

St. Paul and Confronting Oneself

“How could I have been so foolish? How could I have been so blind?” Many of us, perhaps most of us, have expressed these sentiments, at least to ourselves. The issue is not one of intelligence, training or education. Rather we came to a startling reevaluation of our past moral behavior. It is the shocking recognition of sin and its consequences. This insight is the grace of compunction.

Compunction comes from the Latin word *compungo*, which literally means, “to puncture on all sides.” That is exactly what happens. Our heart is pierced on all sides with the terrible awareness of our bad choices stripped away from the façades of our rationalizations. It’s painful to admit how far we have departed from the ideal of our youth. At that awful and wonderful moment we also experience the heart of Jesus embracing our wretchedness. In Latin the heart (*cor*) of Jesus encounters the pitiable (*miser*) sinner in the marvel of God’s mercy (*miser cordia*). Mercy tempers the shock of our sinfulness leading us to genuine repentance rather than despair. The experience of God’s mercy fosters a deep sorrow for and a profound detestation of sin. Then we can declare with St. Paul: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 7:24-25)!

It is painful to recognize how far we are removed from Jesus’ command during the Sermon on the Mount: “You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). Our perfection is always relative to our condition as creatures. It’s an imperfect or limited perfectibility. However, even that is far beyond our natural capability. St. Paul, who was well acquainted with his own sinfulness and human weaknesses, wrote: “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10). This apparent contradiction has meaning when we consider that St. Paul relied on Christ’s strength in his weakness. Therefore, he could also write: “I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

Pope Benedict XVI gave a comforting reminder to all of us who come face to face with our sinfulness: “Holiness does not consist in never having erred or sinned. Holiness increases the capacity for conversion, for repentance, for willingness to start again, and, especially, for reconciliation and forgiveness... Consequently, it is not the fact that we have never erred but our capacity for reconciliation and forgiveness which makes us saints.”¹

Through the last two centuries Christians have found reassurance in the story of St. Paul’s amazing conversion because it exemplifies God’s mercy that also touches our lives. How is it possible that this staggering intellect that assiduously studied the Old Testament under the tutelage of Israel’s greatest rabbi failed to see in Jesus the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies and the hope of mankind? There is a profound connection between the fire-breathing, anti-Christian Saul of Tarsus who became the saint, whose writings and example

¹ *The Apostles*, p. 159 emphasis mine.

inspires us at a distance of 2,000 years, and Stephen the first martyr: “A man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5).

Stephen, “full of grace and power” (Acts 6:8), evangelized the Hellenists. He interpreted the Old Testament as a proclamation of and a foreshadowing of Jesus’ death and resurrection as the savior of the world. He properly placed Jesus at the center of the Jewish scriptures showing that Jesus is its interpretative key. He showed that Jesus, crucified and risen, is truly the center of history and the only way to eternal happiness.

Saul of Tarsus utterly rejected Stephen’s interpretation of the Old Testament as blasphemous. Therefore, he approved the actions of the enraged mob that “cast him [Stephen] out of the city and stoned him” (Acts 7:58). What followed was a general persecution led by Saul that hounded many Christians out of Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, Phoenicia and to the city of Antioch in Syria where the followers of Jesus were first called “Christians” (Acts 8:1; 11:19-20, 26).

On his fateful journey to Damascus to expand his persecution Saul encountered Jesus. In that disquieting moment of truth he experienced the shocking realization of his stupidity and blindness. Three days later his sins were forgiven in the sacrament of baptism (Acts 22:16). The divine heart of mercy met and overcame the ugliness of sin.

The sorrow and joy of compunction takes a person out of himself. Therefore Saul’s response was to share his revelation: “And in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’” (Acts 9:20). Yet with all his newborn zeal, Paul like any other man could not repair the damage of his sinfulness. Stephen remained dead. Only Jesus can heal the wounds of sin. In the amazing story that followed, Jesus used Paul to take up Stephen’s interpretation of the Old Testament that he once assaulted as a relentless enemy. He became the apostle to the gentiles preaching Christ crucified and risen. In this amazing turn of events St. Stephen’s vision was proclaimed in St. Paul’s mission.

St. Paul, who once desperately needed forgiveness, was called to exercise a “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18). The memory of his sinful past prompted St. Paul to write: “For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor 15:9). The difference between the proud Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, and the humble apostle, St. Paul, is the dynamic action of the grace of sincere repentance.

Relying on grace and not on himself, Paul could become the instrument Jesus used to heal the damage caused by Saul’s persecution. The same is true with us, although usually not in so dramatic a fashion. Genuine compunction leads to a trust in God that relies on his mercy to repair the damage we have inflicted on ourselves and others.

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