

HANDOUTS: Week Three

Sin

The Personal and Cosmic Effects of Sin; God's Mercy

St Ignatius had a conversion while recovering from a battle wound. He reflected on his living in sin, having lustful affairs, and living for superficial status and prestige. Once he felt called to living like Christ and the saints, he had a hard time shaking off the guilt and put himself through harsh penances. Eventually his scruples went away and his experiences inspired the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises.

Ignatius calls us to reflect on the world of sin. The grace we're told to pray for is "shame and confusion" before God as we consider the effects of one sin as compared to our own sinful life. Ignatius then takes us through a three-part meditation:

1. The sin of the angels who rebelled against God (cosmic)
2. The sin of Adam and Eve (cosmic)
3. One person's rejection of God, causing their own damnation (personal)

There are not only personal consequences of our sin, but cosmic effects as well. Ask yourself: *Does my sin contribute to a larger sinfulness? A systemic sin? Is my sinfulness a part of a "history of sin?"*

Ignatius hoped that by reflecting on sin and mercy we would:

1. Be awakened to areas where we are not living out our created purpose & mourn that reality, and
2. Be awakened to God's amazing mercy that helps us return to loving well.

Both of these perspectives have the ultimate goal of filling us with desire to throw off all that hinders and eagerly pursue God's will for us.

Sin, Mercy & Freedom

Once we glimpse God's love for us and our meaningful created purpose, we often realize that there are things holding us back. As 13th century monk, Gregory of Sinai, put it:

"If we do not know what we are like when God makes us, we shall not realize what sin has turned us into."

- "137 Texts: On Commandments and Doctrines, Warnings, and Promises; on Thoughts, Passions and Virtues, and also on Stillness and Prayer" in *The Philokalia, The Complete Text, Vol. 4*, comp. by St. Nikodimos, trans. G. E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

We need to know our worth and destiny before we can fathom how tragic are the things that rob us. This week helps us to discern these hindrances. But the problem is not only our own sins; the reality includes the groaning of the whole world, longing for its redemption. As we mourn and confess sin, we become freer and able to live into God's vision for us. This week can be challenging, as it involves facing the reality of sin in the world, our local communities, and our own heart. That can be difficult to look at. But the goal is not to weigh down with guilt & despair. Michael Ivens, SJ describes it thus:

"Mercy, then, is the dominant theme, but there can be no profound sense of God's mercy without a profound sense of sin. Hence the week opens up a faith-vision of sin: sin seen as the negation of praise, reverence and service, as a negative power pervading the history of free creation, as destructive of our relationship with ourselves and with the world. But sin is always considered in the Exercises in light of mercy, the mercy which is finally revealed in the Creator's commitment to sinful humanity in the cross of Jesus . . . This discovery . . . brings about a love-inspired conversion which is different from the conversion prompted by fear."

- *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 44.