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Volume 5 – 2016

Is the Roman Catholic Theology of Sin too Judgmental?

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Introduction

The topic of this essay might suggest a need for a defense or a rebuttal. Whenever a group is charged with being excessive in some way—with being too much this or too much that—members of that group might grow resentful and accuse those who raise the question of dealing in stereotypes. As a Roman Catholic, or more specifically a Catholic of the Roman or Latin Rite,² I do not take any offense at the question. I believe it is an important issue to explore. After all, some former Catholics I know have left the practice of their religion because they believe the Catholic Church judges matters to be sinful that are not sinful, or they themselves feel unfairly judged because they are divorced and remarried, homosexually active, or in support of legal abortion. There is also the popular idea promoted by writers like James Joyce (1882–1941) that the Roman Catholic Church is especially obsessed with sexual sins and, therefore, is responsible for a repressed and unrealistic attitude toward human sexuality.

Because of these fixed ideas about an overly judgmental Roman Catholic view of sin, many people in the media as well as celebrities rejoiced in Pope Francis' words of "who am I to judge" in reference to those struggling with homosexual inclinations. It seems, though, that many people did not read the entire answer Pope Francis gave to the reporter, Ilze Scamparini, in response to a question regarding the alleged private life of Monsignor Battista Ricca and the existence of a "gay lobby" in the Vatican.³ Pope Francis responded during the July 28, 2013 press conference on the flight returning to Rome from World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, and he first noted that the investigation into the alleged private life of Msgr. Ricca found nothing that had been alleged.⁴ He went on to note, "If a person, whether it be a lay person, a priest or a religious sister, commits a sin and then converts,

² The word Roman Catholic is widely used to refer to those who are in communion with the See of Rome under the Pope or Roman Pontiff. There are also Eastern Rite Catholics (e.g. Chaldean, Maronite, and Byzantine) who are in full communion with the Pope but are not of the Roman or Latin Rite. The matter is further complicated by the fact that Eastern Orthodox Christians and many Anglicans consider themselves "Catholic" but not "Roman Catholics."

³ The allegations against Msgr. Ricca stemmed from his time working in the Vatican Nunciature in Montevideo, Uruguay. See Sandro Magister, "The Prelate of the Gay Lobby" in *Chiesa* (July 18, 2013): <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1350561?eng=y>, accessed December 20, 2013.

⁴ The text of the July 28, 2013 press conference can be found on the Vatican website at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2013/outside/documents/papa-francesco-gmg-rio-de-janeiro-2013.html>, accessed December 20, 2016.

the Lord forgives, and when the Lord forgives, the Lord forgets, and this is very important for our lives.” After this, Pope Francis commented on the alleged “gay lobby” in the Vatican in this way:

So much is written about the gay lobby. I still haven’t found anyone with an identity card in the Vatican with “gay” on it. They say there are some there. I believe that when you are dealing with such a person, you must distinguish between the fact of a person being gay and the fact of someone forming a lobby, because not all lobbies are good. This one is not good. If someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has good will, then who am I to judge him? The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains this in a beautiful way ... The problem is not having this tendency, no, we must be brothers and sisters to one another, and there is this one and there is that one. The problem is in making a lobby of this tendency: a lobby of misers, a lobby of politicians, a lobby of masons, so many lobbies. For me, this is the greater problem.

The way Pope Francis addresses the reporter’s questions—both with regard to Msgr. Ricca and with respect to the alleged “gay lobby”—helps us understand the Catholic theology of sin and judgement. Francis first notes that when people commit sins and convert, the Lord forgives them. He does not deny that homosexual actions are sinful.⁵ The existence of this sin or any sin, however, must be balanced with the recognition of God’s forgiveness and mercy toward those who repent. If a person is struggling with some sin and “is searching for the Lord and has good will” we should not judge. In other words, we must realize that only God can judge the inner heart and culpability of any individual. Moreover, only God can judge a person’s soul after death. We can, though, make judgments with regard to what actions are objectively wrong or sinful.

A. How Does the Catholic Church Determine What Is Sinful?

How, though, does the Catholic Church determine which actions are sinful and which are not? Here we must realize that the Catholic Church understands herself as “the Body of Christ,”⁶ and she must be

⁵ In other contexts, Pope Francis makes it abundantly clear that he fully endorses what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2357–2359 teaches about showing “respect, compassion, and sensitivity” to persons with homosexual tendencies while recognizing that homosexual acts can never be justified. See Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy: A Conversation with Andrea Tornielli* trans. Oonagh Stransky (New York: Random House, 2016), 61–62 and Pope Francis, post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of Love* (New York and Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2016), 178, n. 251.

⁶ See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [henceforth, CCC] (Washington, DC: US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997) n. 787–795. See also Rom 12:4–5 and 1 Cor 12:12–31.

faithful to the teachings of Christ and Sacred Scripture. In this regard, the Catholic Church does not believe her teaching authority or Magisterium is above the word of God.⁷ Instead, the Magisterium serves the Word of God, “teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and the help of the Holy Spirit.”⁸ The Catholic Church’s theology of sin, therefore, is believed to be based on Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition as authoritatively interpreted by the Magisterium of the Church.⁹ Moreover, the Catholic Church also believes that the moral norms of Scripture are confirmed by the natural law of “right reason,” which reflects the works of the divine law engraved into the human heart.¹⁰

Many Christians today, including some Catholics, believe that the moral standards of the Bible reflect a certain cultural framework.¹¹ These might accept the general moral principles taught by Jesus (e.g., charity), but they believe that many particular biblical moral teachings need to be evaluated in light of contemporary empirical science.¹² They also ask why some moral teachings of the O.T. are ignored—e.g., prohibitions against sowing a vineyard with two different kinds of seeds, or plowing with an ox or an ass harnessed together (Deut 22:9–10)—while others, such as the prohibition against homosexual relations (Lev 18:22), are upheld strictly.¹³

The Catholic response to these points relies on the distinctions made by St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) between the various types of law in the O.T. While the moral law expressed in the Ten Commandments remains for all time, the ceremonial laws and the judicial laws no longer apply. As Aquinas writes: “We must,

⁷ The Magisterium or teaching authority of the Church is believed to reside in the Roman Pontiff and the bishops in communion with him.

⁸ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (Nov. 18, 1965), n. 10.

⁹ See above and the CCC, n. 84–95.

¹⁰ See CCC, 1956 and Rom 2:14–15.

¹¹ See Anthony Kosnik et al. *Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), especially pages 7–32. It should be noted that the Holy See’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sent a letter with some critical observations about this book to the President of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on July 13, 1979: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19790713_mons-quinn_en.html (accessed December 20, 2016).

¹² Kosnik, *Human Sexuality*, 53–77, 211–213.

¹³ Kosnik, *Human Sexuality*, 10.

therefore, distinguish three kinds of precept in the Old law; viz., moral precepts, which are dictated by the natural law; ceremonial precepts, which are determinations of the Divine worship; and judicial precepts, which are determinations of the justice to be maintained among men.”¹⁴ Unlike the moral law, which continues in force forever, the ceremonial laws represent temporary laws connected with O.T. worship. These laws ceased their binding force after Christ’s passion and resurrection established a new form of worship.¹⁵ The judicial laws of the O.T. were laws that regulated the affairs of people living in a particular place and time. As such, they were contingent and time-bound, and their binding force does not last forever.¹⁶

If there is a question whether a particular law from the O.T. is still in force, the Catholic Church relies first on the N.T. to see whether the law was explicitly abrogated and secondly on discernment as to whether the law was ceremonial or judicial rather than moral. The Catholic Church also believes she is bound by the teachings of Christ and the N.T. Thus, when Christ forbids divorce and remarriage in Mark 10:2–12, Luke 16:18, and Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, the Catholic Church believes she is bound to his teachings.¹⁷ The same is true with the other moral teachings of Christ summed up in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7), as well as the moral teachings of St. Paul and the other writings of the N.T. The moral teachings of the Ten Commandments or Decalogue continue to have normative application, and they form the basis for Catholic catechetical instruction on moral norms.¹⁸

B. The Nature of Sin and Different Kinds of Sin

What exactly does the Catholic Church mean by sin? In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we find these basic definitions:

¹⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 99 a. 4 in *St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologica* trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen: Christian Classics, 1981), 1034.

¹⁵ *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 103, a. 3.

¹⁶ *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 104, a. 3.

¹⁷ The so-called exceptive clauses in Matt 5:32 and 19:9 for *porneia* are understood in reference either to certain forms of lewdness (e.g. incest), which render the marriage unlawful from the start, or to unions that are not truly marriages but examples of fornication (*porneia*). See Robert L. Fastiggi, *What the Church Teaches about Sex: God’s Plan for Human Happiness* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 2009), 51–53.

¹⁸ See the CCC, 2083–2557.

1. “Sin is an offense against reason, truth and right conscience”;
2. Sin “is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods”;
3. Sin is “an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law.”¹⁹

Sin is also variously described as “an offense against God” and “disobedience.”²⁰

In the O.T., the most common Hebrew terms for sin are *hāttā’*, which means, “missing the mark; *pēsha’*, which means rebellion, and *‘awōn*, which means iniquity or guilt.²¹ In the N.T., the main term for sin is *harmatia*. John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin (*harmatia[n]*) of the world.”²² Jesus tells the paralytic, “Child, your sins (*hamartia[i]*) are forgiven” (Mk 2:5). In the N.T., we find other words for sin such as lawlessness (*anomia*; e.g. Rom 4:7); darkness (*skotos*; e.g. John 8:12) and injustice (*adikia*; cf. Rev 22:11).²³

The Bible reveals that certain sins lead to spiritual death and exclusion from God’s kingdom (cf. Deut 30:17; Matt 25:41–46; 1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–21; Rev 21:8 and 22:15). Such sins are called mortal sins because they are deadly to the life of grace and justification. The classical text for the distinction between venial (non-deadly) sins and mortal (deadly) sins is 1 John 5:16–17: “There is such a thing as deadly sin.... All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not deadly.”

The Catholic Church also distinguishes between original sin and personal sin. The fall of Adam and Eve left human nature in a state “deprived of original holiness and justice.”²⁴ This deprivation of holiness and grace is passed on through human propagation and is sometimes described as a “stain” on the soul or an inborn “guilt.” The Catholic Church, however, does not believe that original sin has “the

¹⁹ CCC, 1849; for the third definition, cf. St. Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 22: PL 42, 418; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I–II, 71, 6.

²⁰ CCC, 1850.

²¹ Cf. William E. May, *An Introduction to Moral Theology*, Second Edition (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 2003), 186.

²² John 1:29. Here the reference is to the “sin” of the world, but in the *Agnus Dei* of the Mass, Jesus is invoked as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins (*peccata*) of the world.” The “sin of the world” can be understood as original sin that Jesus takes away at baptism. But it’s equally true that He takes away personal sins as well.

²³ May, *An Introduction to Moral Theology*, 186.

²⁴ CCC, 404.

quality of a personal fault in any of Adam’s descendants.”²⁵ Instead, it is a sin “contracted” but not “committed”; it is “a state and not an act.” Original sin, therefore, can only be understood as sin “in an analogical sense.”²⁶

Original sin has left human nature in a wounded state subject to ignorance, suffering, bodily death, and the “inclination to evil that is called ‘concupiscence.’”²⁷ Concupiscence is the tendency to sin, but it is not sin itself. It manifests itself, however, in the tendencies of self-assertion (pride), lust, and greed.²⁸ It is sometimes described as “the tinder or fuel for sin” (*fomes peccati*). In spite of its influence, concupiscence can be overcome by the grace of Christ.²⁹

Unlike original sin, personal sin involves a freely chosen “thought, word, deed or omission”³⁰ contrary to the law of God. Sin engages the intellect and the will,³¹ and it only takes on the quality of a sin when the person freely chooses to transgress the moral law. Sins can be due to ignorance (lack of knowledge); weakness (giving in to strong passions); or malice (emerging from an evil will or desire to harm).³² Most sexual sins proceed from weakness rather than malice, and in sins of passion, full and deliberate consent of the will may more easily be lacking.³³ Moreover, when the moral law is transgressed because of ignorance there might not be any sin involved if the person is not culpable for his or her ignorance.

Sins that are repeated over and over again lead to “perverse inclinations, which cloud conscience and corrupt the concrete judgment of good and evil.”³⁴ Such perverse inclinations are called

²⁵ CCC, 405.

²⁶ CCC, 404.

²⁷ CCC, 405.

²⁸ 1 John 2:16: “For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world”: sometimes called the “threefold concupiscence.”

²⁹ CCC, 1264; cf. Council of Trent (1546): D–H, 1515.

³⁰ CCC, 1853.

³¹ Cf. Dominic Prümmer, O.P., *Handbook of Moral Theology*, trans. J. G. Nolan (New York: P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1957), no. 158, p.67.

³² Prümmer, O.P., *Handbook of Moral Theology*, 68, no. 159.

³³ Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [CDF], *Declaration on Certain Problems of Sexual Ethics, Persona Humanae*, December 29, 1975, no. 10, in *Vatican Council II: More Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 494.

³⁴ CCC, 1865

vices or bad habits that “have arisen through the repetition of acts.”³⁵ Based on St. John Cassian (c. 360–433) and St. Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), the Catholic Church traditionally has identified seven capital sins or vices. These vices are called “capital” because “they engender other sins, other vices.”³⁶ The seven capital sins are pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth (or *acedia*).³⁷

C. Sin, Repentance, Confession, and Mercy

The Catholic Church is faithful to the biblical message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, for the call to repentance is a major theme of the Bible. John the Baptist is shown in the Gospel of Mark as proclaiming a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). Jesus begins his public ministry by proclaiming: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). In Mark 6, Jesus sends out the Twelve two by two to cure the sick, drive out demons, and preach “repentance” (Mark 6:12). At the end of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus sends out his disciples to preach “repentance for the forgiveness of sins” to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:46–47).

The principal Greek word in the N.T. for repentance is *metanoia*, which is used 24 times as a noun, and an additional 34 times in its verbal form of *metanoēō*.³⁸ Although *metanoia* is usually translated as “repentance” (as in Mark 1:4 and Luke 24:47), it literally means “a change in thinking”³⁹ or a “change of mind.”⁴⁰ The N.T. also uses the Greek verb *metamelomai* six times. This verb means “to regret” or “feel sorrow.” Regret or sorrow can be a true expression of repentance, but it also requires a desire for forgiveness from the Lord.

The N.T. links repentance to faith in Jesus and to baptism. St. Paul, in his farewell speech at Miletus, says: “I earnestly bore witness for both Jews and Greeks to repentance and to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). Jesus responds to the great faith of the people

³⁵ Prümmer, 75, no. 171.

³⁶ CCC, 1866.

³⁷ CCC, 1866.

³⁸ A. Boyd Luter, Jr. “Repentance: N.T.” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 672.

³⁹ Luter, “Repentance,” 674.

⁴⁰ Luter, 672.

and cures the paralytic, saying: “Child, your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:5). Faith, though, also leads to repentance and baptism. In his speech at Pentecost, Peter tells those gathered: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 3:38).

After baptism there is still the possibility of sinning. This is why the Catholic Church, along with the Eastern Orthodox Churches, has the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation.

Baptism is “the instrumental cause” of justification,⁴¹ but the Sacrament of Penance is “the second plank [of salvation] after the shipwreck of lost grace.”⁴² According to St. Paul, there are certain sins that can deprive believers of the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–21). Baptism brings salvation (1 Pet 3:20–21), but deadly sins committed after baptism can deprive those baptized of “the kingdom of Christ and of God.”⁴³ In light of this possibility, the Council of Trent anathematized those who claim “that a man once justified cannot sin again and cannot lose grace.”⁴⁴

The Catholic Church believes that Christ knew the baptized could lose the grace of justification so he “instituted the sacrament of penance for those who fall into sin after baptism.”⁴⁵ After Christ’s resurrection, he breathed the Holy Spirit on his disciples and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained” (John 20:22–23). Because only God can forgive sins (Mark 2:7), Jesus needed to breathe the Holy Spirit on his disciples so they could be ministers of divine forgiveness. This power to forgive sinners is also expressed by the power of binding and loosing (Matt 18:18) and the power of the keys given by Christ to Peter (Matt 16:19).⁴⁶ When Jesus speaks of

⁴¹ Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*, chapter 7 as cited in *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd. ed., ed. Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), [henceforth D–H], n. 1529.

⁴² Tertullian, *De paenitentia*, 4, 2: cited in D–H, 1542.

⁴³ Eph 5:5; see also 1 Cor 6:9–10, Gal 5:19–21, and 2 Pet 2:20–22.

⁴⁴ Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*, canon 23: D–H, 1573.

⁴⁵ Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*, canon 23: chapter 14: D–H, 1542.

⁴⁶ These are the Scriptures cited by the Council of Trent in its *Doctrine on the Sacrament of Penance*, chapter 5 in support of the belief that “our Lord Jesus Christ left priests to represent him as presiding judges to whom all mortal sins into which the faithful of Christ would have fallen should be [Footnote continued on next page ...]

“binding and loosing,” he is using “rabbinic technical terms that can refer to the binding of the devil in exorcism” and “to the juridical acts of excommunication and definitive decision making.”⁴⁷ The Catholic Church understands the power of the binding and loosing as the power given by Christ to priests who “represent him as presiding judges” so they “might pronounce the sentence of remission or retention of sins.”⁴⁸

Many people wonder why Catholics believe that mortal sins must be confessed to a priest rather than directly to God. The Catholic Church, however, believes she is being faithful to Christ who gave the apostles the authority of binding and loosing, and this authority has been passed on by apostolic succession to bishops and to priests. James 5:16 says “confess your sins to one another” so there are occasions in which it is appropriate to confess wrongdoings to those who are not priests. The power of binding and loosing sins in the Sacrament of Penance, however, is possessed only by bishops and priests by means of apostolic succession. This is clearly seen in John 20:22–23 when Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and says: “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” Priests could only know what sins to forgive and what sins to retain if they hear the confession of penitents. Priests, of course, do not have authority by themselves to forgive sins. In granting absolution to sinners and assigning penances, they are acting in the person of Christ the head, *in persona Christi Capitis*.⁴⁹

D. The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation Is a Sacrament of Mercy

The Catholic theology of sin is not intended to make people feel guilty any more than the Gospel witness of the forgiveness is intended to make people feel guilty. Guilt is a human emotion that is felt when we believe we have done something wrong or hurt someone else. Jesus came to into the world to reconcile sinners to God. The

brought that they, through the power of the keys, might pronounce the sentence of remission or retention of sins” D–H, 1679.

⁴⁷ Benedict T. Viviano, “The Gospel According to Matthew” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond B. Brown, S.S. et al. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990), 659.

⁴⁸ Council of Trent, *Doctrine on the Sacrament of Penance*, chapter 5: D–H, 1679.

⁴⁹ CCC, 1548.

forgiveness of sins is at the heart of the Gospel. Baptism brings about the forgiveness of sins, which is why the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed has the believer say: “I acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.”⁵⁰ Christians, though, sin after baptism, and the Sacrament of Penance, which is also called the Sacrament of Reconciliation, is the means by which the sinner can receive forgiveness from Christ through the ministry of priests.

In the early Church and throughout the much of the Middle Ages penances for mortal sins were often very severe. Many times, sinners were required to do public penances and would only be welcomed back to the Eucharist after doing these long penances. It was often believed that the performance of the penance itself, i.e. the satisfaction for the sins committed, was the real efficient cause of reconciliation with God.⁵¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, however, said that it was the absolution imparted by the priest that brought about the forgiveness; the penance was intended to serve as a means of spiritual healing for the sinner and a way of making reparation for the temporal effects (or punishments) caused by the sins committed.⁵² The Council of Trent in 1551 affirmed the teaching of Aquinas in this regard. As Bernhard Poschmann writes:

The primary importance of the Council for the development of dogma consists in the fact that it sanctioned definitively the teaching that had been inaugurated by St. Thomas and had soon become general, that the sacrament is the efficient cause of the forgiveness of sins. Moreover, it swept away forever the theory of the merely declarative character of absolution.⁵³

The teaching of Trent meant that the sinner could be assured of forgiveness of sins by the absolution of the priest as long as there was an honest confession of sins, adequate sorrow,⁵⁴ and a firm purpose not to commit the sins in the future. The performance of the penance was primarily medicinal, but it also served to repair the temporal effects brought about by the sins.

⁵⁰ D–H, 150.

⁵¹ Bernhard Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick* trans. Francis Courtney, S.J. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 141.

⁵² Poschmann, *Penance*, 168–178.

⁵³ Poschmann, 202.

⁵⁴ Trent taught that even imperfect sorrow or attrition, which was motivated by the fear of divine punishment, was sufficient to receive forgiveness of sins. Cf. D–H, 1678.

In recent years, the emphasis on the Sacrament of Reconciliation has been on an encounter with God’s mercy. Pope Francis has made mercy one of the main themes of his pontificate, and he described the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a way people can “touch the grandeur of God’s mercy with their own hands.”⁵⁵ Pope Francis affirms the traditional Catholic theology of sin, but he articulates it in the context of God’s mercy. As he writes:

The Church condemns sin because it has to relay the truth: “This is a sin.” But at the same time, it embraces the sinner who recognizes himself as such, it welcomes him, it speaks to him of the infinite mercy of God. Jesus forgave even those who crucified and scorned him. We must go back to the Gospel. We find it speaks not only of welcoming and forgiveness but also of the “feast” of the returning son. The expression of mercy is the joy of the feast, and that is well expressed in the Gospel of Luke: I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine people who have no need of repentance (Luke 15:7).⁵⁶

The judgment of God is ultimately one of mercy and forgiveness. The Church, though, must teach the truth and identify sins as sins. Of course, there are many factors that might mitigate the culpability for certain actions that are objectively wrong.⁵⁷ As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “The promptings of feelings and passions can also diminish the voluntary and free character of the offense, as can external pressures or pathological disorders.”⁵⁸ The judgment that certain actions or omissions are sinful is another way of saying that certain actions and omissions are spiritually harmful. God wants what is best for his sons and daughters. Sin, by its nature, wounds and destroys charity, which is the highest theological virtue (1 Cor 13:13).

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to address the question: “Is the Roman Catholic theology of sin too judgmental?” The answer I believe is “no.” The Roman Catholic theology of sin would only be overly

⁵⁵ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, Bull of Indication of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (April 11, 2015), n. 17. This Bull is published as an appendix to Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy: A Conversation* with Andrea Tornielli, trans. Oonagh Stransky (New York: Random House, 2016).

⁵⁶ Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 50.

⁵⁷ CCC, 1860.

⁵⁸ CCC, 1860.

judgmental in the eyes of those who find the teachings of the Gospel to be too judgmental. As explained above, the Catholic Church tries to be faithful to the moral law of Christ as revealed in Sacred Scripture. Unfortunately, many people identify certain prohibitions by the Church as merely ecclesiastical prohibitions when, in fact, these prohibitions are grounded in Sacred Scripture. The Church does not invent the moral law, but receives this law from God, who teaches this law through divine revelation and the natural law.

The Catholic theology of sin, to be properly understood, must be seen not so much as a theology of judgment but as a theology of mercy. As Pope Francis teaches: “Let us not forget that mercy is doctrine. Even so, I love saying: mercy is true.”⁵⁹

Judgments, of course, must be made. Penitents must examine their consciences and judge (or determine) whether or not they have sinned or been fully responsible for the wrongdoings committed. Priests also must form judgments about the culpability of the penitents who come to them and what penances would be spiritually beneficial to them. The Magisterium of the Church must judge or determine what teachings of the revealed moral law endure for all time and what laws in the Bible are merely ceremonial or judicial for the times in which they were articulated. God’s mercy is more powerful than any sin committed because Jesus came to reconcile sinners to God. Sinners, though, must be willing to confess their sins with humility and trust in God’s mercy.

We must remember that God is the ultimate judge. When we die, we are all placed before the light of God who judges with perfect justice and perfect mercy. God is merciful to sinners as long as they entrust themselves to his mercy.



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⁵⁹ Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 62.