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## 'Structures of Sin' and the 'Guilty Bystander'

Since the 1970s a new term has been added to the lexicon of Catholic social teaching - "*social sin*" (or "*structures of sin*"). The term may be a neologism; the reality is as ancient as the prophetic tradition and the biblical heritage of covenant justice.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) incorporates a succinct explanation of "social sin" into its treatise on the moral life: "... sin makes men accomplices of one another and causes concupiscent, violence, and injustice to reign among them. Sins give rise to social situations and institutions that are contrary to divine goodness. 'Structures of sin' are the effect and expression of personal sins. They lead their victims to do evil in their turn. In an analogous sense, they constitute a 'social sin.'" (CCC n.1869)

Similarly the Glossary of the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (2006) defines "social sin" as "[s]ins that produce unjust social laws and oppressive institutions."

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2005) also refers to "structures of sin" under the topic of "Service in politics." It states: "The tasks accompanying responsibilities in social and political institutions demand a strict and articulated commitment that is able to demonstrate clearly the absolute necessity of the moral dimension in social and political life, through thoughtful contributions to political debate, planning and the chosen actions." (CSDC n. 566)

And, by the same token, the Compendium makes

a judgment that the neglect of that moral dimension in social and political institutions intensifies and reinforces "the dehumanization of life in society and of social and political institutions, thereby consolidating 'structures of sin'..."

In retrospect, since the midpoint of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of "social sin" (or "structures of sin") has arrived in the mainstream of the social teaching of the Church. *Sharing the Light of Faith*, the National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States published in 1979, had traced the evolution of the concept of "social sin." (SLF n.165)

Within the time frame of the Second Vatican Council, the foundations for the new directions in the social mission of the Church were being forged, especially with the promulgation of *Gaudium et Spes* (1965). The Pastoral Constitution had specifically warned against the danger of being blinded to the course of worldwide events, a condition which might dispose Catholics to "wallow in the luxury of a merely individualistic morality." (GS n. 30) To counteract such indifference, the conciliar document called for the carrying out of the duties of justice and love in promoting "the common good according to one's means and the needs of others, even to the point of fostering and helping public and private organizations devoted to the bettering of the conditions of life."

Moreover, *Gaudium et Spes* counted the social obligations of justice and charity among their major ethical duties incumbent on all. On account of the global conditions of the modern world the need for

*The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.*

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the practice and fostering of the moral and social virtues received new emphasis.

Several years later, the 1971 Synod of Bishops issued *Justice in the World*. That synodal document realistically confronted a world scene marred by “serious injustices which are building up around the world of men and women and a network of domination, oppression and abuses which stifle freedom and which keep the greater part of humanity from sharing in and the building up and enjoyment of a more just and fraternal world.” (JIW n. 3) Nonetheless, the consciousness of the emerging struggle for justice bears witness that “[t]he hopes and the forces which are moving the world in its very foundations are not foreign to the dynamism of the gospel, which through the power of the Holy Spirit frees men from personal sin and from its consequences in social life.” (JIW n. 5)

In the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (“On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*,” 1991) Pope John Paul II opened up the “ecological question” to moral concerns about the “human ecology.” Social development and progress which are not in accord with the moral order “can give rise to specific structures of sin which impede the full realization of those who are in any way oppressed by them.” (CA n. 38)

A key text on “social sin” can be found in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (“On Social Concern,” 1987), an earlier social encyclical of the late Holy Father. (SRS nn. 36-37) “Structures of sin” originate from specific sinful attitudes in the socio-economic sphere typified by the “*all-consuming desire for profit*” and “*the thirst for power*.” (SRS n. 37)

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* synthesizes the thought set forth in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*: “The consequences of sin perpetuate the structures of sin. These are rooted in personal sin and, therefore, are always connected to concrete acts of the individuals who commit them, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. (SRS n. 36) ...The actions and attitudes opposed to the will of God and the good of neighbor, as well as the structures

arising from such behavior, appear to fall into two categories today: ‘on the one hand, the all-consuming desire for profit, and on the other, the thirst for power, with the intention of imposing one’s will upon others. In order to characterize better each of these attitudes, one can add the expression: ‘at any price’ (SRS n. 37).” (CSDC n. 119)

The earlier 1979 U. S. Catechetical Directory did not equate sinful structures simply as “imperfect human organizations.” Such sinful structures are marked by “a systematic abuse of the rights of certain groups or individuals.” The Directory explained: “The sinfulness lies in the unjust way in which social relationships are organized.” Examples of sinful structures range from issues such as racial or ethnic segregation, the failure to enact adequate minimum wage laws, and the impoverishing distribution of goods on a worldwide scale “which calls for a new international economic order.” (STLF n. 165)

*Sharing the Light of Faith* had pointed the responsibility for correcting such situations of “social sin” in two directions: it falls on those who are subjected to injustice in claiming their rights as well as on others who are morally obligated to work for a just and free society for all. Above all, despite the complexity of issues, individuals cannot be excused from seeking remedies for social ills.

Along the same lines of analysis, the current *National Directory for Catechesis* (2005) clarifies the analogical character of the concept of “social sin” or “the effect of sin over time in society that causes society to create structures of sin.” Because “social sin” is the expression of personal sin, “individual people are responsible for the evil consequences of systematic social injustice and should work with others to change those structures and systems that cause evil.” (NDC n. 43D)

The Directory draws an analogy between social sin and original sin insofar as social sin “can exist in structures” as “an evil not of our own creation, and because it is sometimes the inheritance of our families and communities.” The Directory explicitly names “[o]rganized social injustice, institu-

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tionalized racism, systemic economic exploitation, and the destruction of the environment" as graphic "examples of the social consequences of sin." (NCD 43D)

On account of the pervasiveness of social sin, handing out guilty verdicts on specific individuals becomes problematic. For, unlike persons who do bear moral responsibility, social structures and systems do not enjoy moral agency and the concomitant blame "for the evil consequences of systematic social injustice."

Hence, although responsibility for social structures may be so diffuse that particular individuals cannot be charged with personal guilt, all in society must work on behalf of justice. The complexity of many issues that appear to be intractable does not excuse individuals from participating and seeking just solutions.

For instance, in addressing the moral issue of racial and ethnic discrimination, *To Live in Christ Jesus*, a 1976 pastoral letter of the then National Conference of Catholic Bishops, had exemplified that consistent approach to the question of responsibility and "social sin." That pastoral on the moral life observed: "It is sometimes said to be pointless to lecture those who are not personally guilty of causing or directly contributing to racism and other ills of society. But the ab-

sence of personal fault for an evil does not absolve of all responsibility. We must seek to resist and undo injustices we have not caused, lest we become bystanders who tacitly endorse evil and so share in the guilt for it." (TLICJ n. 71)

Without doubt, the identification of "social sin" expands one's moral vision to grasp the impact of personal sin as it is embodied in economic and political systems. Through the lenses of distributive and social justice prophetic criticism rightly focuses on the structures and institutions that oppress human rights and cause suffering and death. Otherwise, socio-political interpretation alone is deprived of an essential theological-ethical element for assessing institutions.

To sum up, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* formulates an integral component of Catholic social doctrine when it describes "social sins" as choices and actions that "constitute by their very object, a direct assault on one's neighbor." ... Sins against the right to life (abortion and attacks on the physical integrity of persons) ... Sins against justice ... sins against human rights ... sins against freedom ... sins against the common good ... fall within the parameters of "social sin." (CSDC n. 117-119)

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