IS THERE SUCH A THING AS “SOCIAL SIN”? 

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The Limits of the Moral Law

Father Joseph Rickaby, S.J., in a conference given to Catholic students at Cambridge University in England in 1897, while commenting on why the private interpretation of Scripture is wrong and why we are dependent upon the Church for the faith we have received, made the following observation:

God follows the great rule of His Providence, providing for man through man, not only in temporal matters, in which every good gift that we have becomes available to us as members of human society, and through the co-operation of our fellowmen, and not otherwise — but also in the needs of our soul and in matters of salvation.

Roughly speaking, we can divide our moral duties into three parts, or concentric spheres, as it were. First we have duties and sins that concern each individual alone. These would be, for example, an individual’s duty to love God; his sin of rejecting God, hating God, or refusing to worship God; or his wrong use of God’s goods, such as gluttony or drunkenness. Although these matters concern simply the individual, it is incorrect to regard the natural state of men as solitary, just as it is incorrect to consider the natural state of ants or bees as solitary. We have connections with our fellow man, from which other duties and moral questions arise.

The second concentric sphere concerns our families, whether large or small, nuclear or extended. This sphere involves questions of justice and charity, of chastity and obedience, of mercy and duty. As we move from the sphere of the individual to that of the family, the moral questions that arise become more complex, precisely because more people are involved. A husband and wife living alone with no children will have fewer and usually less complex moral issues than a large, extended family sharing a homestead.

Human society, of course, does not end with the family. Aristotle taught that a family is not a complete human society unto itself. For this the polis, or political community, is required. This sphere, therefore, entails a much greater number of people — people related to us socially and commercially, both in friendship and hostil-
Church's teachings, whose beauty they will sometimes even praise, but who then add something like, "Of course, because of original sin, this is not possible. Not until the return of Christ will wars cease or every worker receive his just due." There is, of course, some truth in this disclaimer: Perfect justice, perfect peace, perfect anything cannot exist in a fallen world. The difficulty here is that same people would never use this line of argument regarding the first two spheres of morality (individual and familial), but only regarding the third. In many cases it appears to be an excuse for doing nothing: We must accept the economic system we have; we must accept all the products of war-making nations. Papes and prelates, of course, are expected to raise an occasional pious voice on behalf of Church doctrine, but nobody in the "real world" needs to take them seriously in these matters; they are simply speaking beyond their competence. The Church who reason thus, who say or imply that Church teaching on the social or international order is utopian, are rarely heard proclaiming that the outlawing of abortion is utopian. They do not cease their activism on behalf of modesty or chastity because they think these causes are hopeless or unrealistic. In the first two spheres of morality they are often activists; only in the third do they embrace a kind of quietism.

Various popes have stated specifically that the Church's social teaching is not a utopian piece of pie in the sky. Pius XI, for example, in his 1931 encyclical Quadragesimo Anno, criticizing the less-than-enthusiastic response of some Catholics to Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical Rerum Novarum, wrote, "Nor were there wanting those who, while professing their admiration for this message of light, regarded it as a utopian ideal, desirable rather than attainable in practice." Of course, if we do not work for social justice, for peace, or for the end of the murder of the unborn, none of these goals will be realized. But it hardly seems right to announce that, since a goodly portion of Christian morality cannot be perfectly implemented, we need not worry ourselves about it. In truth, except for our Blessed Lady, no mere human has ever lived a perfect life. Usually, when we consider some particular goal to be in our power, we do progress in that virtue. Likewise, when we disregard an entire sphere of morality, we can hardly expect to make any progress there either.

Some Catholics admit responsibility to social morality, but only a personal responsibility. The state as such does not have any moral duties, so they think going, and thus in the instance mentioned above, a Catholic ruler somehow becomes exempt from the law of Christ when he exercises his governmental authority. Leo XIII, in his 1889 encyclical Libertatis Praeclarissimam, condemned this fundamental moral error: "There are others, somewhat more moderate though not more consistent, who affirm that the morality of individuals is to be guided by the divine law, but not the morality of the State, so that in public affairs the commands of God may be passed over, and may be entirely disregarded in the framing of laws.

The kind of thinking that supposes that the state is not bound by the moral law leads ultimately to the justification made by some Nazis: "I was only following orders." When we act as either rulers or agents of the state, we have the same Lord and King. Jesus Christ, as we do in any other sphere or department of human life, the same moral code, the same standard of salvation or damnation. Jesus Christ came to redeem human life in its totality — individual, familial, and social. All sin is doubtless difficult to eradicate, but we cannot leave politics and economics, or war and peace, to the devil on the plea that it is too complex or too difficult to implement real reform. As Pope Pius XII put it in an address to a group of Italian
things might change or cease," Shakespeare makes the force of the storm a measure of Lear's mounting passion: "Strike flat the thick rotundity of the world!" he shouts. "Crack nature's moulards, all germans spill at once! That makes ingrateful man." Let chaos come again!

Contemplating the storming of the stage in King Lear moves one to appreciate how a playwright could create an action that allows for the full development of a character's chaotic rage while simultaneously retaining the degree of structured order necessary to render the scene credible on stage. Imagine the problems the playwright had to solve in finding a dramatic form within which to display the state of mind of a protagonist whose fury approaches apocalyptic levels. He has to show the swirling thoughts of the hero being projected onto the outside world. It is the mind in chaos, not one that is going to bring order to the world around it, but one that wills anarchy. How can the playwright maintain order on the stage at the nuts-and-bolts level of drama when the experience to be rendered is a collapse of cosmic proportions? It requires a device that produces an action of incomparable magnitude but at the same time remains so artfully concealed as to create the impression that there is no action, only the protagonist's reaction.

Shakespeare's solution was to cast Kent, in company with the Fool and Gloucester, as the scene's propelling character, and to make the protagonist himself, throughout the entire scene, the responding or resisting character. It is a bold, remarkable, and highly successful strategy.

The King remains every inch a king, even when "relegated" to a responding role, so that what surfaces in the action is what gives him his tragic proportions: the strength of his will, the recklessness and the rashness of his fury, the magnificent force of his being. In so many ways, Lear's resistance comes into conflict with the rational demands made upon him. Each time Kent succeeds in bringing the reluctant Lear to a state of acquiescence, the achievement will in some way be aborted and the process must begin again. The result is a masterful series of structured scenes that give definition to chaos.

One thing more was added to perfect this structure: the shaping of the search for shelter into the form of a journey, a multi-layered journey at that. At the scene level, we are following the characters on their journey to the designated shelter. At the character level, we are witnessing Lear's journey into madness (as he himself realizes, "that way madness lies"). And at the plot level, we are being taken on a journey that will end at Dover, in the most tragic but profound illumination.

Embodied in the conflict is a thematic element that

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