

17. SIN AND GRACE IN THE CHURCH

Where there is sin, grace abounds

Since the time of Christ, the Catholic Church as an institution and some of her leaders committed theological errors and moral faults. These happened because the Church consists of human believers who were and who still are vulnerable and capable of sinning.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the light that shines in darkness. When the Church fails to be illumined by the light of Christ and falls to the worldly traps of sin, she becomes a counter-witness. In a way, the sins of the Church are the sins of humanity manifested in the religious sphere. Some of the sins are as follows:

Institutional Sins

Christians were among the Westerners who were involved with the African slave trades from the 16th to the 19th century. The minds of Christians were still not adequately enlightened to recognise the injustice of the slave system.

The Church authority took active part in the burning of “heretics” at the stake and the issuing of other punishments, especially during the period of the Spanish Inquisition (established in 1478 and disbanded in 1834). Notably, among those accused and burnt were Joan of Arc who was accused of “wearing men’s clothes”, William Tyndale who was condemned for making a vernacular translation of the Bible, and John Wycliffe who was punished for criticising the corruption of Church leaders.

Galileo was silenced for his astronomical theory and put to house arrest.

The Church was involved in the Catholic-Protestant wars in Europe during the period of 1562-1598. There were at least eight wars where thousands of people were killed.

Many Christians, like the rest of humanity, were silent and inactive in response to the Holocaust (1941-1945) when the situation called for a heroic renunciation of evil and a firm stand against homicides.

Christians, together with other civil and religious authorities, were involved in violating the rights of indigenous peoples in various lands and showing contempt for their cultures and traditions, for example, the forced migration of the Native Americans and the Aborigines in Australia.

The Church's leaders failed to discipline clergy involved in sex abuses and covered up some cases that were found to be true in some recent investigations, especially in the United States of America, Canada, and Australia.

Personal Sins

There were also notorious cases of personal sins at the top of the Catholic Church hierarchy. The following lists seven of the most corrupted popes in history:

Pope Stephen VI (896-897) had the body of his predecessor, Pope Formosus, dug up, abused, and put on trial for blasphemy. He acted out his personal grudge and the differences that they shared in political allegiance.

Pope John VII (955-964) who lived a coarse and immoral life was eventually accused of perjury and simony. He was briefly deposed but swept back into power in a bloody purge.

Pope Benedict IX (1032-1048) lived a licentious life and held the papacy on three separate occasions in the 11th century. On one occasion, he resigned and sold the papacy to another priest.

Pope Boniface VIII (1230-1303) waged wars, sacked cities, and was eventually defeated by an army of his enemies. He indulged in years of simony and licentious acts.

Pope Urban VI (1378-1389) presided over a major schism in 1378, which resulted in the emergence of parallel feuding papacies that lasted nearly four decades. He had six cardinals arrested, tortured, and ultimately executed for conspiracy to depose him.

Pope Alexander VI (1492-1503) was caught up in political intrigues, orgies, skulduggery, and debauchery of the Borgia family.

Pope Leo X (1513-1521) of the Medici family was a patron of the arts and indulged in lavish spendthrift habits. He emptied the Vatican's coffers and tried to replenish the revenue by measures such as the "sale of indulgences".

Christian Charity and Services

Despite the faults and failures of the Catholic Church, over the centuries, her positive influences and contributions to human civilisation cannot be underestimated and should not be overlooked.

The Church radiates charity. Charity can be defined as giving to those outside of one's social circles – a giving motivated by love. It first manifested as a significant social phenomenon with the emergence of the Church's services. The Christian communities would give to the poor, tend to prisoners, and take care of orphans and widows. Today, the Church runs thousands of charities all over the world.

Clinics and hospitals are organised institutions dedicated to the healing of the sick and injured. They began through the Church's initiatives in the 4th century and throughout history. Church efforts in healthcare continue globally today, especially in many of the world's poorest regions.

Schools and universities are pioneered by the Church throughout the centuries. The Catholic schools take care of poor children in many rural areas. Catholic universities advance various disciplines of science and humanities. Prior to these establishments, the learning and teaching of monks preserved Europe from cultural and educational collapse after the fall of the Roman Empire.

Today, it is estimated that Catholic schools educate more than 50 million students worldwide. Catholic educators, from Don Bosco to Elizabeth Ann Seton and many others, brought an egalitarian view of education to the fore, especially in providing opportunities for the children of the poor and the marginalised.

The Promotion of Human Rights

The values of fundamental equality of all human beings and sanctity of life are rooted in Christian ethics, and their widespread social acceptance was influenced by the

Church's teaching. The eventual abolishment of the practices of slavery and the disfigurement of criminals were great examples of the positive effects.

The Church's teaching in relation to marriage, monogamy, family responsibility, and the dignity of wives, girls, and widows massively improved the standing of women in society.

In relation to the handicapped and disabled, the Church was one of the few prominent providers of care and services that safeguard their dignity and serve their needs in the days when they were discriminated and overlooked. Today, the Church continues to be a voice for these people.

The Catholic Church has always been in the forefront of serving refugees and migrants who have suffered loss of homes, livelihoods, possessions, and oftentimes families. In partnership with its affiliates, Catholic Migration and Refugee Services assists and coordinates the provision of food, clothing, shelter, employment, language training, and orientation to a new community and culture.

In the 20th century the Church provided a major force of resistance within societies overtaken by the dictatorial regimes of Russian Communism and German National Socialism. It was the Church that popularised the idea of "human dignity" as a response to these totalitarianisms.

Scientific Development

The Catholic Church has shown in theory and practice how science and religion are mutually supportive. Many

outstanding Catholics were and are instrumental in various scientific advancements throughout history.

At the dawn of the scientific age, it was Pope Clement IV who requested the writing of *Opus Maius* by Friar Roger Bacon (published 1267) and that resulted in the tradition of optical science.

William of Ockham (1288 –1348) was a Franciscan Scholastic who wrote on logic, physics, and theology.

Through diligent study of the stars and constellations, Catholic scientists developed the **Gregorian calendar**, which is used worldwide today. It is named after Pope Gregory XIII, who introduced it in October 1582.

Giovanni Battista Riccioli (1598–1671) was a Jesuit astronomer who authored *Almagestum Novum*, an influential encyclopaedia of astronomy. He was the first person to measure the rate of acceleration of a freely falling body and created a selenograph with Fr. Grimaldi, which now adorns the entrance at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C.

Nicolas Steno (1638-1686) who became a bishop made great strides in anatomy and geology. Various parts of the body are named after him, such as Stensen's duct, Stensen's gland, Stensen's vein, and Stensen's foramina. He is also the founder of the study of fossils.

Gregor Mendel (1822-1884) was an Austrian monk remembered for his experiments with pea plants that led to the discovery of hereditary patterns of traits. His work became the basis for all subsequent studies of genetics.

Georges Lemaître (1894-1966), a Catholic priest in the 20th century, proposed The Big Bang Theory, which challenged Einstein's view of the universe.

Fr. Giuseppe Mercalli (1850-1914) was a volcanologist and director of the Vesuvius Observatory. He is best remembered today for the Mercalli scale that is still used for measuring earthquakes.

George V. Coyne (1933 -) is a Jesuit priest, astronomer, former director of the Vatican Observatory, and head of the observatory's research group, which is based at the University of Arizona.

Conclusion

Modern society has developed a healthy scepticism about large institutions such as the Catholic Church; it has also developed a set of social values such as mutual responsibility and transparency that are expected of these organisations. These developments provide positive challenges for the Catholic Church to embrace renewed way of being Church and being a witness to truth and charity.

The Catholic Church that is centred on Christ has been and will be His Body that pursues the Good for all humanity. The Church in history had occasionally failed to be an authentic witness of Christ – both at the institutional and hierarchical levels. This fact has its root cause in human weaknesses, and such violation of her integrity is due to sin. Catholic believers as part of humanity must find the solution in divine grace, which can repair and perfect human nature.

Catholicity insists that believers should serve God by living rightly; striving to love our neighbours is the key to serving God. We are made holy by God's grace and by continual cooperation with grace to grow in holiness. The Church is on its pilgrim way to God, and she must continue to purify and renew herself while walking the path of truth and charity.