

What Ever Happened To Sin?

by Samuel Hux (August 2016)



Well, nothing actually. It's still with us of course, since we are what we are. My question does not reveal a naïve assumption that there has been some radical reformation of human nature. Rather, it's a question about the perception of sin among "Smorgasbord Catholics"—whom I have been thinking about off and on given the respectful attention awarded them by the press during this Pope's and that one's occasional visits to the States. "I'm a good Catholic, but I think the church should respect my right to believe what I wish to believe, and furthermore. . . ." Isn't that a fair characterization of smorgasbord rhetoric?

Of course "my right to believe" has little theological relevance here. Smorgasbord Catholics don't have much interest in theological doctrine. But they are passionately interested in the sociology of Catholicism—to give a high-sounding name to what is essentially no more than a lifestyle consideration. It is my impression (I may be wrong) that the passion is more modest about the question of an all-male celibate priesthood, which affects the visible structure of the church, but fervent about those issues which affect the private life, such as divorce, abortion, birth control, and homosexuality. Since

the established positions of the church are such a burden to them, why don't Smorgasbord Catholics just become Episcopalians? This is not meant as a slur upon Canterbury. Bear with me. If one could bear to hear the "SC" out one should have patience enough for me. (An emendation: since I did basic training at Fort Jackson, "SC" will always mean *South Carolina* to me, so I need another abbreviation.)

The *SmorgCats* would find relaxed attitudes toward abortion and birth control, less moral concern with homosexuality, and, if it does after all matter, female priests. They would find a sufficiently similar architecture and, in High Church (Anglo Catholic) congregations at least, a solemnity of ritual that would ease a transition. They would find no Pope making medieval demands. And they would find priests uniformed about the same as in the Roman church, the occasional grey suit instead of black only providing a comfortable salt-and-pepper effect. What would they have to lose? Father Shannon's accent of course, or Father Rizzo's warm excitability. Now of course there is traditionally a sort of tweedy to preppy WASPishness, a lot of Dekes and Zeta Psi's, there being few Episcopalians like the Jewish-Italian Fiorello LaGuardia; but if the city is small enough, with no Orthodox church within reasonable travel distance, there would be some Greeks in attendance providing an ethnic leavening. And they would also find in all likelihood a declining active membership, open arms thus, and consequently the possibility of a demographic redefinition of Anglicanism. And perhaps even an Anglo-Irish Father Yeats for the accent.

The answer of course is: You just don't understand! There is just something about the Holy Roman Catholic Church, there just is. It's more than a church, is a home, and even if one doesn't always like one's home, it's home. Indelible impressions are left. Note the phenomenon of the lapsed-but-*cultural* Catholic: almost like the secular Jew still more Jewish than some Reform rabbis. A sort of brooding Augustinian resonance remaining while the particulars of faith do not. *But*. . . the point is that SmorgCat'ism doesn't seem to me culturally Catholic at all, even though its adherents are ostensibly within the church. A brooding resonance? Not at all. Rather, a self-confident sense of entitlement. Another way to put it: an insufficient sense of sin, its complexity and, relatively speaking, its grandeur. Hence my paradoxical argument, through which I should proceed with caution.

I propose an actual figure whom I will call "Mac." Highly intelligent, Notre

Dame. Not an academic philosopher (a painter instead), but still brooding on the *Summa*. Mac often says that the real church is “the union of all good men and true,” yet insists on calling himself “one of the last pre-Vatican II Catholics.” Dispensing with Latin, for instance, was a gross error. As Father Manus says in Brian Moore’s novella *Catholics*, “Latin was the language of the Church and the Church was one and universal and a Catholic could go into any church in the world, here or in Timbuktu, or in China, and hear the same Mass, the only Mass there was, the Latin Mass. And if the Mass was in Latin and the people did not speak Latin, that was part of the mystery of it, for the Mass was not talking to your neighbor, it was talking to God. Almighty God!” A shame that a liturgical-linguistic reform should signal to so many the legitimacy of doctrinal relaxations. Yet for all his pre-Vatican reaction (so to speak) Mac is, there’s no other way to put it, a *sinner*. By which I do not mean he is “human.” He is specifically, by church doctrine, a sinner. Profane and hilarious when inebriated—well, that’s not what I mean. Something of a sexual carouser when single—nor is that. Technically an adulterer at one stage of his life at least. I don’t know of any abortions; but since there has been but one child for his three marriages, and abstinence not a likelihood, contraceptive birth control is as likely as the violation of the sixth commandment is a certainty.

How can Mac—a highly imperfect being, as most worthy people I’ve known have been—consider himself a Catholic and love the church as much as he does when he is so clearly in violation? He obviously was not capable of bearing the utter impossibility of his first marriage, and got the hell out. But one should not assume this exacted no cost. The craggy face is a map of pain. While I might judge his life a life of reason, he would judge that his subsequent modicum of happiness was bought at the risk of danger to soul. So why has it never occurred to me to ask: “Mac, why don’t you just become an Episcopalian? Look at me.” Because he belongs where he is, that’s why. How so?

While some might judge Mac a hypocrite, I would insist on a more sympathetic hearing. Who really is the hypocrite? The one who accepts all the teachings yet finds himself incapable of living up to all he accepts? Or the one who accepts only those he chooses to live up to, as if the teachings were only a smorgasbord feast? The one who suffers his failings? Or the one who suffers nothing, for hasn’t he adjusted his putative faith to the pleasures of a fulfilling lifestyle? The one who knows he’s a sinner, even if he feels incapable of being

any other? Or the one who has forgotten, rather conveniently, what sin is?

And what do *I* know of sin, its residue of guilt, never having been frightened out of my wits by some repressed sadistic priest out of James Joyce? Well, my Anglicanism, which I stumbled upon in college after a youth in one of John Calvin's off-spring denominations, was not the "Whiskypalianism" of country club and Zeta Psi, and if it is now a here-it-is-where'd-it-go sort of thing, I remain what I was becoming all along: a lapsed-but-*cultural* Calvinist. So I would not advertise the pleasures of guilt. Only its dignity, so to say; that is, the dignity inherent in being able to *feel* guilt.

One thing that always made the Roman Catholic Church *large* is its wise incorporation of sin as a discipline of the soul. It must have been this ironic notion that the French poet-philosopher Charles Péguy (*La Note conjointe*, 1914) had in mind when he argued that sin is often a kind of wound through which grace may penetrate: "Those who are never wounded, whose moral skin is intact and makes a faultless leather jerkin. . . do not offer grace the opening of an appalling wound, an unforgettable distress, an invisible regret. . . a mortal anxiety. . . . They do not offer grace that door of entry which sin leaves open. . . . even God's charity cannot succour those who are unwounded." Something like this is what I meant several pages back when I may have stunned the reader by referring to the *relative grandeur of sin*. Of course one was to avoid sin if possible. And one couldn't fully, of course, the body being weak, as Saint Paul said. So, use it. Which means: suffer your guilt, for guilt is not merely a fact but a recognition of limits violated. I am not talking about doctrine here (or I don't think I am), but rather the inescapable logic of doctrine. While some Protestant faiths with their often literal-minded devaluation of good works as a way to salvation often removed some of the burden of imperfect humankind, Catholicism with its insistence that faith is not merely a possession but a praxis (and, hence, *works*) removed no burdens, indeed added weight to them. (Of course some Protestants often said Catholicism removed burdens through the institution of confession, but that was merely a bad-faith argument by those for whom the burden of sin is lightened by the faith which alone justifies.)

I hope it is clear that the specifics of SmorgCat'ism are not at issue here, not as far as I am concerned. I might sympathize with a SmorgCat here and there. While a moral opprobrium lifted from homosexuality would seem to me a

humane gesture, the matter of the priesthood—whether a male-celibate clergy, or a clergy of husbands and wives—is not something I choose to get overly worked up about. (Which is to say that my traditionalist preference for a male clergy is not a position I would like to be forced to defend.) I think birth control, whether through prophylactic or rhythm. Abortion, however, except in well-defined medical (life-threatening) or legal (rape) cases, I judge to be a moral horror—but since I was many years ago male party to an abortion, I am no one to speak. But the general phenomenon, the smorgasbord, is something else. Perhaps the church *should* redefine its positions. . . . but not because some middle-class American Catholics want a church more comfortable, which is really what the SmorgCats want, no matter how much they disguise their comfort-seeking as courageous stances of risk-taking Reformers.

It seems to me the church hierarchy has but two alternatives in relation to SmorgCat'ism. (1) A pragmatic retreat: although that's a suicidal and thus impractical kind of pragmatism which would destroy that which the retreat is intended to preserve. (2) Resistance (although I don't know what that means in specifics), even at the expense of waving goodbye to SmorgCats. The SmorgCats have three alternatives, it seems to me. (1) Wave goodbye to Mother Church, with or without marching to Canterbury. (2) Arrogantly continue as are: "The church should respect my right to pick and choose; this is a free country." (3) Rediscover sin. . . . and guilt's dignity. Of course one can't *command* the third. And why should a putative Catholic take advice from a non-? So, none of that. Let me simply share a reaction.

Those smiling presumptive Catholics basking before the camera's attention, with (figuratively speaking) potato salad in one hand and the other poised above the board, so obviously expect sympathy and encouragement (Right on!) as their clear entitlement, especially from those outside the faith. They so obviously expect to be taken as serious people, as advanced thinkers even, Thinkers Thinking Big Thoughts. Well, I wonder if I am in a minority in thinking them sadly and excruciatingly-embarrassedly absurd in their pretensions: a banal self-indulgence cast as brave critique.

"But," I can imagine someone asking at this point, "what's it to you, non-Catholic as you are; why such an emotional reaction to the puerile pretensions of silly people rebelling selectively against the teachings of Mother Church for the sake of a non-demanding lifestyle; are you contemplating a late conversion

to Mother Church so want it to remain the pure thing.”

Well, no—no such contemplation. And while my respect for the Roman Catholic Church is enormous, it’s not only my contempt for its violation that sets me off, nor only my impatience with the particular violators, but, ultimately, *my contempt for the historical type the SmorgCat is a familiar, and utterly banal, instance of.*

I think Edmund Burke had him sized up. . . . the type, I mean. “It is with infinite caution,” Burke wrote in his *Reflections*, “that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice, which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society.” But this caution of course is always alien to the radical, he possessing a brave vision so much more advanced than the accumulated wisdom of the past. His arrogance is boundless, as boundless as his stature is puny—his stature and arrogance both captured precisely in a marvelous Burkean passage which is done no violation, I think, by our reading where Burke writes “commonwealth,” “society,” or “state,” *Church* instead. I shall for your convenience italicize the words which “church” might replace.

“But one of the first and most leading principles on which the *commonwealth* and the laws are consecrated, is lest the temporary possessors and life-renters in it, unmindful of what they have received from their ancestors, or of what is due to their posterity, should act as if they were the entire masters; that they should not think it amongst their rights to cut off the entail, or commit waste on the inheritance, by destroying at their pleasure the whole original fabric of their *society*