



On the Lovely Side of Sin

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In *The City of God*, Saint Augustine affirms, “God, the wise Creator and just Ordainer of all natures, has made the mortal race of man the loveliest of all lovely things on earth.”¹ And as Catholics we are taught that God made us to know him, to love him, and to serve him in this world so as to be happy with him forever in the next.² Although the next world is one of eternal peace, life in the present, sinful world remains an unsettled journey. Earthly suffering and eternal serenity unite in the person of Jesus Christ, who proclaims, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”³ Saint Paul testifies to this worldly effect - “The flesh is at war with the spirit”⁴ - and Augustine expresses our earthly quest in mysterious yet moving terms: “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”⁵

We live in a loud and restless world. A fallen world. A sinful world. According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, the consequence of original sin is separation from God and a disposition to fix our gaze on the trappings of the *ego*, the Latin word for “I”. This manifests in a disordered and insatiable appetite for worldly treasures: wealth, power, honor, and pleasure.⁶ And the more we seek peace in earthly things, that is, the more we turn inward toward the self, the farther off course we drift from God’s truth and love. Augustine declares “It is in vain that men look for beatitude on earth or in human nature”⁷; the City of God, however, is “everlasting and perfect peace.”⁸

¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 19, Chapter 13

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1721

³ John 16:33

⁴ Galatians 5:17

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1

⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Secundae Partis, Question 2

⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 19, Chapter 4

⁸ Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 19, Chapter 20

It is logical that the greatest of God's creatures would be ordered to pursue the most exalted of aspirations, God himself. But how is it that the most consequential of life's journeys - that of knowing, loving, and serving God - is at the same time restless and peaceful? Where, precisely, does this phenomenon occur? And why? C.S. Lewis contends, "No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good; only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is."⁹ The Christian life is one of *movement*; from the temporal to the spiritual, from sin to salvation, from tribulation to peace. Life's fundamental journey is one of *trying* to be good, of *resisting* the persistent pull of sin, the continual *laboring* from darkness to light. And on this journey the grace of God begets trying (to be good); trying begets realization (that one is sinful); and realization begets grace (through the sacraments). And it is there, within the *realizing* that vice becomes a participation in virtue, sin a participation in grace. In accordance with his Divine Will, God permits, embraces, and employs sin for the salvation of humankind; it is there, precisely between restlessness and peace, on the lovely side of sin, that we find God.

Sin existed from the very beginning. "The whole of human history is marked by the original fault freely committed by our first parents."¹⁰ Not only did God permit sin - for it was, after all, the free choice of Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, to seek to know good and evil¹¹ - but he permitted the instigator of sin, the devil himself, to reside in the garden alongside his loveliest creation.¹² "Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God, which makes them fall into death out of envy."¹³ Adam and Eve were easy prey for the evil one, and he, "the most cunning of all the wild animals that the Lord God

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book Three, Chapter 11

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 390

¹¹ Genesis 3:6

¹² Genesis 1:27

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 391

had made”¹⁴, was quick to strike. *Eat the apple*, he said reassuringly. “You certainly will not die!”¹⁵ And upon eating the apple, the suffering was immediate; “they knew that they were naked...and they hid themselves from the Lord God.”¹⁶

Satan is committed to dragging our souls and the souls of our loved ones to Hell for all eternity. He and his horde of demons lurk on earth, using our own bad habits and prideful behaviors - the *ego* - to ensnare us, not always with obvious traps but with false promises. “The Devil was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he speaks in character, because he is a liar and the father of lies.”¹⁷ Satan’s sinister aim is to facilitate, stimulate, and accelerate lies, resulting in disunion and accusation against one other, and ultimately, against God.

First, he presents sin to his victims, disguised as an earthly treasure, something “good, pleasing, and desirable”¹⁸; next, he assures his targets that there will be no consequence for the sinful action taken; finally, when the deed has been done, when the sin has been committed, hopelessness - that is, shame and estrangement from God - sets in. And after we’ve fallen away from God, we are unable to correct our course, to disentangle ourselves, because we have no mortal power to do so. We’re trapped in the darkness, bound in hopelessness, caught in the clutches of the evil one. The inscription above the gates of Hell is said to read: “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.”¹⁹ Is there anything more terrifying than the thought of spending eternity without hope, forever separated from God? In fact, an eternally hellish and infernal existence for all souls is precisely Satan’s purpose²⁰.

¹⁴ Genesis 3:1

¹⁵ Genesis 3:4

¹⁶ Genesis 3:7-8

¹⁷ John 8:44

¹⁸ Genesis 3:6

¹⁹ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*

²⁰ 1 Peter 5:8

But God, who is endless mercy and compassion, does not forsake us, as he did not forsake the original sinners; to the contrary, he immediately called out to them in the garden, extending his grace: “Where are you?”²¹, and they turned toward his voice, and confessed, “I ate it; I was afraid; I hid.”²² Restless and hopeless, Adam and Eve lifted their heads, and turned to God, to his eternal love. And just as the negative impact of sin - that of shame and estrangement - was immediate, so too was the positive impact of hope. For at once God announced his plan to solve the problem created by Adam and Eve, warning Satan “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; they will strike at your head, while you strike at their heel.”²³

Sin precipitates our falling downward, our anxious tumble into fear and despair, away from the City of God. But God who is mercy itself, never forsakes or abandons us.²⁴ He is always there, calling out, welcoming us back with unconditional love. “Faithful is he who calls you.”²⁵ Upon the circuitous timeline of our earthly journey, situated precisely between restlessness and peace is the moment we realize our sinfulness, the very instant we acknowledge our helplessness, hear God’s voice, and turn to him. And in doing so, we find hope. “Hope denotes a movement or a stretching forth of the appetite towards an arduous good; In so far as we hope for anything as being possible to us by means of the Divine assistance, our hope attains God Himself, on Whose help it leans.”²⁶ It is here, in the *turning* toward God, in the *stretching forth* toward his goodness, in that split second of movement toward the light, that we meet God. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from

²¹ Genesis 3:9

²² Genesis 3: 10

²³ Genesis 3:15

²⁴ Hebrews 13:5

²⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:24

²⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Secunda Secundæ Partis, Question 17

every wrongdoing.”²⁷ It is in hope that God’s grace envelopes sin, when sin itself becomes a participation in grace. It is here, on the lovely side of sin, that we recognize our own exodus from restlessness to peace, our own movement toward the light, our own cleansing now a subtle echo of the ancient wisdom: “He has made everything beautiful in its time.”²⁸

And though sin existed from the beginning, so too did the light of Jesus Christ; “He was in the beginning with God; the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”²⁹ In the earthly city we are surrounded by temptation, and forever faced with evil. God, however, is endless love, eternal truth, and everlasting beauty. He does not compel temptation; he does not cause evil. And though God permits sin and evil - that is, God accepts the absence of good to manifest as suffering in our earthly lives - he at the same time equips us with the remedy for it; his Son, Jesus Christ. “God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ.”³⁰

God our heavenly father not only permits sin, but he embraces it through Christ, who came to eradicate the pestilence of sin as the antidote himself. “Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners.”³¹ Throughout the Gospels, Christ confronts sin directly, and conforms death to his salvific intentions, sanctifying the afflicted with his healing touch.³² In each circumstance, we witness movement of the aggrieved *away* from despair, away from the edge of darkness, *toward* the light of hope:

²⁷ 1 John 1:9

²⁸ Ecclesiastes 3:11

²⁹ John 1:2, 5

³⁰ Ephesians 2:4-5

³¹ Luke 5:31

³² Colossians 4:14; the Gospel of Luke (he the earthly physician) is specifically referenced

- God heals our afflictions; he relieves our suffering. “At sunset all who had people sick with various diseases brought them to him. He laid his hands on each of them and cured them.”³³
- God sees the beauty of himself in all his creatures; he washes away our deformities. “When he (the leper) saw Jesus, he fell prostrate, pleaded with him, and said ‘Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean.’ Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, ‘I will do it. Be made clean.’”³⁴
- God unchains us from the bondage of sin; he liberates us from paralysis. “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”, he said to the man who was paralyzed, “I say to you, rise, pick up your stretcher, and go home.”³⁵
- God wakes us from our earthly slumber; he stirs us from death to eternal life. “All were weeping and mourning for her, when he said, ‘Do not weep any longer, for she is not dead but sleeping.’ He took her by the hand and called to her, ‘Child, arise!’ Her breath returned and she immediately arose.”³⁶
- God repels evil; he protects us from the snares of Satan. “‘Teacher, I beg you, look at my son; he is my only child.’ Jesus said, ‘Bring your son here.’ Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and returned him to his father.”³⁷
- God calls out and lifts our heads to him; he is our only hope amid fear and suffering. “And a woman was there who for eighteen years had been crippled by

³³ Luke 4:40

³⁴ Luke 5:12-13

³⁵ Luke 5:24

³⁶ Luke 8:52, 55

³⁷ Luke 9:38, 42

a spirit; she was bent over and completely incapable of standing erect. When Jesus saw her, he called to her and said, ‘Woman, you are set free of your infirmity.’ He laid his hands on her, and she at once stood up straight and glorified God.”³⁸

Christ embraced sin for our sake, it was “for our sake God made him to be sin.”³⁹

Communion is derived from the Latin word meaning “common.” At the Last Supper—the very first Mass of his Church—Jesus gathered with his disciples around a table, broke bread, and said “This is my body, which will be given for you”⁴⁰. Within 24 hours, Jesus would be scourged, crowned with thorns, and nailed through his hands and feet to a cross. Christ and the cross became one; our communion with Christ, therefore, requires communion with the cross. “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”⁴¹ As members of the body of Christ we are called to receive the grace of Jesus by embracing our earthly suffering as he did—with thanksgiving, faith, humility, and love. Yes, there is tribulation in the earthly city, but we take heart knowing that Christ - through his embrace and conquering of sin - has overcome the world.

Christ, by his embrace of sin, has indeed overcome the world; however, until our final liberation, we must remain in the earthly city, struggling toward the ideals of the City of God. And though we reach out, arms outstretched, toward the light, we can’t fully grasp it. Our heart is undeniably restless, and we are unable to rest completely in God while here on earth. But we are heartened by Augustine’s wisdom, “So it falls out that in this world, in evil days like these, the Church walks onward like a wayfarer stricken by the world’s hostility, but comforted by the

³⁸ Luke 13:11-13

³⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 602

⁴⁰ Luke 22:19

⁴¹ Matthew 16:24

mercy of God; so it shall be until this world is no more.”⁴² Gratefully, we can avail ourselves to the comfort and mercy of God through his Church, that blessed vessel designed and founded by Jesus Christ and outfitted with her priests and the sacraments to feed us and to heal us on our journey, to offer transport upward upon the passage from the earthly city to the City of God. It is the eternal treasure of heaven held in temporal earthen vessels⁴³ that provides access to hope during our exile in the earthly city. It is the Church that is required to help free us from the shackles of sin. It is the work of bishops and priests - mortal men called for our benefit to impose the structure of the Church on earth - needed to compel and enable the pursuit of virtue. It is Christ’s Church that offers healing and relief.

God created the world, and in the world sin exists. Of course, God hates sin. He neither needs, nor desires it. But he permits it, and he embraces it, going so far as to become it for our sake upon the cross. But God our heavenly father uses all things for his eternal designs. Saint Paul proclaims, “And we know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose”⁴⁴, just as Saul of Tarsus, he who “breathed murderous threats against the disciples”⁴⁵, was called to do the Lord’s work.⁴⁶ In God’s eternal wisdom and power, he enlisted the worst thing on earth - humiliating and excruciating death upon a Roman instrument of torture - and transfigured it into the very best thing - eternal life in heaven.

The peace that we can achieve on earth - imperfect as it is - occurs in the realization of our sinfulness, in hearing God’s voice, in turning away from hopelessness and despair, back toward the light of God. On the lovely side of sin, where we see him, and know him, and love

⁴² Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 18, Chapter 51

⁴³ 2 Corinthians 4:7

⁴⁴ Romans 8:28

⁴⁵ Acts of the Apostles 9:1

⁴⁶ Acts of the Apostles 9:15

him and therefore find his peace. In the earthly city, alas, we're destined to repeatedly fall, and therefore, we're bound to repeat the cycle. But through the grace of the sacraments, by the light and the truth of the Catholic Church, the circuitous journey we travel upon is ultimately a virtuous one. God is hope. Jesus Christ is our only hope. Peter mercifully discovered the hope of Christ on the lovely side of sin⁴⁷; Judas tragically did not⁴⁸.

“The desire for God is written on the human heart, because man is made by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will man find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for.”⁴⁹ But while “we seek final rest in the supreme good...will as we may, such liberty cannot be had in mortal life.”⁵⁰ As such, the Christian life is one of *movement*; from the temporal to the spiritual, from sin to salvation, from tribulation to peace. Our happiness in the earthly city occurs within the movement toward the light, within the *striving* to be better. In accordance with his Divine Will, God permits, embraces, and employs sin for the salvation of humankind; it is there, precisely between restlessness and peace that we find hope; it is in hope, that we achieve our heart's desire. We find God there, on the lovely side of sin.

⁴⁷ Luke 22:61-62

⁴⁸ Matthew 27:5

⁴⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 27

⁵⁰ Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 19, Chapter 4