

Social Sin, Sinful Structures

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I suggest that the claims that are usually made regarding social sin and sinful structures can be set out in the following way:

1. Evil exists not only in the choices individuals make but also in the social structures and economic systems which result from our choices;
2. Structures and systems have a life of their own over and above, and even independent of, the life and the powers of the individuals within them;
3. Because the evil that becomes enshrined in structures and systems is over and above what can be attributed to individuals, the way to counter that evil is different from how one goes about changing individuals;
4. Changing oppressive structures and systems requires the methods of confrontation;
5. The Church, by reason of its commitment to the oppressed, must be involved in confronting and changing oppressive structures and systems.

Let us now see whether or not, or to what extent, we can agree with any part of this five-part statement about social sin and sinful structures. (Each part leads to the next, and so I will deal with the first three very briefly, and with the last two more substantially.)

1. This statement is not only true, but it needs to be emphasised, in order to help people realise that they can be contributing to oppression even though they would not see themselves as oppressors. For example, one might justifiably disclaim having personal attitudes that are racist, but nevertheless, just by serving social and political institutions which give an entrenched advantage to a dominant group in society, one can be oppressing those who don't belong to that group. Similarly, the economic system, the education system, the legal and judicial systems, and the Church, just by being geared according to the thought-patterns, expectations, values and preferences of the dominant culture, effectively disadvantage people who don't belong to that culture and who have different values and expectations and ways of relating. This form of oppression goes largely unnoticed by the majority group who simply presume that others think and relate and choose the way they do - which is what ethnocentrism means. But it is noticed by those who are disadvantaged by it, and acutely felt when the conflict is between a majority culture which is individualistic, competitive, materialistic and success oriented, and minority cultures which are more personalistic, more spiritual and more concerned for relationships and community, and the environment.

Statistics which demonstrate the devastating consequences of this conflict are by now unfortunately tedious.

2. Anthropologists have long since pointed out that within any particular culture or sub-cultural group, the lives of individuals are considerably conditioned by the expectations, the customs and the norms of the group, sometimes for their good and sometimes not. I think some of the indigenous cultures of the Pacific are well acquainted with this phenomenon.

Likewise, corporate bodies, whether they are business groups or trade unions or religious institutions, develop their own customs, ethos and expectations which considerably condition the lives of their individual members. This is not necessarily evil, and may be a very positive support to people who have the same ideals and need to experience solidarity in pursuit of those ideals. But if for some reason change is needed, the movement for change will encounter the strong tendency of the institution to preserve the status quo. The underlying dynamic here is the instinct for self-preservation, and includes fear. The reaction against change is heightened when significant vested interests - whether economic or social are at stake. Those with the most to lose can be expected to react to preserve their interests and privileges.

Trying to bring about change can be likened to trying to change the direction of a moving car or boat. Persons put it in motion in the first place and are regarded as being in control. But a momentum has been created that is a little larger than the powers of the people on board. In a real sense, the car/boat has a life of its own - although not totally. And the situation is different also according to whether one is in the driving seat or the back seat.

3. How do you bring to heel that something in the life of institutions and systems which is more than the life of their individual members? After all, you can call individuals to repentance and to reconciliation. That's because they are persons. But institutions and systems are not persons. It looks as though how you change them, and how you change individuals, are two different processes. After all, we have seen that institutions and systems do have a life of their own, additional to the life of their individual members and not entirely and immediately within the control of the individual members.
4. Some conclude from this that opposing the oppression that is enshrined in structures and systems requires that you "take sides" against them. Further, it is argued that to the extent that structures and systems repress reform movements or deny political or due judicial processes, this constitutes a kind of "institutional violence", which may be justly countered by violence.

Others argue that if you don't change the individual persons who make up the institution or who control the system, then you haven't really changed anything. To change the system itself without effecting any change of heart or conversion in people is only to change the stripes on the tiger. And there is a lot of historical evidence that revolutions are not very successful at bringing in the promised new order.

I don't think we should be cornered into arguing whether you need to change individuals or systems. It seems too obvious that the need is to change both. The question is, therefore, *how* do you change systems in a way that really does remove the evils of oppression?

Some solid food for thought has been given by a leading moral philosopher and moral theologian here in New Zealand:

There is an approach to social issues that has been rather widely accepted and still enjoys considerable favour. It is essentially based on scientific method. A survey of the situation as made, the data collected and the most suitable remedy that the state of knowledge permits is applied. In itself, the method is unexceptionable. It is systematic and efficient. Who wants solutions based on ignorance? But as a total approach it is inadequate. It presumes that the situation and the problems are as clear and as unambiguous as rocks. It fails to recognise that what constitutes an issue, and what significance is to be attached to it, are based on one's presuppositions, values and policy. There is the tacit assumption that the problem is "out there" to be recognised by any sane human being. On closer analysis, it appears that this approach is highly conservative. It tends to conserve the roots of the problem.

The Christian approach is different and essentially radical. It invites to, in fact insists on, a fundamental shift of attention from the claimed facts "out there" to the heart of the one who views the situation. It looks back at the one who is interpreting the facts and the situation. The person must be sure that his heart is pure, his eye clear, his love sincere, and his purposes beyond reproach. He must listen to the voice of the Lord, ready to find himself in the wrong. In listening to God's word he discovers afresh who he is in relation to God and to his brothers and sisters. This leads to a purer and fuller grasp of his responsibilities in the human and Christian communities. An awareness should gradually develop of the extent to which he himself wittingly, half-wittingly and unwittingly contributes to and connives at the situation he now regards as problematic. (Rev V Hunt, unpublished paper).

Father Hunt's last sentence suggests to me that to do justice to our topic we need to reflect on the subject of corporate guilt. We need to be aware of how we "wittingly, half-wittingly or unwittingly" contribute to social sin and sinful structures.

The concept of corporate guilt is not strange to some indigenous cultures in our own day and in the Pacific, just as it was natural to the people of the ancient Middle East. Semitic legal codes simply took it for granted that guilt and retribution belonged not just to the individual but also to the whole group to which the individual belonged. So much was this the case that the prophet Ezekiel had to remind the Jews of his day that, in the final analysis, guilt and punishment belonged strictly speaking only to the individual who had made the sinful choices. So, there were two kinds of guilt: that which belonged to the group and that which belonged only to the individual.

Similarly, the Christian faith, in its turn, took some centuries to understand properly the differences between original sin and personal sin. Original sin doesn't involve

any personal decision by ourselves and therefore doesn't involve guilt or punishment strictly speaking. Personal sin, on the other hand, involves both. But the Christian community had no trouble understanding that without Christ we were collectively deprived of our own destiny. It knew that Christ was radically needed by every human being. And so, just as salvation was a corporate thing resulting from union with Christ, so too, the condition of needing Christ was a corporate thing.

So, too, is the condition of being human a corporate thing. Without others, we cannot be our true selves. So much does our own authenticity depend on right relationships with others that some individual rights (for example, the right to ownership) are in fact conditional upon the prior right of others to the means of meeting their own more fundamental needs. Some of our personal rights are relative, because being human means being in relationships to others. There is no other way of being human. It is a corporate thing.

It also pertains to the condition of being human to experience solidarity with others in a variety of ways, including guilt. As a corrective to the exaggerated individualism of Western culture, we need to reflect on this experience of solidarity. With some editorial adaptations, I give you a description of this from the pen of Father J. Cowburn SJ (cf his chapter in John J Scullion and Others, *Original Sin*, Dove, Melbourne, 1975)

First, we experience solidarity in *accomplishment*, or we obtain glory through the deeds of others when we and they belong to some group. A young woman, let us suppose, gives her first cello recital in her home city, and it is a huge success, everyone clapping like mad. In the audience are some members of her family. These feel themselves to be in two positions: as individual persons they are in the audience clapping the performer, but as her blood relations they are also on the stage with her receiving the applause. They later tell the girl they are proud of her - not just that she has a right to be proud, but that *they* are proud, as if they had done something; and other people, congratulate them on the cellist's success. At times like this we behave like ancient Middle East Semites. Whole countries behave in the same way: when Virginia Wade won the Women's' Singles at Wimbledon, almost every English person felt victorious. So do races: when Israel won the six day war, Jews everywhere said, "*We've won*". At times the whole human race reacts as one, and human beings everywhere claim credit for what a few have done: When in 1969 a man first set foot on the surface of the moon, everyone said that "man" had accomplished a great feat and all felt a sense of accomplishment. In this experience of solidarity in accomplishment, people often reach back into the past: I remember a guide in a church in Tyrol pointing to a Medieval carved door and saying: "Look at what we could do before America was even discovered!"

Secondly, we experience solidarity in *indebtedness* arising from favours received. Suppose that you are running a garage and a man comes to you at an inconvenient time asking you to fix his car at once; you are about to explain that you can't, when you recognise him as the doctor, who, by extraordinary efforts, saved your sister's life, and so you do the job because you feel you should.

Thirdly, we experience solidarity in *hurt or grievance*. If someone is treated unjustly, all his family feels hurt with him, and the appalling things done to Jews in Nazi Europe were taken personally by Jews everywhere. In solidarity of race and religion they all felt the hurt and the grievance. In solidarity of colour, black people everywhere feel hurts inflicted on blacks anywhere, and at least some of us feel that when injustice is done to any human beings, we suffer and have a grievance. This, too, reaches back into the past: present-day Jews still feel wronged by the persecutions of Jews by Christians in the 19th Century and earlier and American blacks have a grievance because of what was done to blacks in the time of slavery.

Fourthly, and finally, there is solidarity in *guilt*. We tend to resist this idea. We are eager to claim our share of the glory won by members of our families or our fellow country-men. We spontaneously feel that their grievances are also ours; more or less willingly, we share their indebtedness; but when it comes to sharing their guilt, we may behave like those sports fans who, when their team wins, say “we won”, and when it loses say: “they lost”. However, in spite of this resistance, at times we have the experience. (To take a recent example, didn't all Canadians rejoice in the victory of Johnson in the 100 metres at Seoul? And didn't all Canadians feel that they somehow shared the shame and the guilt for which Johnson was disqualified?) Likewise, some of us, when we think of Auschwitz, instead of saying “the Nazis did that” and stopping there, we go on to say: “That was done by members of the human race to which we belong”, and feel ashamed. We go beyond judging others to experiencing a share of their guilt. And so, I suggest, we still *experience* corporate guilt, as the ancient Middle East used to do, though we distinguish more clearly between it and personal guilt and we punish only those who are personally guilty.

But are these experiences valid? An individualist might say that “the human race” is a convenient phrase but it represents no single entity; all that is real, he would say, are individual people, so that when someone does something good, no one else has any right to feel proud or victorious; when a favour is done to one person, no one else incurs a debt of gratitude; when someone is hurt, no one else should feel aggrieved unless personally affected; and if someone does wrong, no one else shares the guilt, and if you do feel guilt or shame because of what someone else has done, you should reason yourself out of it. This sounds highly rational, but it is rationalistic, which is different. I suggest that we should trust the experience, not write it off as deluded.....

If I am right, and these experiences are valid, there is a personal glory, which one gets by one's own exertions, and there is a different kind of glory or sense of accomplishment which comes to us from what others do. There is one's own individual indebtedness, and there is one's share in that of others. There is personal hurt, coming from what one suffers in one's own person, and there is the different thing which is one's sense of grievance because of what was done to others (and this can be stronger and more unforgiving than the former). Finally, there is personal guilt and there is our share of the guilt of others.... One should “not only be mindful of one's own guilt, but feel oneself genuinely implicated in the guilt of others and furthermore the collective guilt of one's age” (Unpublished paper, pp 3-7).

I wonder whether the solidarity in hurt and grievance and guilt that Cowburn illustrates doesn't sometimes become an experience of solidarity in death itself. In the BBC programme "*Fourteen Days in May*", when an apparently innocent man was being taken to his execution after four years of waiting, one of the other inmates said "we all die tonight". How profoundly true that was - not only for the other inmates whose turn was still to come, but also for the prison officials and all the bureaucrats who slavishly carried out the dictates of the system. Hadn't the taking of that one life somehow relativised the lives of everybody concerned? The death of one had reduced the living of others. Later, when the executed man's lawyer was asked the perennial question: "why" he could only say: "because it's a sick world."

We have looked at the reality of corporate guilt, even in cases where no personal fault or choice is involved. But corporate guilt comes into its own when we are personally involved by complicity, whether through what we do or through what we fail to do. However, I think we need to be clear-headed about this, because there is something abhorrent about judging people guilty just on the grounds of their association with others who are guilty. If we are going to be consistent with our own sense of justice, we will not want to brand people as automatically responsible for what the group they belong to is doing: guilt just by association.

The individual's complicity presupposes that he/she knows what is going on and knows that it is wrong. Such is not always the case; it is certain, for example, that not all the German people knew about the killing in concentration camps. On the other hand, there can be a not-knowing resulting from not wanting to know, as when we strongly suspect something and deliberately do not investigate. Or, there can be a not-knowing resulting from unconcern. For example, the older Mafia wives in the *Godfather* did not know what the men were doing, not so much because they did not want to know, but because they did not regard it as their business. There are still practising Christians who do not know about social injustices for the same sort of reasons. It can be a form of complicity with the sins of others.

But even when the individuals know what is going on, they must also know that these activities are wrong before they can be regarded as morally responsible. Here, too, there can be a not-knowing, either in good faith or in bad faith. It is not uncommon for people to grow up with genuinely mistaken moral views, especially when these are the views of the group itself, collectively shared and lived out over a long time, e.g. children in Northern Ireland, pillaging, looting. And in the early stages of it first dawning on individuals that the values or practices of the group might not be right, it is easy to put such disturbing thoughts aside.

As well as being in the know, individuals also need to be in a position of being able to do something about it before they can be regarded as personally responsible for what is going on. Clearly, different levels of responsibility within the organisation can make a difference here. But just as there are ways of conveniently not knowing, so too, there are ways of conveniently feeling powerless. It may require courage to stand up against more powerful members of the group. It hasn't even been easy for conscientious doctors to challenge some of the unethical research practices of their

colleagues. It wouldn't be easy for junior reporters to challenge the editing and selection processes by which their media bosses give an unethical misrepresentation of what is involved in Maori land claims.

From all these examples, I think it is clear that even where social sin and sinful structures are active, it is still *persons* that are involved, and changing oppressive systems is still, and above all, a matter of dealing with persons. We need to be clear on that before we can be clear on what methods of promoting change are appropriate (cf also Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation on Penance and Reconciliation*, n.16).

5. One of the problems with blaming institutions and systems is that in the final analysis if it is the system's fault then it's nobody's fault, and nobody in particular is responsible for changing the system from the inside. The only thing left is to confront it from the outside. It is at this point that the Church takes a stand based on its conviction that *persons* are responsible for social sin, and therefore persons can be rightly called upon to change what needs changing. This is a more radical defence of the oppressed than any method which focuses only on the sinful structures themselves.

The Church accepts that "there are structures which are evil and which cause evil", but it believes they are *consequences* of evil more than the *causes* of evil. The Church also accepts that structures and systems can become "relatively independent of the human will", e.g. car/boat, but it insists that human freedom is still a greater reality, e.g. driver (cf *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"*, 1984, n.15; *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* 1986, nn 42, 74-79.)

In this context, we come up against two opposing views: on the one hand, the view which has its roots in the Judeo-Christian faith and sees persons as being responsible for the structures and systems they create, and responsible for changing them when required. From this perspective, sin comes from the heart and only in a derived and secondary sense can we speak of "social sin" (Instruction 1986, n.75). We have already dealt at length with the significant difference between collective guilt and personal guilt.

On the other hand, there is a materialistic ideology which attributes to structures and systems a pervading priority over persons. This ideology leads, logically enough, to the view that changing systems and structures is sufficient to create the new society. The nearest it comes to acknowledging the responsibility of persons is when it acknowledges the fault of *other* persons - "them and us" situation. From this perspective, it is an easy step to the view that class struggle and violence are inevitable.

In the earlier passage from Father Hunt, the point was made that the Christian approach to change is more radical. It focuses not only on the other persons "out

there”, but also on the persons working for change. Change involves us, not just them. And precisely for that reason, it includes an acceptance of our *own guilt*.

One of the profound convictions of the Church concerning its efforts to change others - (evangelization) - is that it presupposes the continuing and deeper conversion of those who want to change the others. This was beautifully reiterated by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975. But in the same document, the Pope made it clear that a change process which begins with personal conversion never ends with the individual, and in fact is defective and unfinished if it doesn't reach out into every sphere of society. A true change of thinking and of heart, and of attitude and direction, becomes exteriorised in changed relationships, and in changed structures which, after all, are only structured relationships - structured for the purpose of getting advantage over others, or structured for the pursuit of freedom and justice, depending on the purposes of the mind and heart, - which is the point! (cf also John Paul II's references to “Solidarity” and the responsibility “of all for all”, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, nn 38-40).

The Church's field of action is vast, in fact, cosmic. It is not only other persons who are changed by the gospel acting as a leaven, but the whole human habitat, including both our social and our physical environments. Yet the Church is under no illusion that the completion of this task involves a further divine intervention in history which will mark the final transition from history as we know it to what scripture calls the fullness of God's kingdom. The sheer transcendence of God's kingdom over even the greatest human accomplishments is the reason why the gospel prevents us from absolutising any and all particular social programmes. The Church cannot be committed to particular programmes *in the same way* as it is committed to the kingdom. They all belong to what must pass away. But this is not to say the Church shouldn't be committed to particular historically conditioned programmes of change. Just the contrary: the Church's activities on behalf of justice, peace, development and mercy are the very language by which it carries out its mission of being a sign of that kingdom - a sign that human beings really do have a destiny and a future and a reason for living, despite every limitation and set-back and death itself. Without a practical commitment to the deeds of justice and human development, the Church could not be a sign of that destiny, and so would not be fulfilling its own essential mission.

The Church's role is even more radical in its methods. It is through love that human hearts are most profoundly changed. Consequently, its preferred methods are those which leave the minds and hearts of persons free to be radically changed - the interior renewal that Pope Paul VI spoke of. The prophetic word and the prophetic stance will always be a more human change agent; they challenge us but leave us free for a more personal commitment.

People will not be liberated if the steps by which we lead them to it do not leave them free; (cf *Instruction*, 1986, n.76).

But what if that freedom is used by others to continue the oppression? The Church's ethic has never totally excluded the use of force against injustice, but

(notwithstanding instances of over-eagerness to use force) regards it as justifiable only as an absolutely last resort, when more appropriate ways of countering injustice are out of contention.

It is also out of respect for people's right to use their own minds and choose freely that the Church tries to avoid a return to clericalism. As the bishops of Chile once said: "If the political choice of the priest is presented as a logical and ineluctable consequence of his Christian faith, he implicitly condemns every other option and limits the legitimate freedom of Christians."

If we are to be true to the Incarnation, the Church must be big-minded enough to live with all that is messy and slow in the processes of politics, trial and error, dialogue and pluralism, to say nothing of human sinfulness. By the same token, however, Christians will also feel entitled to use to advantage those strategies for change which are being developed in our own time, and which must safeguard the right to freedom, not only as an end, but also in the pursuit of that end.

In practice, the Church acts sometimes as a counter-culture and sometimes as a leaven, subject to all that is most human. But whatever the method that is most appropriate in the circumstances, the obligation to challenge social sin and sinful structures is unambiguous. As Cardinal Ratzinger has said:

.....A great call goes out to all the Church: with boldness and courage, with far-sightedness and prudence, with zeal and strength of spirit, with a love for the poor which demands sacrifice, pastors will consider the response to this call a matter of the highest priority.... (Instruction, 1984, XI, n.2).