not some norm that precedes and guides it. What matters, therefore, is not whether man acts in a manner some society or age or church would deem right or wrong. What matters is that he acts freely, independent of any pressures they would put on him. 'This above all, to thine own self be true': to the ideal self that lies at the term of every man's freedom.

Here we have Kant's insistence on the personal conscience, become a law to itself, combined with the widespread refusal to accept a morality whose main hinge is a more or less arbitrary connection between certain kinds of action and the corresponding reward or punishment. But the final fruit of this cult of liberty occurs in the so-called 'situation-ethics', which stresses that each moral agent and each decision confronting him are both so perfectly individual that no universal laws can possibly be applicable. There is indeed a possibility of right and wrong, good and bad; but there are no rules. Paradoxically: there can be sin, but there are no definable 'sins'.

### *Modern morality: the central thrust*

'To thine own self be true'. In spite of the variety of moral attitudes, the welter of theories that invite modern man's loyalties, here we have a keynote, which brings contemporary moral sentiment

(for sentiment it is rather than formulated theory) into a kind of unstable synthesis. Sincerity is the key regarding the *manner* of moral action. As to the *matter*, it can best be summarised in two terms enjoying some vogue at the moment: humanism or, in more determinate form, personalism.

### *Sincerity*

Despite the naturalism that tempts him, despite the appeals of determinisms of all sorts, modern man seems dimly to retain a burning conviction that his freedom makes him fundamentally different from the beasts. Not all his other positions are coherent with this one, and even this consciousness of liberty often remains implicit. But what he sees in liberty, in the first place, is the duty to be sincere. Liberty lays upon him the inescapable responsibility to be true to whatever moral ideal is imposed by personal experience and judgement. He vaguely feels it is all-important that he embrace and sanction this ideal personally, rather than let himself be pulled this way and that by the norms which some misty, impersonal 'they' seek to thrust upon him. In former times, he feels, it may have been enough for 'them' to announce that this or that 'simply is not done': and, out of some sheep-like conformity, it was not done. Or at least, not openly. Against what he looks upon as a mere exterior conformity to 'the rules', modern man puts the primary accent squarely on the interior: the heart must be right, one must do what one is personally convinced is the right thing, and hang the rules. At all costs, don't be (in Salinger's term) a 'phoney': even if this means running directly into collision with all the traditional taboos.

### *Personalism*

We can liken sincerity to the limpidity of an eye rinsed clear of the dust of accepted standards, which, in the half-formulated view of the man of our day, merely obstructed the view of the moral landscape. Having swept the slate clean, modern man is left with the terrible possibility of doing wrong, but at first blush with no rules to guide him in avoiding it. If there is any principle regarding the *matter* of moral action which modern man finds himself forced to acknowledge, this will be concerned with what he terms 'humanism' or 'personalism'.

It is not entirely easy to spell out what these terms imply, especially for the ordinary man of our times. Before we begin, however, one objection may be forestalled. If we choose our examples of this concern from the writings of philosophers, playwrights, and from films and other mass media, it is because all these normally take root in that humus of intellectual and artistic activity, the confused and ill-expressed consciousness of the inarticulate mass of mankind. The artist and thinker of any age is always a forerunner, but at the same time a representative of his time: he brings to expression what the men of his age are capable of thinking only in vaguer terms, of being anxious about without being able to locate the seat of their trouble.

Now if there is one phrase that modern man seems to have taken to heart, it is Dostoevski's ringing 'we are all responsible for all'. Radio, films, television, all seem to have extended the concern of today's man to the further limits of the world he lives in. The Marxist pretension to form the New Man, the concern of socialists, democrats and liberals of every stamp to bring to the masses what were once the privileges of only the few, the tendency of writers, artists, intellectuals to devote their efforts to a constant stream of 'causes', the vogue of philosophies containing the terms 'humanism' and 'personalism' in their labels, – all these are symptomatic. Modern man has emerged from what he (somewhat hastily, perhaps) brands as an age of individualism, of isolation. If there is one thing he decries, it is the egotistic posture of unconcern and non-commitment towards the problems that torment the world about him. The value of values is man, and humankind is one great family; each one of us must strain every effort to assure that each member of that family enjoy a life worthy of a man. Despite all his infidelities to it (and which of us is entirely faithful to what we believe in?), this, dimly sensed, would seem the closest thing to an objective ideal envisaged by contemporary man.

But it has only made him more acutely conscious of its unattainability. How do we really get to communicate with others? To understand and be understood? To sympathise and gain real sympathy in return – not some sham of it? Who will consider me as a person, not coldly inform me, in the words of Menotti's consular secretary, 'Your name is a number, your story is a case'? We find ourselves all sitting at 'Separate Tables', revolted by the distance between us, impotent to get together. It is fascinating to see how Sartre, whose system excludes any meaningful personal relationship,

even as a possibility, still beats his wings like a wounded bird against this problem. It is precisely when one sees that all communication, understanding, love is impossible, that one faces the stark realisation that '*L'enfer, c'est les autres*'. Here, too, is one of the persistent themes of two of the most talented film directors of our day, Ingmar Bergman and Frederico Fellini. When the Zampano of *La Strada* crumples up on the sea-shore crying into the night his final protest, 'I don't need anybody, not anybody', even the most ordinary film-goer is aware that the gentleman doth protest too much. The very depersonalisation of his world, the bigness of its cold corporate structures, the multiplication of 'functionaries' who perform their unfeeling routines with all the icy precision of machines, seem to have set man running frantically about for some one to call him 'thou', to call him by his own most intimate name, some one 'real' with whom a truly personal relation is possible. And the multiplication of characters, paintings, sculptures in our day, from which eyes stare blank and expressionless out of a self imprisoned in unwilling, unwitting solitude, is testimony not only to a dim awareness that something has gone terribly wrong, but is also an inverted image of a cherished world in which true understanding and love would be possible.

That love, the man of our day is aware, would not imply merely the perfunctory performance of a set of duties one to another, be they sanctioned by Dale Carnegie or the God of Exodus. It could not mean simply giving what one *has* to the other: it must be the self that is given, in a gift that is perfectly reciprocal, with nothing held back. No more explicit recognition of the total exigencies of love could be imagined. It is the very totality of the gift required that makes modern man conscious, perhaps far more than his predecessors, of the sham that all partial loves represent, and at the same time, alas, of the quasi-impossibility of genuine love for the poor egotists that we all, Adam's children, are.

But to the products of a chance evolution, stray lostlings clinging to a tiny planet, due eventually (perhaps tomorrow) for meaningless extinction, what reason can modern man give to us why anyone should love us? 'Unloved, unloving, unloveable, in the same kind of a world': this was Clare Boothe Luce's anguished portrait of herself before she found the faith. And this is the source of anguish for the man we have been examining. He feels the need for a relationship that acknowledges an absolute value to the human being and his individual story, but in a world from which all absolutes



have been banished. His deep frustration is comparable to the builders of Babel. He is trying to construct a Mystical Body, but without a Christ.

### *Why Not Christianity?*

The reason is that a return to the Christian morality strikes modern man as necessarily a step backwards. Partially because his view of Christian morality is something of a caricature, surely; but neither the practice nor the preaching of Christians has always been exempt of the defects he thinks he has found there. Neither has always been entirely free of a certain taint that tended to devalue the body and make the sense of sin dangerously analogous to what modern man terms the guilt-complex. A nominalist or purely voluntarist notion of law is not always easy to distinguish from an irrational taboo originating in a perfectly arbitrary will of God, backed up with threats of a hell-fire that seems to have no intrinsic connection with the acts condemned. Doctrinal exaggerations and the imposition of certain practices, all we refer to as 'formalism', have not always respected the ineradicable personal element in religion and morality. Nor have the contingent norms of society and class always been kept distinct from the perennial demands of a Christian morality that must find resonance in the deepest heart of man wherever and whenever found.

The historical dimension of the human person, the fact that his liberty and moral responsibility are subject to growth and do not take the same form in childhood as in maturity, the historical axis of Christianity itself, the connection of Law, conscience, and God's Personal Love working out in time; these essential signposts of Christian reflection have sometimes been put in the shade by a timeless scheme of impersonal Law more akin to Stoicism. The paradox of development in dogma, whereby the Scribe in the Kingdom of Heaven is forever drawing out of the same treasure truths which are old and ever again renewed, has not always been accomplished without the danger of misplaced emphasis. And so with Christian morality as well.

To cite but the two main currents of present-day concern, the Christian moralist did not need to wait for modern man to tell him that a personalist morality, emphasising the values of communion in true charity and underlining a moral teaching based on the Mystical Body, was only caricatured in an individualist morality

which emphasises the apparently egotistic pursuit of one's own 'perfection', and the devil take the rest of men. Nor did the Christian moralist need await the philosophies of subjectivity to focus on the paramount importance of sincerity and of personal commitment to what one interiorly believes to be right. The classic distinction of material and formal sin makes this abundantly clear: a man can do what in fact is objectively evil and still get to heaven if he (blamelessly) think it good; another can exteriorly perform what is objectively good and still be damned because, in the modern term, the heart is not right.<sup>1</sup>

*Modern sense of sin: a Christian appraisal*

We may begin by pointing out that the guilt complex, far from being the equivalent of the Christian sense of sin, is rather a masquerade of it. In certain conditions, in fact, it can be a virulent foe of the true Christian sense of sin. This latter must have as its point of reference God and not the self; especially if that self pretends to be ideally some disembodied angelic being better than the union of body and soul God made and saw to be very good. A Christian sense of sin, moreover, would bear fruits of 'charity, joy, peace, patience' – all fruits of the Holy Spirit; the guilt complex produces almost the exact opposite. Instead of being a springboard to progress, it is a disease that paralyses all progress, particularly on that central point which is the whole of the law, charity.

*From taboo to law to conscience*

And yet, in his moral life, that historical creature called man must begin as a child under a law which he cannot understand, a law that is imposed from without, often couched in the form of a prohibition where the connection of the act and the threatened punishment must strike his infant understanding as perfectly arbitrary. The abuse of such parental authority can, granted, be extremely harmful, can tie the child into neurotic knots in later life. But the mistake would come in thinking either that all impositions from parental authority are to be dispensed with, or that the child is meant to stay forever at this infantile stage. Parental authority, like most teaching, has the function of putting itself eventually out

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Karl Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism* (London, 1934), pp. 225–9.

of a job, precisely by producing an individual who is reasonable and responsible enough at last to stand on his own feet. Only at this stage can the value of actions be scrutinised in the light of a mature vision of reality: only then can the child see that not all 'taboos' of society are on the same footing, nor all, from table manners to incest prohibitions, on a moral footing. Only then can he be expected to compare the code he has *received* with the code his personal conscience has not merely the privilege but the *duty to construct* and ratify interiorly<sup>1</sup>. The process does not mean rejection *en bloc* of all imposed morality, but the lucid discernment of where taboo and a mature vision of reality coincide, and where they differ.

A continuous reading of the Old and New Testaments, in fact, leads one to speculate whether the infancy of our race did not have to pass through the same pedagogy as the individual moral agent. From an original accent on an almost material notion of sin, akin to ritual impurity, without discernible relation to interior dispositions, backed by the often inscrutable punishments of a 'jealous' Yahweh, the moral consciousness of Israel advances to a notion of law as God's wise ordering of things for our own good. The God of the Decalogue is more frequently underlined as the God who, even prior to Exodus, is the God who promised our fulfilment to Abraham. The Law never becomes that merely impersonal Logos, the 'immanent reason of things' of Stoic philosophy. The Torah remains always God's personal word addressed to a people that is the object of his entirely unaccountable love: 'I have called thee by thy name!'

Then sin becomes plain as a rebellion of the first-born to his Father, the adultery of the bride to her Spouse. Then God's jealousy becomes plain as the other face of his inexplicable love for men, all the more inexplicable in that he has no need of man. And sin is seen as the *hamartia*,<sup>2</sup> the missing of the mark that is none other than our happiness: *gloria Dei vivens homo!*

The evolutionists, then, are not entirely wrong: there is an evolution of moral consciousness, not only in humanity more generally, but even in the pedagogical process of God's long revelation.

And yet, is the evolutionist prepared to show that all notion of a perennial structure of human nature is to be discarded? Or that man, wherever and whenever found, is incapable of perceiving a

<sup>1</sup> It is taken for granted, of course, that this process takes place in the context of faith.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Fr. Vawter's article, *infra* pp. 19-27.

certain basic set of ethical principles? The Decalogue, for instance?

In considering the thirst for sincerity which we find in contemporary man, we are reminded of Thomas Wolfe's determination to cast methodic doubt on all accepted literary judgements. He embarks on years of voracious reading in the effort to form his own personal opinions, only to confess at the end, perhaps with some disappointment, but with a candour that does him credit, that he has wound up in substantial agreement with the evaluations of the great tradition. The quest for a personal set of values can drive us into a tenacious refusal to agree with an opinion we finally see to be true, for the simple reason that someone else has managed to utter it before we did. This is the satanic temptation lying in the path of modern man: a sham sincerity more monstrous even than the sheep-like conformity he sees infecting the morality of former ages.

Can the personalism of contemporary morality sanction, sincerely sanction, unbridled robbery? or random murder? Or are these, as the great tradition insists, unchangeable features of the moral landscape which the limpid eye of personalism must acknowledge? Agreement here may be a first step down to Graham Greene's Potting Shed, the test of whether sincerity is sincere enough to admit the vision that waits there. Men have proposed literally hundreds of theories on where and how man is to find happiness. For us, our nature trails off into mystery, — man, the unknown, Carrel calls him — and reason may not always be able with its flickering lamp to light up *all* its dark passageways. To the Israelite, the Decalogue becomes increasingly clear as the map of human life his Father has given him in loving care for him. Sincerity will lead to a love that finds it normal to believe, trust, confide itself to One who is Father as well as Law-giver; it will lead to that Personal Word, his Son, then to that Church which continues his Incarnation down to our own day; it will lead us to find life, and find it more abundantly.

The Church and modern man, are, in fact drilling the same tunnel starting from opposite ends. The one begins from the exigency of interior sincerity; its initial probings are in the direction of objective standards. The former, starting out with the objective standards which her God has drawn out of the man he fashioned, must forever remind her children of their need to interiorise those standards in a faith unfeigned, a trust that is never confounded and a charity that bears all things. Let modern man read the Sermon on the Mount once again — let all of us do so, in fact. There, beside

the most eloquent demand for inwardness ever uttered, we shall find the Law, not abolished but fulfilled. We are asked now to furnish, not works of a purely exterior observance, but the unreserving gift of ourselves. How, and why? The answer lies in the piece of the puzzle that the man of our day seems hardly to know is lacking to him.

That piece is a God who is Personal; who loves us and out of love gives us his Law; and – incredible – can be *personally* offended by our rejection of his gift. The entire atmosphere of the Sermon on the Mount is bathed in a childlike trust in the Father; the key to the love it demands of us lies in the fact that His Son affirms ‘you do it unto Me’. Of each of us he wishes to say nothing less than ‘This is My Body’.

Here is the missing foundation for the modern world’s obscure sense of being responsible all for all, for the unlimited extension of its concern, for its mute detestation of all egotistic unconcern. And here alone can it find the love, the communication, the oneness it seeks so sorely: ‘One, Father, as You and I are One’. To the exigency of this sincere love, ‘Love one another as I have loved you’, modern man is honest enough to reply that such love is impossible to us. And Christ said nothing different: ‘Abide in My love’. ‘For without Me you can do nothing’. That love must be given, that gift is the Spirit of Jesus, soul of his Mystical Body: at one and the same time the bond of all the members one to another, and the voice that cries from within each of them, *Abba, Father!*

This Gift, this love, and not, as in the guilt complex, some ideal image of himself, is the focus for the Christian’s apprehension of the tragic seriousness of sin. Our constant temptation is to think that God loves us because we are somehow lovable in ourselves. But the exact reverse is true: sin is our own strictly personal property, all the rest is God’s gift. God loved us first, while we were still sinners, and in loving us, makes us lovable. The foundation for man’s dignity and worth which contemporary man seeks in vain, is nowhere else than in that love which God pours out in his unflagging creation of man, a creation which always has in view the adoption of man into the Sonship of Christ.

This is why the Cross will always remain the final embodiment of a single truth with two faces, each implying and reinforcing the other. It shows us what sin is, but precisely and only because it shows sin’s antithesis, God’s inexhaustible love. Only then was it plain that the secret, dimly avowed aim of sin must always be decide,

the destruction of God.<sup>1</sup> To a love which would draw us out of our egotism, pride and selfish adoration of our own independence, man's answer is 'Crucify him'. But not until Calvary did sin amazingly rub its eyes at finding its Victim at last within reach, not until then could it unleash all its lurking fury. The miracle is that this moment was not the last in human history.

And yet, when man has vented his utmost, when he sees the dead figure on the gibbet as wordless testimony to his hatefulness, just as he is tempted to descend that hill to final despair, the lance thrusts home and there rushes forth blood and water. All the hate we could fling against Him, God had endured, absorbed, outlasted. At the end, our sinful strength is spent, yet His Love still lives. Lives and creates in us a new heart, one that can love with a love that is poured out of his own heart.

Once sin is seen, in the only way a Christian can look at it, against the backdrop of that Crucified Love, a peculiar inversion occurs. The very recognition of our sins brings with it the simultaneous revelation of that same Love. And the Christian sense of sin becomes suffused with a trust, a liberating joy and a response of love that reminds us of St. Paul's word that we live no longer for ourselves but for Him who loved and died for us. Progressively the Christian is conscious of being, as it were, only secondarily concerned with *his own* perfection, *his own* getting to Heaven, *himself* generally. The final bolt of egotism has been slipped. It is the immense outpouring of God's love that becomes central for him, it is this which must not go to waste. The Blood that was poured out for our Atonement, to 'unite the scattered children of God', must not have been poured in vain.

But the vision of that Love shows at the same time why sin's punishment is not arbitrarily but intrinsically connected with the nature of sin itself. All sin ultimately comes down to the proud refusal of God's love that would bring us out of our egotism into communion with him and all his scattered children. Sin is sin exactly in the measure embodied in that refusal: whether it take the slack form of a sensuality too soft to face the challenge of that commitment, or the terrifying form that avarice, or even lust, can assume, ruthlessly reducing everyone in its entourage to mere objects of its own exploitation. Hell is our isolated selves having finally obtained the wish expressed by our lives; self-entombed, eternally frozen in the attitude of refusal that becomes at death the résumé of our

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Fr. Mally's article, *infra*, pp. 52-3.

entire life. Love cannot be forced, even by Infinite Love. And once faced with a life that culminates in final rejection, even the omnipotent God is helpless. 'How oft would I have gathered thee together . . . and thou wouldst not!'<sup>1</sup>

Only the Christian view of man can attribute such substance, such meaning to human life: this temporal, bodily creature can freely choose heaven or hell. For as Christians we believe in the whole man, embodied spirit, a creature made by God to be wholly native to space and time, body and soul indivisibly the object of God's creative as well as his redemptive action. We believe in a body whose positive value is such that without its handmaid the soul is gaping incompleteness; a body whose union with the soul is essential, not accidental, not to say somehow monstrous.

Much is said of the Unconscious dictating our conscious acts; but the fact of psychoanalytic cure indicates that even in psychic sickness liberty can impose a new organisation in the depths of our soul. Hence our drives and quasi-determinisms can be checked, tamed and eventually, in limits known only to God, personalised in this life through the patient action of an incarnate liberty in constant growth; till eventually we stand forth, in the image of the risen Christ, our bodies become the perfect embodiment of our accomplished personality. Nothing man does is entirely 'indifferent' or completely refractory to this process, whether we 'eat or drink or whatever else we do' – including sex. Our contemporaries see in the Unconscious nothing but demons, pulling down everything to the level of mere biology. The Christian may prefer to look on Christ's descent into the 'lower regions' as a liberating invasion of that realm as well; now the seed planted in our depths at creation is once more free to bring forth the fruit of its hidden yearning and can at last become the incorporation of a personal, life-producing love. Even instinct has a 'desire' to be transformed by the charity of Christ; even the lower creation 'groans and travails', 'awaits with eager longing' and eventually 'will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God'.<sup>2</sup>

But this 'assumption' of instinct into liberty, a term we prefer in hope of avoiding the connotations of 'escape' and 'camouflage' that beset the term 'sublimation', must then be seen as a long, continuous, life-time project. In this long pedagogy, even our

---

<sup>1</sup> Mt 23, 37.

<sup>2</sup> Rom 8, 18–22.

sins can assume a positive function,<sup>1</sup> if brought to the One who knew what was in man, and who has given sinful men like ourselves the power of changing wounds into glorified scars. In this patient pruning of time, all the various ages of man, each building on the work that went before it, each bringing its typical challenges, trials, temptations, purifications, each with its characteristic joys and its proper moral perfection; all of them have an irreplaceable contribution to make to us. Not only the 'big decisions' that set the course of our lives for years to come, but the long series of grey days where there is neither storm nor sunlight: all have an indispensable brush-stroke to add to the canvas that is our finished portrait.

For the actions of our lives are not an unrelated, discontinuous series. Sins do not make us just 'someone who sinned yesterday' but 'someone who today is a sinner'. Each one alters, however slightly, the helm of our basic life-course, forcing the fundamental direction of our being either towards or away from the communion God would give us, till at the end we take form like some living tableau, set in an attitude expressive either of acceptance or refusal.

In St. Matthew's account of the judgement, the damned ask indignantly: 'Lord, when did we see Thee hungry . . . thirsty . . . naked?' Christ's answer suggests that despite the opaque tissue of our temporal existence, he insists on our duty to see the strands of God's love working through our lives and the lives of those he expects us to love. We are not asked to recognise Christ in Magdalene's gardener, in the quite ordinary traveller to Emmaus, or in the dim figure on the shore which John detects as 'the Lord'. Our eyes must be sharpened by long fidelity, to the penetration of a faith that is already clairvoyant with the light of knowledge, understanding and wisdom.

Perhaps his persistence in assigning a kind of absolute value to the person and personal love puts contemporary man 'not far from the Kingdom of God' after all, closer than we imagine to the implication that 'you do it unto Me'. If the shadow of any momentary sparrow (to borrow an image from Chesterton) can be a message from the Sun, perhaps the smile of any love can tell us Love exists and loves us. Perhaps his sincerity will lead our groping brother to 'be watchful', his good intentions burgeon into a continued effort of attention, till one day he detect, however faintly the music of God's love which all the raucous cries of Calvary could not drown.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Fr. Le Blond's article, *infra*, pp. 28-35.