

# DO WE BELIEVE IN A CHURCH OF SINNERS?

By KEVIN T. KELLY

**E**ACH TIME WE ASSEMBLE AS CHURCH to celebrate eucharist we begin by acknowledging our need for forgiveness; and we go on to prepare to share in holy communion by making a common declaration: 'Lord, I am not worthy . . .'. Since Vatican II tells us that 'the real nature of the true Church' is revealed in the liturgy (cf *Constitution on the sacred liturgy*, n 2), it is clear that we are committed to a belief that we are a Church of sinners.

To say that we believe in a Church of sinners can be understood in a very weak sense i.e. it is within a Church of sinners that we believe. This would be saying no more than that the Church, though holy in itself, is made up of members who individually are more or less sinful. This would imply that the holiness of the Church is not affected by the sinfulness of its members. It exists on a higher plane beyond the reach of our personal sinfulness. In his two essays, 'The Church of sinners' and 'The sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II' (*Theological investigations* 6, chapters 17 and 18), Rahner reminds us that such a view is contrary to Catholic belief. There is no metaphysical church which has an existence of its own, separate from the flesh and blood men and women who are its members. We, the members of the Church, actually are the Church. Our sins are sins of the Church. They do not merely weaken the Church's witness to God's call to universal holiness. Through us, the Church is actually the subject of sin.

Some Christians might feel uneasy with such a stark attribution of sinfulness to the Church and might be tempted to tone it down a little. After all, the creed professes belief in a Church which is 'holy', not 'sinful'. Would it not be sufficient to admit that this 'holy' Church is, in its historical existence, defiled by the sins of its members but that, when the overall picture is seen, it is the holiness of the Church that predominates, not the sinfulness of its members?

Such a position is too complacent about the sins of the members of the Church, Christians who sin as Christians. If, to use Paul's metaphor, Christians are members of the body of Christ, Christians who sin make the body of Christ the subject of sin. If that is so, surely it is horrendous. For Paul the horror of it is vividly expressed in the question he poses to

the church in Corinth: 'Do you think I can take parts of Christ's body and join them to the body of a prostitute?' (1 Cor 6:15).

In the course of history some Christians have tried to evade this whole issue by claiming that sinners do not really belong to the Church. They are only nominal Christians. In reality, their sin has either put them outside the Church or else has shown them up as never really belonging to the true Church. Movements for Church reform down through the centuries have often been tempted to adopt this position. In its wisdom the Church has always recognized that it is contrary to our gospel-based faith to say that sinners do not belong to the Church.

This is a very salutary reaction. It means that the Church cannot be excused from tackling its own sinfulness. The sinfulness of the Church is a reality that cannot be denied. It is also a tragedy. The question every Christian has to face, if he or she really believes in the Church, is 'how am I to respond to the sinfulness of the Church I believe in? What am I going to do about it?' An obvious answer to that question is 'Physician, heal yourself'. In other words, each of us has to face up to his or her own sinfulness, since that is my own personal contribution to the sinfulness of the Church. Nevertheless, our concern for the sinfulness of the Church must look beyond our own sinfulness. The Church is more than a collection of individual Christians.

#### *Sinner – an ambiguous term*

Our use of the word 'sinner' tends to be ambiguous. Perhaps it might help to make a distinction between the positive and negative ways Christians use the word.

For Christians 'sin' is fundamentally a positive word. Its Christian meaning is inextricably bound up with our belief in a God of healing and forgiveness. Hence, the very 'owning' of one's sinfulness (and sin) before God is a transformative act. It is the first step on the road to conversion. To acknowledge that I am a sinner and to 'own' my sin before God is to confess my need for forgiveness and healing. The gospel parable assures us that the person who, with the tax-collector, sincerely prays: 'Lord, be merciful to me a sinner' returns home 'at rights with God'.

'Sinner' used in this positive way should not be taken to mean 'someone who used to be a sinner but is so no longer'. That is not what the tax-collector means when he prays, 'Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner'. He really is a sinner and he recognizes himself as such. That is precisely why he recognizes his need for the compassion and forgiveness of God. Even the words of Jesus to the woman taken in adultery, 'Go, and sin no more', are not an indication that she is no longer a sinner. She

leaves Jesus a sinner, but a forgiven sinner, as do the many others who hear his life-giving words 'Go, your sins are forgiven you'.

However, the word 'sinner' can be used by Christians also in a negative way. A striking example of a sinner in this negative sense is the Pharisee in the parable who prided himself on his righteous life and who thanked God that he was not like the rest of humankind. The gospel tells us that he did not return home at rights with God. There is no indication in the parable that there is any major ethical misconduct in his life. His sin is at a deeper level than ethical misconduct. He personifies the people to whom Jesus is addressing this parable – 'people who prided themselves on being virtuous and despised everyone else' (Lk 18:9). It is this group of people who come under this negative use of the word 'sinner'. It is as though the only sin that ties the hands of God's forgiveness is the sin of grounding one's self-worth on a belief in the non-worth of everyone else.

Sinners in the positive sense mentioned earlier clearly belong to the Church. No one would have any problem with that. What about Christians who are sinners in the negative sense outlined above? Do they belong to the Church?

Fidelity to the gospel must surely make us recognize that they do. Yet at the same time the gospels portray Jesus as being radically opposed to this group of sinners. What are we to make of this? Perhaps it highlights the paradox in their situation. They belong to the Church and yet they are a living contradiction to the faith of the Church. Maybe the pastoral approach to these sinners has to reflect this paradox. At one and the same time, the Church has to both 'own' and 'disown' them and their sinfulness.

This is consistent with the process of conversion in the case of a 'sinner' in the positive Christian sense. When such a person 'owns' his sinfulness and his sins, he is both 'owning' and 'disowning' them at the same time. He is acknowledging that these sins truly are his own, they belong to him, they are part of his reality. Yet he is also acknowledging that, as a disciple of Christ, he has to 'disown' these sins since they contradict what Christ stands for. That is why he wants to 'die' to sin and be liberated from this side of his life. Admittedly, the healing process might take a lifetime – and beyond! Yet the initial act of both 'owning' and 'disowning' his sin is indispensable. Without that first step the healing process cannot begin.

This conversion process is short-circuited in the case of a 'sinner' in the negative sense. As long as he remains enclosed within his self-inflicted blindness, there is no possibility that he himself will 'disown' his

sin since he refuses to 'own' it. This is where the Church has to step in. As well as 'owning' his sin, the Church must also 'disown' it, precisely because it is also the Church's sin. In the case of conduct which, though wrong, does not involve any major violation of the dignity of human persons, it is probably sufficient for such 'disowning' to be implicit in the ordinary run-of-the-mill moral teaching of the Church as commonly recognized by people. However, where more gross violations of human dignity are involved, the Church might feel obliged to 'own' the sin by a very explicit act of 'naming' it (and even the sinner, in some instances) and at the same time 'disowning' it by declaring it to be contradictory to Christian life and witness.

A very striking instance of such 'owning' and 'disowning' by the Church is found in a sermon preached in 1511 on the island of Hispaniola (the modern-day Dominican Republic). The preacher, Fray Antonio de Montesinos, a Dominican friar, was addressing a congregation made up of the Governor of the island and all the Christian notables who were making themselves rich by their exploitation of the native Indians. Taking as his text 'I am the voice of one crying in the desert', he began:

I am the Voice of Christ crying in the desert of this island. It is essential that you listen . . . with your entire heart and your entire being . . . The message of Christ to you is this: you are all in a state of mortal sin. You are living in mortal sin and will die in it, because of your cruelty and your tyrannical attitude towards innocent people . . . Are they, too, not human beings? . . . Are you not obliged to love them as yourselves?  
(*Catholic International* vol 3, no 19, p 936)

It would be hard to imagine a more forthright condemnation of a group of people. The language is blunt, the judgement is clear and unconditional. Nevertheless, when this sermon is read in 1992, a year in which remorse is being expressed for the collusion and even support of the Church for the appalling injustice committed against the Indians, it stands out like a beacon in the darkness. Fray Antonio had the integrity and courage to name the horrendous sin which was being committed against the Indians. And the context of his naming was the gathering of the community to celebrate the eucharist. The Governor and the Christian nobility of the island had gathered to thank God for all the blessings they had received. I suspect that there would have been no Indians present at that gathering. The Christian invaders would have considered them 'not our kind'. No doubt, too, they would have thought of them as 'not God's kind' either, since they were sunk in idolatry and

outside the grace of God. These Christian nobles, like the Pharisee in the parable, would have thanked God that they were not 'like the rest of mankind' and particularly that they were not like these Indians.

To gather in eucharist in such a frame of mind is a horrendous sacrilege. Such people, in the words of the parable, would not go home again 'at rights with God'. Fray Antonio says the same thing in different language when he tells them they will go home 'in a state of mortal sin'.

What so outraged Fray Antonio was that this eucharistic gathering of Christians refused to own their blatantly obvious sin. As long as they refused to take that step, they were not *en route* for conversion. They were facing in the opposite direction. They were in a state of mortal sin. No doubt, the pastoral intention behind his sermon was salvific. By naming their sin with such candour (and he was 'one of them'), he was hoping that they might be stirred into recognizing the inhumanity they were involved in. His naming their sin was an invitation to them to own it themselves.

It could probably be argued that some papal encyclicals, particularly in the social field, fit into this process of 'owning' and 'disowning' gross sins of violating the dignity of human persons. So too do prophetic statements of local hierarchies and church groups when they speak out against violations of human dignity in their own countries, as was the case with the 1992 Lenten Pastoral Letter of the bishops of Malawi. Such 'owning' and 'disowning' is clearly seen as an integral element in proclaiming the gospel of God's love for all women and men. This is part of the Church's public witness. Of course, whether it has any credibility will largely depend on how faithful the Church is to the gospel it is proclaiming. Paul VI made this point very clearly in his Apostolic Letter on Evangelization: 'People today listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses' (n 41). This salutary warning leads us to look at the credibility of the Church's own life and conduct. Granted that it is a Church of sinners, does the 'owning' and 'disowning' of sin by the Church in its own life and conduct give a credible witness to those outside the Church to whom it is proclaiming the gospel?

#### *Difficulties with the credibility of the Church's public witness*

In the eyes of many outside the Church, including those sympathetically disposed towards the Church, there is a major problem about the credibility of the Church's public witness. This is due to the fact that if by sin we mean inhumanity, the current categorization of certain groups of people in the Church as 'sinners' seems to run counter to our present-

day perception of what constitutes inhumanity. Many who come into these categories are not perceived by people today as involved in any gross violation of the dignity of the human person. In fact, in many instances they are seen more as 'victims of sin' and it is their own dignity as human persons which has been violated.

Among such people are women and men who have had to face the shattering experience of recognizing that the marriage on which they have staked their lives has failed and whose painful pilgrimage through a kind of death towards resurrection has eventually led them into a second marriage; or, again, gay men and lesbian women who have struggled with their sexual identity in the face of incomprehension, disapproval and even outright hostility from many in society (perhaps their own family in some cases), who, in their loneliness and hopelessness, may have sought some kind of passing relief in a series of transient relationships and who have eventually found peace, a positive direction in life and genuine love in a more permanent gay or lesbian relationship which, in turn, is sustained and deepened by the sexual expression of their love; or married couples who have found that methods of contraception condemned by the Church have helped them deepen their love for each other and their children by giving them the opportunity to make love when appropriate without the experience being vitiated by the fear of another pregnancy.

In their different ways, all these people have been made to feel that they are not fully accepted in the Church they regard as their home. They even experience this condemnation as a form of being 'disowned' by the Church.

For instance, those who are living in a second marriage, unless they are widowed or their first marriage has been annulled, are officially barred from receiving communion. Gay couples in faithful relationships are 'disowned' by official church teaching in very strong terms. In fact, the recent letter of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith to the US bishops even justifies discrimination against them in the area of housing and certain forms of employment. The implication clearly is that they constitute a danger to society and are likely to corrupt the morals of the young. Those who cannot accept the teaching of *Humanae vitae* and who find the practice of contraception beneficial to their marriage are told by the pope: 'What is called into question by the rejection of this teaching is the very idea of the holiness of God' (quoted in Bernard Häring, *My witness for the Church*, p 227).

Of course, the point will be made that there is no problem for any of these people provided they are prepared to both 'own' and 'disown'

their sin. If those in a second marriage are prepared to live as 'brother and sister', they can receive communion. If gays and lesbians renounce their life-style and practise celibacy, they will be fully accepted. With the enormous advances in the reliability and availability of natural family planning, it should be possible for most couples practising contraception to amend their ways.

However, the problem is not as simple as this solution seems to suggest. For the most part, these people have really tried to 'own' and 'disown' whatever sin has been involved in the tragic situations they have lived through. In no way are they denying that they are sinners. Many of them feel their sinfulness very profoundly – but in the positive sense mentioned earlier. They can identify very deeply with the prayer of the tax-collector 'Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner'.

However what they cannot disown is the gift of new life they are now experiencing. It runs counter to their own experience for such couples in a good second marriage or in a life-giving homosexual partnership to be told that they are 'living in sin', or for married couples to be told that their contraceptive-aided love-making is seriously offensive to God. Far from 'living in sin', people such as these sincerely believe they are forgiven sinners living in grace. And they are grateful to God for this gift.

It is sometimes argued that the conduct of these categories of people has to be publicly 'disowned' because it is a living contradiction to the Church's moral witness. In reality, what scandalizes many people outside the Church, as well as within, is the fact that a church of sinners which professes belief in a God of forgiveness and compassion seems to condemn groups of people for whom most in our society would feel great compassion.

#### *The sinfulness of office-holders in the Church*

As Christians our love for the Church inclines us to presume the integrity of office-holders in the Church, especially since, from the nature of the case, they are usually bishops and priests. Hence, while theoretically we recognize the possibility of their sinning, our natural tendency is to deny, or at least play down, sin on the part of office-holders. I am not referring to sin in their personal lives but in the exercise of their duties of office.

There is no lack of criticism of office-holders in the Church. Like all who carry the heavy burden of exercising authority, they are targets for criticism from all quarters. However, we do not tend to speak of 'sin' with regard to the way they exercise their office. Perhaps this reticence betrays a kind of spiritual immaturity. We find our security in the

Church. Hence, we do not like to think of those in positions of authority as capable of letting us down by actually sinning in the decisions they make.

Sinful behaviour means acting in a way which violates human dignity, either that of ourselves or of others. Quite literally it is irresponsible behaviour since it is failing to respond adequately to the needs of the human persons with whom we are dealing.

Hence, all sin is inhumanity in some form or other. In the past decade there have been an increasing number of allegations of serious inhumanity in the way office-holders at various levels in the Church have exercised their authority. The criteria used for the appointment of bishops and the actual appointments made in a not inconsiderable number of cases have been regarded as irresponsible and hence inhuman. The same has been alleged with regard to the way some female religious congregations have been treated as they have struggled to reorder their constitutions in response to their original charism and the needs of the present day. Something similar is alleged to have happened to some male congregations wanting to return to the 'non-clerical' vision of their founder. Numerous theologians of acknowledged competence and integrity appear to have been hounded in a most inhuman fashion by a CDF which fails to listen to the breadth of theological thinking in the Church as a whole. If these allegations are true, and I am inclined to think they are, the situation is serious.

However, the core of the inhumanity alleged to be currently operative among some office-holders in the Church, especially in some of the Vatican congregations, lies deeper than these particular instances. They are the symptoms, rather than the root cause.

The root cause is perceived by many people as being a mind-set found among many powerful Vatican office-holders which is not open to views which challenge its own position. Any listening that takes place is not for the purpose of learning but only in order to refute. Local churches struggling to bring about more genuine inculturation of the gospel or trying to interpret the gospel in the light of the signs of the times as experienced in their part of the world find their efforts emasculated by curial directives or by manipulation on the part of some curial congregations or officials. According to first-hand reports, the curial manipulation of the 1992 meeting of CELAM seems to have been a blatant example of such an irresponsible and inhuman exercise of authority. Issues which, in the Church at large throughout the world, are considered to be burning issues of pastoral urgency are not even allowed on the agenda for discussion – optional celibacy for priests, the ordination

of women, not forgetting the issues mentioned in the previous section, contraception, divorce-remarriage and homosexuality.

This kind of inhumanity on the part of some office-holders is beginning to drive many in the Church to desperation. It has even provoked such a saintly moral theologian as Bernard Häring to overcome his natural reluctance to criticize the Vatican publicly. He has recently produced a little book, *My witness for the Church* (Paulist Press 1992), which is extremely frank and hard-hitting in its criticisms of the mentality of some office-holders in the Vatican. He felt an obligation to 'do all that is humanly possible to encourage a change, a transformation of the structures and mentalities which are not gospel-centred' and even went so far as to say: 'I believe that we have arrived at the point where it can no longer be disputed that we are in a pathological situation' (p 90).

To believe in a Church of sinners is to recognize that there is a real possibility of sin in the office-holders of the Church. Consequently, a concern for the good of the Church should make us alert to situations where this possibility may seem to be actually recognized. This should not be condemned out of hand as a negative, hypercritical or disloyal attitude towards the Church. Of course, it is possible that some people who criticize office-holders in the Church may in reality be dumping on them unresolved problems from their earlier years. However, that is merely a pathological version of what is fundamentally a very positive and healthy love of a Church which is honestly acknowledged to be a Church of sinners. I would interpret Bernard Häring's impassioned criticisms as an expression of such a love of the Church.

Granting the real possibility of sin in the office-holders of the Church, such sin, when it occurs, contradicts the public witness of the Church and so needs to be publicly 'owned' and 'disowned'. If this is done by the office-holders themselves, there is no problem. However, when they refuse to 'own' their sin and even insist on denying it, it needs to be named and 'owned' by other members of the Church, so that it can then be publicly 'disowned' for the sake of the public witness of the Church. However, a Catch-22 situation arises when the office holders concerned claim to be judge and jury in their own case. This is really what happens when they claim the right to set the agenda regarding what issues are open for discussion in the Church. The Catch-22 situation is intensified when they attempt to make lesser office-holders promise under oath to keep to the restricted agenda they have set. The ultimate irony occurs when they publicly 'disown' the very people who have the prophetic insight and courage to 'own' and 'disown' the church-injuring sins of these office-holders.

Is 'sin' too harsh a word to be using in this context? I do not think so. My intention is not to vilify these office-holders or attribute personal malice to them. Sin is a word with all kinds of positive reverberations for Christians. To speak of sin with regard to office-holders in the Church is to acknowledge their solidarity with the rest of us. Unlike what we say of Christ in the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer, they are like us in all things, including sin. To make sin a taboo word in speaking of them is to refuse to face human reality. It also shows a lack of faith in the power of God's healing Spirit active in the Church – and a lack of faith in the office-holders in question to be open to that Spirit.

*The Church we believe in – a Church of sinners, but also a holy Church*

This article has tried to wrestle with the question 'Do we believe in a church of sinners?' Although considerable space has been devoted to the sinfulness of the Church, I would like to end on a positive note. The ultimate object of faith is God. God is the one in whom we believe. To believe in the Church is to believe in God acting in and through the Church. To borrow a phrase from Rahner, the Holy Spirit is the dynamic element in the Church. That is why it is totally inadequate to interpret 'we believe in a Church of sinners' as meaning 'we believe in a Church in which, on balance, there is more good than evil'. Our belief in the Church is not a judgement of proportionality. It is belief in the living presence and action of God in the Church. That is why any pessimism or fatalism with regard to the Church must be 'disowned' as unchristian. It stands in contradiction to belief in the Church. While we must 'own' the sinfulness of the Church – and each of us has a special responsibility to 'own' his or her personal contribution to that sinfulness – we must not be content to settle for that sinfulness and give it whatever house-room it wants in the Church. Our belief in the Holy Spirit, present and active in the Church, commits us strongly to 'disown' that sinfulness. To believe in the Church is to have a confident hope that the Church can become a truer image of the one whose very name it 'owns' by calling itself Christian. Hence, we must always have the faith and courage to 'disown' whatever is unchristian in the Church. This must be the case even, or rather especially, when what is deemed to be unchristian is the way office-holders in the Church are exercising their authority. The words of Cardinal Ratzinger, quoted by Leonardo Boff in a letter to his Franciscan Provincial (cf *The Tablet*, 17/10/92, p 1309), might provide an appropriate conclusion to this article:

Is it unconditionally a sign of better times that today's theologians no longer dare to speak prophetically? Is it not rather a sign of a feeble love

which no longer makes the heart burn with holy zeal for God's cause (2 Cor 12:2)? It is the sign of a love which has become apathetic and which no longer dares to make the painful commitment on behalf of and in favour of the beloved. The person who does not feel wounded by the shortcomings of a friend, who no longer suffers because of them and who does not fight to change them, no longer loves. Should this also apply to our relationship with the church?