

The real tragedy of sin

The real tragedy of sin is that often the one who is sinned against eventually becomes a sinner, inflicting on others what was first inflicted upon him or her. There's something perverse within us whereby when we are sinned against we tend to take in the sin, complete with the sickness from which it emanated, and then struggle not to act out in that same sick way. The ultimate triumph of sin is that first being sinned against, we often become sinners.

We see this, in an elementary form, in the effects that certain sadistic hazing rituals have on those who undergo them. From high school football teams to college sororities to certain schools of military training, we see sadistic hazing rituals used as forms of initiation.

The interesting thing is that those who undergo them generally can't wait for their turn to inflict them upon someone else. Having undergone some sadism, something sadistic arises within them.

There's an axiom within certain schools of psychology which submits that every abuser was first abused. Mostly that's true. The bully was himself first bullied, the sadist was himself first victimized, and the bitter alienated outsider (whom in arrogance we label "a loser") was himself first unfairly excluded.

What produces an outsider? What produces a sadistic person? Indeed, what produces a mass killer? What must have happened to the heart of a man for him to put on military fatigues, take up an assault rifle, and begin to shoot helpless school children?

Mental illness, no doubt, is often the factor, but there are other factors too, most of which we don't have the courage to honestly face. Our spontaneous judgment on the perpetrator of a mass shooting or terrorist bombing most naturally expresses itself this way: "I hope he fries in hell!"

What's wrong with that reaction is its failure to understand that this person was already frying in some private hell and this terrible acting-out is an attempt to get out of hell or at least to take as many people as he can to hell with him.

What perpetrators of violence mostly want to do is to ruin heaven for others since they themselves feel unfairly deprived of it. This isn't everywhere true of course since mental illness and the mystery of human freedom also play in, but it's true enough to challenge us towards a better understanding of why some people have bitter, sadistic hearts while others have gracious, loving ones. What shapes a heart? What makes someone bitter or gracious?

Sin and blessing shape a heart, the former deforming it and the latter healing

it.

Sin, our own not less than anyone else's, wounds others and shields us from having to own what's sick inside us because we have now inflicted our sickness onto someone else where it works at making that person ill.

Blessing does opposite. It relieves others of the sickness that was unfairly inflicted on them, helps turn their bitterness into graciousness, and soothes the very root of their wounds.

And so we need to stop classifying people as "winners" and "losers", as if they alone were responsible for their success or failure. They aren't. Not many Mother Teresas, I suspect, were traumatically abused as children. Not many Saint Francis suffered debilitating ridicule as young children, were bullied on Facebook, or shamed for their appearance.

Cruelty and grace, as Leonard Cohen submits, both come upon us undeserved. And then they imprint themselves into our psyches and even our bodies.

How we carry ourselves, our bodily posture, how we radiate spiritually, our self-confidence, our shame, our big-heartedness, our pettiness, our ability to express love, our resistance of love, how much we bless and how much we curse, is very much contingent on how much we ourselves have been undeservedly blessed or cursed, that is, the various undeserved graces and cruelties we have undergone.

Admittedly, this is still colored by the mystery of human freedom. Some Mother Teresas do come from abusive backgrounds and some St. Francis did suffer cruelty and bullying as a child and yet became one-in-million wounded healers, turning the very sin against them into a powerful healing grace. Unfortunately, they're the exception, not the rule, and their greatness, more than anything else, lies in that exact achievement.

There are many challenges for us in this: First, we must not let our emotions sway us into making the kind of judgements where we would like to see someone "fry in hell". Second, we should be much less smug and arrogant about those whom we label as "losers".

Next, we need to learn that perhaps the ultimate human and spiritual challenge is to not let what we suffer from the sins and failings of others turn us bitter so that we in turn begin to inflict that same sin onto others.

Finally, and not least, understanding more deeply what's undeserved in our lives should lead us to a deeper gratitude towards God and towards all who have so, undeservedly, loved and gifted us.