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Columnists

Tearing down 'structures of sin'

By Father Albert Shamon
Sunday's Readings: (R1) John 15:9-17; (R2) Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48; (R3) 1 John 4:7-10.

The Easter Season is the period of mystagogia. One mystery neophytes might reflect on is our Easter gift, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, a second baptism.

A short while ago, a high-school-aged girl asked me: "Why do I have to go to confession to a priest? Why can't I go directly to God?"

I assured her that she could go directly to God; but that if her sin was mortal, she would still have to go to a priest. The basic reason, I said, is because Jesus set it up that way (John 20:19-23). But that didn't convince her.

"Well," I said, "to get peace of soul, we need to know beyond all doubt that sin is forgiven. We've got to see and hear forgiveness. Confession, the upraised hand, the words of absolution, are such sign-symbols." I still did not hit pay dirt.

So I tried again. "God normally deals with us through others. With His people, He used Moses and the prophets. Through parents, He brings life into the world. He empowers states to execute justice. Why should He not dispense His mercy through His priests?" Still no acceptance.

Finally, I said: "You know our Holy Father has been speaking more and more about social sin. I think most of us see sin as something very personal, as your question shows, something between only God and myself, a God-me relationship!"

"In his Exhortation on Reconciliation and Penance Dec. 12, 1984), Pope John Paul II defined sin as social because 'every individual's sin affects others.' He even went on to say that to the Communion of Saints, there corresponds a communion of sin 'whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the Church, and in some way, the whole world . . . Not even the most intimate and secret sin . . . exclusively concerns the person committing it (No. 16)'.
"In other words," I continued, "John Paul is saying that sin has a ripple effect. Sin is not just a God-me, but a God-me-others relationship. This is so because of the solidarity of the

A Word for Sunday

human race. If a father loses his job, is not his whole family affected? If a child gets into trouble, does it not affect all the family? Did not the sin of Adam and Eve affect the entire human race?

"Even the name 'Sacrament of Reconciliation' was meant to help us see that every sin is social and ruptures relationships with God and others. So as the prodigal son had to be reconciled not only to his father, but also to his elder brother, so sinners need to be reconciled not only to God by sorrow for sin, but also to God and others by confession to a priest."

This final explanation seemed to satisfy my questioner.

In his latest encyclical "On Social Concerns" (Solicitudo Rei Socialis, Feb. 19, 1988), Pope John Paul II returned to the idea of social sin. Our personal sins, he said, are so social that they cause "structures of sin" to be erected in society — structures that make sin easier (No. 36).

These structures are not at fault, but the personal sins that caused those structures are. Each of us causes them when we fail to limit or eliminate social evils "out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; taking refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world" (Reconciliation and Penance, No. 16).

Is not Our Lady right when at Medjugorje she asks us to make peace with God through monthly confession as the first step in bringing peace to the world?

Sin is social: It builds the "structures of sin." Only the avoidance of personal sin and the confession of sin will tear down these "structures."

Hail, Mary, Mother of God!

By Cindy Bassett

As she crossed the street, Mary could see that the carpenter's shop was crowded with customers. Joseph was a fine craftsman, and even in the small town of Nazareth his work was in demand. On any other day, Mary would never have come to see her fiance while he worked, but her news today would not wait until evening. In fact, as she entered his shop, Mary wasn't even sure how to tell Joseph.

Joseph gave her a hasty greeting and then went right on with his customers, and it was some time before the shop was empty again. Mary hesitated. If she didn't speak quickly, she would lose her chance again.

"Business is very good today!" Joseph told her as he came up smiling. "Perhaps I will have enough money to start building us a house soon." Then, finally noticing Mary's downcast look, he said, "Something is not right today, Mary. Tell me, what is it?"

"Joseph, I'm going to have a baby. But it's not what you think," she added quickly.

"How can this be? We promised to love always. For you to come here and tell me that there is someone else . . ." his voice trailed off.

"Joseph, I love you and there is no one else!" Mary cried, her face flushing. "The Messiah, the one our people have waited so long for is coming! An angel came and asked if I would be the mother of God. What was I to say? It was my choice, and I said yes!"

Just then Simeon and his wife arrived to inspect a table Joseph was making for them. So Joseph said, "Mary, please go home now. I can't talk about this anymore. I must think!"

The carpenter's shop closed early that day. Joseph told no one, not even his family, of Mary's news. Nazareth was a small town, and gossip would spread soon enough. But what was to be done?

Both Mary and Joseph came from devout Hebrew families. This sin was against the laws of Moses and everything they believed in. And yet, he loved Mary. How could she have

The Bible Corner

betrayed him?

Just before Joseph fell asleep that night, he decided what to do. Tomorrow, he would quietly break off his engagement to Mary, so as not to disgrace anyone. Perhaps the person responsible for this breach of trust would come forward and do the right thing. Then this other man would marry the woman Joseph knew he would love forever.

When he finally fell asleep, Joseph had a strange dream. What happened in his dream was so vivid that when Joseph awoke, he wasn't certain if he had been asleep at all.

An angel had presented himself to Joseph saying, "You must not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. It is exactly as she told you. All that has occurred was done by the power of God. Call the child, 'Jesus' because he will grow up to be the Savior of the World!"

Early the next morning, Joseph knocked at the door of Mary's house. "Joseph?" Mary asked uncertainly.

"The child's name shall be 'Jesus,'" he said.

"I know," Mary replied.

"Mary, forgive me for doubting you. I am just a simple carpenter. How was I to know?"

"Joseph, you are an honorable man, and I will be proud to be your wife," Mary smiled. "You can teach Jesus all about your beautiful work."

Scripture Reference: Matthew 1:18-24; Luke 1:26-36
Meditation: Dear Lord, help us to be willing servants like Mary and obey your commands even when we are not sure where you will lead us.

Cenacle Sisters to mark 40th year in Rochester

The Feast of Our Lady of the Cenacle on Sunday, May 14, will mark the 40th anniversary of the Cenacle sisters' presence in Rochester. The anniversary will be marked with a celebration, beginning with Eucharist at 11:30

a.m. Bishop Dennis W. Hickey will preside at the Mass.

The Mass will be followed by a luncheon. Space is limited. For information or reservations, call (716) 271-8755.

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