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Learning About Sin

By FATHER CARL J. PFEIFER, SJ

A week or two after the law forbidding Catholics to eat meat on Friday was changed, a cartoon appeared in several magazines and newspapers. Two devils are standing in the middle of the roaring flames of hell. They are seemingly discussing a serious problem posed by the change in the Church law. One devil asks the other, "What are we supposed to do now with all those people who are down here for eating meat on Friday?"

The cartoon is thought-provoking as well as humorous. "Could a person go to hell forever for eating a steak or hamburger on Friday?" "If it was a serious sin to eat meat on Friday then, how can it not be a sin now?" "Is something a sin just because it is forbidden by a law?" "Just what is sin?"

Questions like these are often asked by parents at meetings about religious education. They are good questions, questions that prevent us from maintaining a notion of sin that is too simple and legalistic.

They also force us to reflect on how sin is approached in religious education.

Many Catholics think of sin primarily as the more or less deliberate breaking of a law or commandment. The law in question may be the "natural law" or the "commandments of God," or a "precept of the Church," or a civil law, or a command given by someone in authority. In any case sin is defined by them as a more or less serious infraction of a law.

This approach to sin is used by many people as they prepare for confession; they examine their consciences by checking through the ten commandments and seven precepts of the Church.

While many adult Catholics are comfortable with this description of sin, increasing numbers of parents and professional religious educators seriously question its adequacy.

They see a lack of proper realism and balance in a definition of sin that is framed exclusively or primarily in terms of law violations. It is clear that people can sin without violating any particular commandment—examples of racial injustice readily come to mind. It is equally true that people can sin by obeying certain laws and commands—incidents of war crimes carried out in obedience to orders suggest themselves. Perhaps most important is that such an approach to sin finds little basis in the Gospels.

The Gospels do record that Jesus spoke strong words about

people who broke laws and taught others to do so. But he never describes sin either exclusively or even primarily in terms of infractions of laws. For Him sin is the opposite of love, the violation of a relationship more than a violation of a law.

In Jesus' eyes sin is primarily a question of failing to respond with generosity and compassion in day to day relationships with people. It is not so much a matter of breaking laws as a failure to love. Sin mars human relationships; and therefore disfigures relations with God, "for by His Incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man" (Church Today, 22). It is a more or less deliberate refusal to love one's neighbor—in the intimacy of the family or in the public world of politics and economics.

Resting on this soundly traditional base, religious educa-

tion programs focus the attention of the young on other people, gradually guiding them to a deeper sensitivity and greater responsibility. Children and youth—and adults too—are helped to reflect on their experiences with other people, common experiences at work, or play, in school or at home. Without burdening them too quickly with adult problems they are led to consider some of the serious needs suffered by people in our society. As they grow older and slowly become more able to love, they also become more sensitive to what negates or lessens love. Reflection on experience is accompanied by study of the living tradition of the Church which is rooted in the Scriptures. In this way they may come to recognize sin as a more or less serious breach in their personal relationship with God within the context of personal, responsible relations with others.

KNOW YOUR FAITH

Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD P. McBRIEN

Q. The Vatican and Yugoslavia have restored full diplomatic relations after an 18-year break. According to the report in the New York Times, the new pact binds Yugoslavia to allow Catholic citizens access to their own religious press and gives the Church the right to name priests and bishops without interference. In turn, the Church will keep members from actively opposing the Communist government. While I rejoice in this political and diplomatic reconciliation, I am worried about the propriety of the Church's concession. How can the Church withhold criticism when criticism is due?

A. I, too, have had to rely upon summaries of the new agreements as they are provided in the Catholic and secular press. Without the full text of the pact in hand, I must limit myself to a general answer.

If the agreement demands that Catholic spokesmen will desist from frequent, almost carping, complaints about the quality of the Church-State relations, then I can understand how the ecclesiastical diplomats could make a concession on that point. Furthermore, the restoration of some amount of freedom for the Church should make such attacks unnecessary.

If, however, the agreement were to restrict the Church's freedom to criticize the government when it fails to meet the legitimate needs of its citizens (not in religious affairs now, but in matters of housing, education, health care, civil rights, and so forth), then the ecclesiastical diplomats would have conceded too much. (See, for example, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 42-43, which states this obligation in a positive, constructive fashion.)

Prophetic utterance, in the name of Jesus and for the sake of the Kingdom of God, is part of the Church's essential mission. Were the Church to withdraw from this responsibility, it would no longer be faithful to the ministry bequeathed to it by the Lord.

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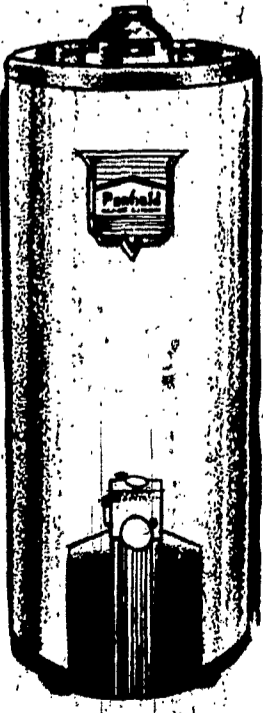
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