

## THE SINNER

By BEDE JARRETT, O.P.<sup>1</sup>

IF we were truly humble, we should never be astonished to find ourselves giving way to sin. We should indeed be horrified but not surprised. This is one of those things that are so hard, so impossible, to understand. Once we have really begun to try to see what we are like, we recognise ourselves to be the most evil of all creatures. This is no mock humility. At least, we can put it another way round by saying that we know more evil against ourselves than against anyone else. I know others in history or amongst my acquaintances who have done worse things than I, but I cannot say truthfully that they are worse because I do not know. I do not know either their temptations or their conditions of interior life, nor do I know their motives; and until one knows motives one cannot tell whether what was done was sinful or not. The Catholic Church never claims to judge intentions, to judge why people do what they do. She may condemn acts, but never persons in their own consciences: 'All judgment must be left to the Son'. It follows, then, that I know worse against myself than against anyone else. I know that I am a sinner.

I have also every reason for supposing that I shall always be a sinner. At least, my self-knowledge suggests to me that it will be wonderful if I am not. There is nothing that I can think of in myself to assure me of any change in my character to warrant any supposition to the contrary; consequently, I have to keep in view, as far as my own power is concerned, the prospect of sinnership to the very end. To hold this in memory is at least to avoid any disturbing discouragement when I find myself giving way to my old sins. I shall not be surprised at their return, even if I find that for some reason or other I remain free from them for some time. To be surprised because I had kept clear of evil is more reasonable than to be surprised because I had fallen back into habits of sin.

<sup>1</sup> This article first appeared in *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review* for March 1934, in the series PRACTICAL ASCETICAL NOTES FOR PRIESTS, No. VII: 'The Place of Sin in the Divine Economy', and is here reprinted by kind permission of the Editor & Publisher.

The value of recognising this seemingly depressing truth is, first that it prevents me from falling into the habit of confusing hurt vanity with an act of contrition. To be distressed because of sins—especially of returning sins that I thought I had rid myself of—is not contrition, as like as not, but mere hurt vanity. Such an act of sorrow cannot well be supernatural, since God does not come into it but myself only. It has not a supernatural motive but a very natural one; it is not in the least a motive of conversion but the beginning of despair. Let me, on the other hand, hold to the conviction that I am a sinner, and at least I shall not be discouraged at my falls; and this is no mean accomplishment. For priests are the most easily discouraged people in the world.

We shall always be sinners: consequently, we must not allow ourselves to lose heart over our sins. But why is sin allowed in the world at all? We do not know, and perhaps never will know till the very end of all, when it will no longer interest us to know the answer. But we do know this, that God allows it. Unless he allowed it, it would not be found here. We know also that God does not will it, because he could not be the perfect holiness he is if he willed it. Yet though it be contrary to his direct will it is not contrary to his permissive will. God allows it, and therefore God has a good motive in allowing it, for God cannot have motives other than good. God allows sin; God allows me to sin. Why? I do not know, but it is something to know that God does allow it and that he has a good motive for so doing. Now the fact that God allows it does not in any way excuse me from the guilt and responsibility of my wrongdoing. These sins are sins, and I know quite well that I deliberately chose evil rather than good. It was a deliberate choice of my will. God's permission does not therefore absolve me, but it does give me reason to think differently of my sin after the event than if it bore no relation to God at all. For it is clear that since he allows sin and since his motive in so doing is a good motive and since his only motive can be love, I am allowed to fall into sin because God loves me. However disconcerting this thought is, undoubtedly it is a valuable one because it makes me realise that something can be done with sin to make it useful to me.

What else can that mean but that God wishes me out of my past sin to come nearer to him, to find somewhere in that unhappy past a motive too for love? Nor is this difficult to find, for

the past seen in this light is not merely full of my failures, it is also full of God's forgiveness—the remembrance of which shall surely be as important to me as the remembrance of my sins. Not only shall it be more important but more too in my thoughts, for thus shall I have more courage with which to meet life.

On this account let me not suppose that I have reason to presume on God's forgiveness. I must not therefore take as my conclusion that it does not matter that I sin for God will forgive me; God will not forgive me if I am not sorry for my sins, and sorrow I cannot have if I take no trouble to avoid sin and merely think of the infinity of God's mercy. But the way it should affect me is this: I should try to make capital out of this past sin by letting it bring me nearer to God. The starting point of this concept must be that there is a divine purpose being achieved by this permissive act of God. We know that he is so powerful that he could have prevented sin. We know that he did not prevent sin. We know therefore that sin must in some way fit into his plan. Let us say, as St Augustine did, that God is so powerful that he can bring good out of evil.

There is a passage in the writings of Juliana of Norwich in which the idea is stated in the terms in which a mystic would see it. She was privileged as it seemed to her to ask God why he should have let sin come; and his answer as she understood it was not a direct answer and yet an answer after all. God set in front of her the fact that by Adam's sin more harm was done than by any other sin, more harm to man and more dishonour to God. Yet the remedy for this was the Incarnation, which was more pleasing to God than the sin of Adam was displeasing; else we should never have been saved. But also the Incarnation brought to man finer and fairer things than sin had brought him hurt and pain: 'Since I have made well the most harm, then is my will that thou know thereby that I shall make well all that is less'. This was to show her, as she thought, that even the sins of men have a place in the economy of God, and that man can, if he so chooses, use them for finding an additional reason for loving and serving God better. Indeed, what else is the act of sorrow but some such act as this? It is the act of a soul that deliberately turns to its own sin, but not merely to its own sin. Sorrow is not merely self-regarding, else it would be no act of religion at all. Religion is looking at God and paying to God what is owed him. What do we owe God when

we have sinned against him? What is sin? It is an act or thought or word or omission against the law of God. Truly so. But it is also against his love. It is an act, not only of disobedience, but also of malice. God therefore asks of us in return by way of recompense not merely that we shall be obedient but that we should love. It is love exactly that we must have in our act of sorrow or else it is not sorrow at all. Love is turning to God. Turning to God means that he is in our thoughts as an aspiration to help us to a deeper and stronger resolution to do better than we have done in the past. Past sin can thus be made to re-assert to us the claims of God on us. This does not justify sin but it can be made the way in which sin also plays into the hands of God.

Indeed, so strong is this idea in the New Testament that our Lord almost seems in a well-known scene to put a premium on sin: 'Which of the two loved him most, Simon? The one who had been forgiven a little or the one whose forgiven debt had been the greater of the two?' Surely the answer of Simon is reasonable: 'He to whom most was forgiven has more reason to love most'. It sounds as if our Lord wanted to teach that the converted sinner had more reason for loving God than those have who have never done wrong. But this he cannot mean. What is evident is the positive teaching that those who have been forgiven much have much reason for love.

Sorrow then is an act of love. In it the soul looks beyond its own fault to see God at the end of the vista. Sorrow, to be supernatural, must bring in God, and that means that in my act of sorrow I have to think more of God than of myself, give more time to the consideration of him than of myself. That is why our Lord when he meets St Peter after the Passion does not say to him: 'Art thou sorry?' but he asks: 'Lovest thou me?' There is a whole world of difference between these two. Peter was sorry of course. So also was Judas; else he would never have hanged himself. But the sorrow of Judas is a purely human sorrow, the sorrow that is the offspring of hurt vanity. He suddenly woke to the meanness of what he had done and was terribly ashamed. But shame is not sorrow. Shame is a much less inspiring emotion. It leads indeed of its nature to depression as the sequel showed. But love, on the contrary, is inspiring for the simple reason that it takes the soul away from the contemplation of itself—always a depressing sight to those who are honest—and focuses its attention

on another. That is what we mean by love. So the remembrance of past sin can become either of two things: an emotion which is self-regarding and depressing or an emotion that is other-regarding (to wit, God-regarding) and inspiring to further effort. The difference between these two is the whole teaching of Christ. He came to lead men to God and that in every part of their lives. He came to lead them there through everything they did. There must be no exceptions, no bare patches which are exempt from this. Every sin, once over, must be brought under the dedication of the Gospel teaching. Not even evil can be allowed to escape.

Again then we repeat that the priest needs to remember this as much as any one else does. Perhaps he needs it more than any one else. It is our experience surely, if we have had to deal with the unhappy cases of those priests who have fallen away (or perhaps we have had the more distressing sight to have to watch one gradually fall), that in more cases than not they have fallen away because they have despaired of recovery, because they have thought some habit of sin to which they had fallen victim was too compelling a bond. Afterwards they have invented other explanations, such as difficulties against faith, etc. But at base we know that it is the firm hold on them that sin had obtained that really frightened them and made them lose hope. How much safer to be sure that one will be a sinner to the end, that all we are asked to do is to realise this and continue our struggle; because the real point is that God can set our troubles right. We have perpetually to be turning to him for assistance, because we know that it is his will that we should be saved. As long as we are not resigned to sin so as to make no efforts against it, we are in the right condition to escape from it. Priests fail for one of two reasons, either discouragement or disdain, and both are the children of vanity or pride. Now once you are convinced that you are a sinner, you are proof against discouragement for you are already sure that you will never do very much, or at least will be surprised at any success that comes your way and will attribute it to the right source—not man but God. Any success that attends your efforts is not so customary that it is accepted as a habit; rather it is acknowledged to be a gift of God. Hence, that we overcome any fault and continue to overcome it never sets up the impression that now we are free of it, but only that God is most kind in giving permanency of a kind to the feeble efforts of our will. Hence always there is

complete acceptance of the idea that God is the giver of all good things, that good things come from no one but him.

We are left then to look back on our past with deep thankfulness for all the mercies that have been shown us, and should endeavour to show our gratitude in return by further efforts to bring ourselves into line with his will. It does not do to be thinking of ourselves unless we are also thinking of God; not the misery of man so much as the mercy of God should engross our attention.

Sin, then, can be used afterwards so as to make the memory of it an inspiration towards a greater love of God. This is also the real act of sorrows, the perfect contrition that thinks of sin and is sorry for it because it has offended God who is infinitely good in himself. Here is true sorrow in which self is forgotten and God only remembered. It is not sorrow only, but sweet sorrow: it is love.

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