

Greater than Sin

Reflection on the Pope's Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”

There is filth in the Church. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger himself said so during the Way of the Cross at Rome's Colosseum five years ago, shortly before being elected Pope and he has never stopped recalling the fact since. There is sin, grave sin. There is evil, along with the abyss of pain that evil carries with it, and everything possible has to be done, and with firmness, to stem the evil and to make amends for that pain. The Pope is already doing this, and his letter reiterates it strongly when it asks the guilty to “answer for it before Almighty God and before properly constituted tribunals.”

This is precisely why the real heart of the question, the forgotten focus, lies elsewhere. Alongside all the limitations and within the Church's wounded humanity, is there or not something greater than sin, something *radically* greater than sin? Is there something that can shatter the inexorable weight of our evil? Something that, as the Pope writes, “has the power to forgive even the greatest of sins, and to bring forth good even from the most terrible evil?”

“This is the point: God was moved by our nothingness,” Fr. Giussani said in the phrase quoted on the CL Easter Poster*. “Not only that God was moved by our betrayal, by our crude, forgetful, and treacherous poverty, by our pettiness... It's compassion, pity, passion. He had pity on me.” This is what the Church brings to the world, and certainly not because of its members' merit, goodness, or even less because of their coherence: God's compassion for our pettiness, something greater than our limitations, the only thing infinitely greater than our limitations. If we don't start from here, we cannot understand anything; everything goes mad, literally.

We all have had moments when we have dodged that compassion, and have run away from it. At times, it is in the Church itself that faith is reduced to ethics, and morality is reduced to an impossible lonely recourse to laws, as if the need of that embrace were something to be ashamed of. But if we forget Christ, if we do away with the wholly different measure that He introduces into the world now, *through* the Church, then we no longer have the terms with which to judge and understand the Church. And it becomes impossible to understand why the Church can be hard and motherly at the same time with the priests who go wrong. It can punish them severely and ask them to serve their sentence and make amends for the evil but without snapping, if possible, that thread that binds them, because it is the only thing that can redeem them. It can ask its children to “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect, not so as to demand of the man impossible irreproachability, but so as to remind them of a tension to live the same mercy with which God embraces us” (“be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful”).

This is why the Church can and must continue to educate. But we must not think that the Church's being a teacher depends solely on the behaviour of her children, forgetting about Christ, about that Presence which— amidst all the errors and horrors committed— makes an embrace like that of Chagall's Prodigal Son (which appears on the Easter Poster) possible in the world. There, alongside Fr.Giussani's phrase, there is another, by Benedict XVI: "Conversion to Christ ultimately means this: to exit the illusion of self-sufficiency in order to discover and accept one's own need—the need of His forgiveness and His friendship."

This is the embrace of Christ, the embrace of our wounded and needy humanity, far greater than the evil we can do. If the Church, with all its limitations, had not this to offer to the world, especially to the victims of those barbarities, then we would be lost—because the evil would still be there, but it would be impossible to overcome it.

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The Christian Good News responds positively to man's thirst for justice. What then is the justice of Christ? Above all, it is the justice that comes from grace, where it is not man who makes amends, heals himself and others. Conversion to Christ ultimately means this: to exit the illusion of self-sufficiency in order to discover and accept one's own need – the need of others and God, the need of His forgiveness and His friendship.

Benedict XVI

This is the point: God was moved by our nothingness. Not only that. God was moved by our betrayal, by our crude, forgetful, and treacherous poverty, by our pettiness. Like a father and mother who cry with emotion, a cry that is totally determined by the desire for the child's good, the child's destiny. It's compassion, pity, passion. He had pity on me.

Luigi Giussani