

COLUMNS COMMENTARY

Sin breaks a relationship, not just rules

By Dr. Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

Several questions have come to me about contemporary moral theology and sin. It might be interesting to consider one of the major directions in our contemporary theology of sin.

For several years, moral theologians have been trying to emphasize the central element of sin as breaking our loving relationship with God. At its core, sin is estrangement from God.

This understanding of sin has firm backing in both Scripture and tradition, where we can find many passages and images depicting the central focus of the entire Christian life as a call for each of us to enter into a personal, loving relationship with God.

In emphasizing the essence of sin as breaking this relationship, moral theologians are trying to avoid some tendencies they think have caused us to trivialize sin by placing its core meaning somewhere other than on this central relationship of the Christian life.

For example, inadequate catechesis might have caused some of us at some points in our moral development to identify sin with "breaking a law."

Moral theologians are quick to point out that human beings need laws and rules. They also know that laws are often broken when sin is committed.

But moral theologians today are trying to challenge the misperception that the essence of sin is breaking a



THE MORAL LIFE

law. One of the problems with this interpretation of sin's meaning is that law really measures only "what is on the surface of the human person," namely, his or her outward behavior. But sin seems to touch not only the level of behavior; it reaches to deep levels of our character and person.

Human beings are complex, and even our simplest actions sometimes can include complicated blends of intentions and motives in our attempt to act in very involved circumstances. Thus, theologians today are anxious to move beyond identifying sin with individual wrong external actions. Instead, they encourage us to look beyond single external actions in our lives and consider also what goes on in our hearts, and at the core levels of

our person where we actually "respond to the God of our being."

Moral theologians also remind us that looking at the pattern of our actions is probably more helpful in assessing areas of sinfulness in our lives than is considering only individual actions. By considering our entire lifestyles as responses to God, we are better able to identify those areas that draw us away from God and jeopardize our faithfulness in this central relationship of the Christian life.

Some may regret that this new insight into the meaning of sin — which shifts the emphasis from a focus on lawbreaking to one on relationship — seems less clear than the understandings of sin they grew up with. Turning to a relational understanding of sin renders inadequate the traditional confession of a list of actions in violation of a rule or a law. It also calls for a different sort of conversation between penitent and confessor.

Despite these difficulties, this new understanding of sin offers a number of positive effects. First, it can help Catholics to appreciate the moral life in terms much broader than "the avoidance of sin. Moralists have often been accused of promoting a preoccupation with sin that sometimes has eclipsed a larger and more positive vision of our moral life.

In fact, we need to understand human life, Christian life, as God's invitation to us to join Him in relationship — to come into covenant with God and to work on behalf of God's

mission in the world. Christian life ought to be a positive and exciting adventure of moving forward with God. In the past, perhaps, we focused the moral life too exclusively on sin and sinfulness, without stressing this broader context enough.

This understanding also can help us to be less individualistic in our understanding of sin. While the bulk of our church's official teaching has concentrated on the need for justice in the world, some critics argue that the practice of moral theology — and the thinking of most Catholics — has failed to incorporate this focus in accounting for personal sinfulness.

In fact, Catholic moral theology as a whole has found it difficult to handle the ideas of collective responsibility and social sin. Understanding sin in terms of our relationship with God should make it easier to include the social dimensions of our lives in our appreciation of human and personal sinfulness.

Finally, this relational understanding helps us to appreciate the seriousness of sin. If we reduce sin to breaking laws or rules — if we let it remain only on the level of harm we have done to ourselves or other people — we risk denying the true seriousness of sin. In fact, we may end up treating it simply as a social problem or psychological maladjustment. At its core, sin is a violation of our relationship with God. To make it anything less than this is to risk trivializing the Christian life altogether.

Blueberry Hill Farm

HORNELL, NY
The Pick-Your-Own Blueberry Season Is Now Open!
At "New York's Premier Berry Farm"
HOURS: 7 AM to 7PM Monday Through Saturday

Follow direction signs on Route 36
1 1/4 miles South of Arkport
We suggest calling ahead for picking dates
(607) 324-5321

Picking buckets and stools, field transportation, a picnic area, and modern restrooms are all provided.

FOSTER PARENTS NEEDED

for expanding family based treatment program working with emotionally disturbed children 5-14 years old in your home. Liberal stipend, on-going training & 24 hour support services provided.

Call Hillside Children's Center
(716) 654-4417
EOE

Please patronize our advertisers

AUGUST CLEARANCE

STORE WIDE HURRY FOR BEST SELECTION HUGE SAVINGS

Becker's FURNITURE

1461 Buffalo Road at Howard 436-5129
DAILY 10-6, SAT. 10-5 FREE DELIVERY

Josaphats Ukrainian Arts & Crafts Festival

940 Ridge Road East, Irondequoit

AUGUST 18, 19, 20, 21

★ RIDES ★ GAMES ★ AMUSEMENTS

FREE PARKING, ADMISSION, ENTERTAINMENT

STARTING TIMES
THURSDAY & FRIDAY 6P.M.-?
SATURDAY & SUNDAY, 1:00 P.M.-?

- ★ Ukrainian Arts & Crafts
- ★ Ukrainian Folk Dancing— Saturday & Sunday at 4:00p.m.
- ★ Ukrainian Food
- ★ Live Music For Dancing— Friday, Saturday, & Sunday evenings.

GRAND PRIZE DRAWING

WIN 1994 OLDSMOBILE ACHIEVA OR \$10,000

Come & See nightly performances by "FATA MORGANA" musical rock group from Ukraine

FOR FULL DETAILS CALL THE FESTIVAL HOTLINE: **266-2255**

ian to ciling
cil of nique s 'the 617). m the s, our
s the-ropri-ze the resur-e cru-sm to e sig-s pre-
s that blical d oth-pret, not glish s doc-wells 's ver-
r "dis-e the e for-e Re-ervap-ting cance it ref-
next

ollow Arch-lered: een so intel-resent thy of ay (to ot in-
to the think, They h her nents. ecause ine of ut be-moral ot be-x, but il con-cause ut be-cting. is not neresy
hrist, his or

\$5
S