

COLUMNISTS

Hiding sinful nature denies God's salvation

When I taught at another college a few years ago, the practice was to have a few penance services each year. These services typically would be held after sunset. Unlike our other liturgies, the penance services took place in a dark chapel. A few candles were lit, but basically the atmosphere projected a kind of hiddenness and secrecy, even stealth.

I didn't think much about this at the time. One of my students, however, took issue with the fact that the penance services were held at night and shrouded in darkness. His charge was that we treated sin differently from the other realities of the Christian life. He claimed that we put sin "in the shadows" by holding the services in darkness and surrounding them with a hush-hush tone. To him, that practice implied we were denying the reality of sin as a universal part of human life.

This student accused Catholic theology and practice of operating in a state of denial when it comes to sin. He thought the school was only reinforcing this sense of denial by holding penance services in an atmosphere of exaggerated mystery. When he proposed to the student senate that the penance services be moved to daylight hours to suggest that sin really is a part of ordinary life, he was overruled. The idea didn't go anywhere at the time, but I have thought of it often since then.

Protestant theology has always had a much more realistic approach to sin and sinfulness than Catholics have. For Protestants, the reality and effects of



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

original sin are treated with far more seriousness than they are in Catholic thought. The paradoxical effect of our minimizing sin is that we end up feeling far more guilty about our own sinfulness. Somehow we arrive at the mistaken assumption that we can get through life without sinning. We then become overly ashamed every time we commit a transgression. This exaggerated sense of shame can cause us to try to conceal and even deny our faults and failings. In a way, we are so sensitive to sin that we can't even avail ourselves of redemption and salvation.

Oddly, the central proclamation of Christianity is the "good news" of God's triumph over sin through Christ. To talk about sin is to talk about salvation, to talk about grace. Yet the good news of salvation is good news only for those who admit a need for salvation. "Those who are well do not need a physician" (Mt.9:12). In the words of Steve Duffy, "A theology of sin articulates the conviction that hu-

manity ails and needs a physician."

If we are excessively ashamed of personal sin, we seem to have an even worse time with institutional sin. In recent years theologians have been talking about what they call "social sin." This sort of sin is not as precise a category as personal sin, and it has been horribly neglected in the catechesis most of us grew up with. It is the kind of sin that is at work in institutions, cultures and social arrangements. It is less the product of deliberate decision and choice than of blindness and inertia.

Social sin is not just the sum of the actions of several individuals. It really is the product of a collectivity and remains unrecognized because it causes the kind of bias that obstructs true seeing. For years I did not notice, for example, that African Americans were never on television. Only gradually did I become aware that black people were excluded from that entertainment medium. It wasn't just the actions of strategically placed individuals excluding black people from this industry that constituted social sin. It was the fact that it went unrecognized and unacknowledged by so many ordinary people for so long. In social sin, the sheer massiveness of the affected system reinforces the destructiveness that is present.

In some ways, the Catholic tendency to "hide our sin" on the institutional level may have fed some recent charges of a cover-up regarding the reassignment of

priests accused of child sex abuse. Apparently, recognizing the unfit and even criminal behavior of some priests could not be handled in a way that would allow public knowledge of that reality. Keeping the "secret" of sins or crimes that have become an institutional embarrassment became the paramount value. I imagine that the fear of admitting to our own sinfulness and failure as an institution was part of what fueled those kinds of decisions.

In our attempts to put in place practices that will avoid the mistakes of the past, it will be important not to fall into a new expression of "sin denial" by abandoning priests accused of behaviors that really are not pedophilia at all. It was our false and ridiculous need to have a "sinless priesthood" that led to these charges of a cover-up in the first place. Let us not recast this childish yearning in a new form by rejecting any priest whom we find accused of any indiscretion at all.

We are all sinners. The paradox is that this is not really such bad news. As Steve Duffy points out: "The world is sin-ravaged; yet the battle does not hang in the balance. 'Where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more.'" (Rom 5:20) The shamefulness we experience because of sin leads to big trouble for individuals and for institutions. It also denies the salvation that comes from God.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry.

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