

Week 5

The Disorder of Sin — Appalling Rebellion

Guide: What Sin Is



We have spent several weeks enjoying what it is to live in harmony with our purpose and to be inspired by people who seem to get it right. We now turn to look at another picture. Fr. Doll's photo of a bombed Bosnian village can symbolize for us both the revolting evil that results from the rejection of God and God's desire for us and for humanity.

Why do we go here this week? We want to see, to taste, *what sin is* — an appalling rebellion against God. This is not to look at some vague sense of social evil,

without any responsible villains. Our intention is to spend this week more consciously aware of the *sheer arrogance* and *outrageous opposition* to God's grace that exists in our world. Why? We do this because we rarely look evil in the face, and we do this that we might more deeply come to know the loving mercy of our God, in the death and resurrection of Jesus for the sin of the world.

So, there are really two images this week:

1. The ones that will come to us this week that represent the sin of the world.
2. The image of Jesus on the Cross, liberating us from sin and death's threat of victory over us.

The enemy of our relationship with God does not want to be *unveiled* by our staring at, our becoming wiser to, just what sin is. This is not primarily about our *personal sin*, though we are all sinners. Our desire this week is to grow in what our culture seems to have lost — *a sense of sin*.

From time to time this week, we look back though history and let our imagination picture all of the violence, the inhumanity, the injustice, the abuse, the greed, and the lust for power — humanity in rebellion from God's desire that we praise, reverence, and serve God and use everything else in creation for that end.

How much denial of God's right to praise, reverence, and service can we experience this week? How much worshipping of other gods? How much violence against the dignity of human life? How much deception or injustice or scandal or depravity? We want to experience the *magnitude* of the sin of the world, so we don't hesitate to explore its scope.

Our goal is not to become judgmental and to grow in anger at sinners. Our desire is to experience the *ingratitude* and *prideful independence* from God that sin represents. It is *disorder*, and we are feeling *how wrong* it is.

Each day this week, our consciousness of evil would be too great for us to bear without the second image: *God's loving, merciful response*. The price for it all is paid for in the body and blood of Jesus, there on the cross.

We end each day with growing gratitude for the *magnitude* of God's Mercy.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

This is an important week to see that there is a natural progression to our retreat. These exercises build on the graces of the previous weeks, just as the upcoming weeks will build on the graces of this week. This week we will be reflecting on some realities that we normally don't reflect on. Here are some practical suggestions for making this week more fruitful.

Pay attention to the beginning and ending of each day. This remains *key* to our being able to stay focused each day. As I wake each day, and put on my slippers or robe — for a very brief few moments — I will recall the grace I desire today: to enter more deeply into a sense of what sin really is. I may say, for example, "Lord, let me see and feel the outrage of the evil that seems to reign in our world. Lord, I so want to be moved by the profound depth of your love and mercy." At the end of each day, let all these images be replaced by the one image of Jesus on the cross. Each night, try to return to that image. Try to let it become more real. Perhaps I can imagine looking up into the face of Jesus and speaking to him my gratitude. Perhaps I will imagine speaking face-to-face with our risen Lord, as he is today, asking him to show me the holes in his hands and feet and side today, as they remain the signs of the power of God's love.

The content will take some effort this week, but it will be worth it. The photo of the horror of Bosnia can be the entryway into all the other appalling evils of our world. I think of all of the wars in history and the atrocities committed for the sake of some leader or because of people's lust for power. I think of all the innocent children, deprived of even a chance to experience human freedom and dignity. I imagine systemic corruption and the resulting cost to all of humanity. I remember loved ones and friends who are real victims of sin. Perhaps I have experienced the tragedy of caregivers who failed to love or the betrayal of a loved one.

How does this *grief*, or even *outrage*, become the *background* of my everyday life this week, without affecting my mood, my attitude at work or with my family? We do want it to affect our hearts. We want to take our blinders off and really see and feel the power of evil. But *at the same time*, we want to experience the power of God's response. This week should not *discourage* us. It should give us *hope*.

This week will be a great grace if we keep mindful of the focus: asking for the grace to see the outrageous, rebellious evil of sin in the world and the merciful love of God in the death of Jesus for the sin of our world.

Writing down a grace, sharing it with another, e-mailing someone, or sending it in to be shared here are all ways to deepen the experience.

Perhaps by midweek we can ask ourselves how we are doing. We can ask, "Is it difficult for me to look at *the evil of the sin of the world*? To be outraged by it? Is it difficult for me to grow in gratitude for the mercy of God?"

For the Journey: Praying with Sin

Praying with sin, whether it be our own or that of our world, does not invite a joyful response from us at first. As someone once said, “There’s nothing original about sin.” None of us likes to consider the damage of hurricanes or the destruction of wars. The more sensitive one is, the more he or she shrinks from viewing or imagining the ugliness of violence and hatred.

In praying about sin in the Exercises, the main question is whether guilt is a grace or a tangent. Perhaps I could put it this way: Does a painting receive anything from its frame? The frame should lead the eye to what it frames, obviously. In considering the rebellion and ingratitude of sin, what is the picture and what is the frame?

For most of us, our participation in the sin of the world and our own personal sins fill the whole canvas, and the surrounding frame is the somewhat arbitrary love of Jesus for this world and for us. The opposite is true for those praying these considerations of the Exercises. Always the main central picture is the love of Jesus Christ for us and for our world. What highlights this love is the deep reality of our resistance to live in and trust that love. Our sin is why Jesus came to take his place in the center of the canvas of history.

My father was a lawyer and his firm’s motto was “The worst injury is the one not properly represented.” Our worst sins are those we hold to ourselves, refuse to recognize, and do not allow Jesus to take into the center of his cross. He does more than represent us; he represents us back into the world that he loves and offers us as a healing gift.

There is a proper grace of guilt when it remains the frame and leads us to consider and then receive the freeing forgiveness of Jesus. Guilt is a distracting tangent when we consider that it leads us to put ourselves at the center of our unforgiveness. We can spin our spiritual wheels in the muck and mire of our own self-destruction, and in doing so, we hope that God will see how much punishment we are inflicting on ourselves so that God just has to have pity on us. That puts God not at the center, but far outside the frame of our lives. God is neither a spectator nor an art critic.

The real freedom to which the Spiritual Exercises calls us is the freedom to let God be God and to allow us to be loved not only as we are now but also as we will be. In praying this week, can we be honest but not negative?

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Lord,

I’m confused. For the past four weeks, I’ve prayed with these beautiful photos, of mothers, children, landscapes, and happy people, and in my prayer I have felt love and harmony. But this week, there is only a bombed-out village — such a stark picture that jars the rhythm of the others. I know you are there in the love and harmony. Are you also there in the destruction?

I almost don’t know how to pray when I look at the photo. I want to pray for the people who have lost their families and their homes, whose lives have been changed because of this. I want those people to find support from you, some impossible peace in their shattered lives.

But as I look at the photo, I wonder about those who have become so separated from you that they carry out this kind of destruction against their brothers and sisters. What is it that leads us as humans to treat each other this way? What must that be like for you, God, to watch us, the people you created, destroy each other?

I think of my own family and how I would feel if I spent a lot of time making a gift for my daughter, thinking of how it would make her happy and please her. What if she looked at it, said “thanks,” and then tossed it in the closet? What would that be like for me? Is it presumptuous to wonder what the same thing is like for you, God?

Help me this week to feel how sin is a rejection of you. Help me break through the resistance I have to look at anything evil. Stretch me to appreciate how sin is nothing more than ingratitude to you, who creates life and gives it purpose and meaning. I want to disdain evil the way I disdain anything that hurts me. I want to have the instinctive sense of how selfishness destroys and subverts your purpose and plan. And when I look up at you on the cross, help me to feel, help me to sense how you embrace and take upon yourself all of this evil. How do I say “thank you” to you? Let me never take for granted how your selfless gift saves me from the destruction of sin and death.

Scripture Readings

Colossians 2:9–15

Psalms 10 and 73

1 John 1:5–2:2

Luke 15:1–10