

situation is also generally understood as one which is brought about not necessarily by accident, but by the planning and connivance of Satan. Similarly, our decisions are not entirely free in the sense that there are no external influences. On the one hand, God provides us with his grace to help make a decision that **reflects his love**. On the other, Satan tries to persuade us that our best interest are served by **not** expressing the love that God expects of us. Now, while we believe that temptation, as just described, certainly occurs, **another** far more sinister aspect to it must also be recognised. Temptation is **also, and even primarily, a process** that is ongoing within **our society** itself and thus affects people indirectly as well.



Jesus stated how powerful and cunning Satan is “**He was never grounded in the truth. There is no truth in him at all. When he lies he is speaking true to his nature because he is a liar and the father of lies**” (Jn.8:44). Satan’s real power lies in the way he undermines positive Christian values in the guise of what seems reasonable arguments. His very ‘**reasonableness**’ hides the falsehoods that seek to destroy real love between people. The result is the evil of abortion under the banner of a ‘woman’s right to choose’, it is in attempts to introduce assisted suicide and euthanasia on the grounds of preventing suffering, it is the erosion of the importance of marriage between a man and a woman on the grounds of human rights, it is the devaluing of Christian moral values on the grounds of progress and modernity, it is the rise of selfishness and greed under the banner of self-fulfilment. It is many more things, but the common factor is Satan’s power not only to influence people’s decisions to act against God’ love but also, even worse, to persuade them by his ‘reasonableness’ to be become completely **indifferent** to God’s existence. In many ways that is the **greatest** threat to the salvation of such people and what affects Jesus’ Sacred heart most.

What is Real Goodness?

Because sin is anything that reduces our capacity to love God and others, it follows that the rejection of temptation is the choice to pursue unselfish love, love of God and love of our fellow man. It is this that gives us **real freedom** because we are at peace with ourselves, because we are at peace with God and in our relationship with others. Further, it is this which creates **real goodness** within us, because real goodness is all to do with **living for and with God** and being filled with God “**A pure heart create for me, O God. Put a steadfast spirit within me**” (Ps.51). The traditional way of describing this is to say we are full of sanctifying grace but the reality is that we actually become **filled with the Holy Spirit** (Rm.8). Further, on a practical level, this means we become more and more transformed as individuals so that we become **virtuous** in our very being, that is, we become better able to choose God’s love **instinctively**, with less deliberation (Gal.5:22). That is **real** goodness.



Our Catholic Faith

10. Sin, Temptation, Goodness - - *What Do These Really Mean?*



Questions for Reflection

1. What do you understand by sin?
2. Is temptation just a way of expressing human weakness?
3. Is what we might call ‘a good person’ really good?

The Real Nature of Sin

When we were children we were probably taught that sin offends God. Probably, we were also taught this in the context of the Ten Commandments, and we were told that doing or failing to do certain actions constituted sin. No doubt this led to a formulaic way of using the Sacrament of Penance (Confession) whereby we would examine a list of actions/sins and confess our failures according to this list.

However, this approach does not give a complete or proper perspective of the true nature of sin. This is because it places the emphasis on what we call sin **first**, and **then** relates it to God. Instead the perspective should **start** with God and then understand sin in the light of God. This, in turn, may lead to a better way to use the Sacrament of Penance.

We should, therefore, really start with the notion of the **perfect goodness** of God. This perfect goodness is nothing else but perfect and complete love “**because God is love**” (1 Jn.4:8). Once we start from that central point and realise how much God loves us:



“**God so loved the world that gave his only begotten Son .. that we may have eternal life**” (Jn.3:16 and parallel in 1 Jn.4:9).

then it becomes clear that to reject this love is an offence against God’s goodness. It is the **rejection in any way of God’s love** that constitutes sin.

So, sin is really to do with how we relate on a personal level with God in light of his love. This has two aspects, the first is Jesus’ reflection on Deut.6

“**The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with all your soul and with all your strength**” (Mtt.22). The second is the responsibility to love others “**You must love your neighbour as yourself**”.

Before we think or speak or act, therefore, we should always ask ourselves “Am I behaving in such a way that I am expressing love?” We might think that as long as we show love and personal devotion to God by praying and undertaking our religious duties then that is sufficient to make us a good person. But Jesus tells us that our first duty is to love our fellow man “**If you bring your offering to the altar and remember your brother has something against you, leave your offering before the altar and go and be reconciled with your brother first, then come back and present your offering**” (Mtt.5).

Jesus’ point is emphasised directly by St. John “**Anyone who says ‘I love God’ and hates his brother is a liar, since whoever does not love his brother whom he can see, can not love God whom he has not seen**” (1 Jn.4:20).

Therefore, our view of sin needs to be more mature than simply ‘checking-off’ our actions against a list: it has to be more to do with the question “Have I become

a **better** person in terms of the love I have shown to God and my fellow man?”

An effective way to relate sin and love is to picture the **Sacred Heart of Jesus** with its crown of embedded thorns. Jesus’ heart of love is injured by every sin, and each sin against love is a thorn piercing his heart. The less love we show, the deeper each thorn is inserted. The more love we show, the more we contribute to their removal.



We all like the idea of being free to run our own lives, and we tend to want to make decisions that give us short-term satisfaction and pleasure. But any idea of freedom that does not take into account God’s love is illusory. Similarly, any action that does not include God in its performance does not, in fact, lead to a real improvement in our lives or really make us better or, indeed, happier people.

Real freedom, as St. Augustine of Hippo taught, only comes by loving God and placing at the front of all that we do “**Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be given you**” as Jesus said (Mtt.6).

What is Really Meant by Mortal Sin?

Sin is any action that does not place God first, that does not show love, that is selfish. But, of course, there are degrees of being selfish and degrees of not showing love. Historically, the Church has separated sin into **mortal** and lesser **venial** sins. The former extinguishes any grace that we might have had within us and completely separates us from God. **Spiritually, it is Death.**



Traditionally, this was defined in terms of a serious matter done with full consent and knowledge. Again, the serious matter tended to be anything from a list of standard serious sins e.g. murder, adultery. However, perhaps a better way to define a mortal sin is to say it is **when a person deliberately and consciously decides to reject God himself, and gives up on him.** Of course, God never gives up or rejects anyone and is always open to a repentant sinner, and this new definition of a mortal sin emphasises that it is never God who condemns a sinner but themselves by knowingly choosing to separate themselves from him. It may be argued in response that surely no-one would ever be able to do this? That is a powerful question, but one that should make us very wary of judging anyone by their actions, even though those actions may be abhorrent and evil in themselves.

Temptation

Temptation is generally understood as an occasion where we have to decide whether to conform within the spirit of a list of activities or not. We may see the choice in terms of, for example, obeying the Ten Commandments or not. This