



**Boston Catholic Journal**



NIHIL NISI IESUM

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[www.boston-catholic-journal.com](http://www.boston-catholic-journal.com)  
[editor@boston-catholic-journal.com](mailto:editor@boston-catholic-journal.com)

# **The Curious Faces of Sin**



**What was *our* Place in the Crucifying of Christ?**

## **The faces of sin, of course, are many.**

Anger, greed, lust, pride — we have seen, stood before, the menacing faces of sin and we instinctively recognize them despite all efforts to conceal or disguise the malice they portend. They contort and disfigure the face that leers at us, the face behind which the turbulence of sin implacably roils. We recoil from them in either fear or disgust — and we abhor them. The signature of sin is the same even as the faces change, but it is always inscribed on distinguishable faces, on identifiable persons. The sin, the malice, is personal — that is to say, it infects a personality, an individual to whom we have some manifest connection. In a sense the malice, the evil, is personified; it assumes the personality of another. Avoid the person and avoid the malice, a very reasonable and effective remedy — for us as individuals.

There is, however, another and much less clearly defined (but no less pernicious) aspect of sin that we are far less disposed to recognize — despite ample and apparently futile lessons from history.

## **Our Silence: the Sin of Omission**

While most of us grasp the existence of our own individual sins — and even more clearly the sins of others — there is little awareness of our own complicity in sins that lacerate us as a people, a society, a nation — even a civilization. This absence of the realization of an evil to which we contribute beyond our individual culpability, this failure to recognize the reality of collective as well as personal sin — essentially a recognition of our complicity in appalling moral enormities — not through our acts but through our silence — is just as grave in nature (but more far-reaching and devastating in consequences) than most of our personal sins. The sin, as we see it, is not our own. It is not of our making. We do not will it, therefore we are not responsible for it. We recognize the evil. We lament it. But in the end, because we do not enact the evil ourselves, we have no responsibility for it.

Now, multiply that by a society, a nation, a civilization, and we begin to understand the nature of collective sin, the sin for which all are responsible but in which no one personally participates ... It might be summed up in three words: “Let it pass. Whatever the evil, whatever the injustice, whatever the oppression — in whatever form it takes — “let it pass.”

We do not see — it is inconvenient to see — that when we fail to raise our voice against evil, to stamp it out as inimical to the good, as irreconcilably contrary to a Law greater than any men legislate (and subsequently amend, discard, or abolish) in courts or seats of legislature, however august, esteemed, and established its venue. Whenever we fail to raise our voice, and simply “let it pass” —we have entered into complicity with that outrage through our silence. We fear to condemn it, to reveal our abhorrence of it ... to act against it ... and in remaining silent we promote it. It is the sin of omission.

Unlike individual sin which both confronts us and indicts us in clear and personal terms, collective sin is a much more subtle evil that attempts to elude the responsibility of the individual by diffusing and propagating itself in a social context. It is collaborative sin, sin that is only possible through the collaboration of the many. The Holocaust, slavery, and pornography come immediately to mind. And because it is so subtle it is extremely pervasive. In fact, we come to believe that the more pervasive it is, the less evil it must be. It is essentially morality as distributive, or more simply, morals as mathematics. In effect, “it is legitimized; it has become a matter of open policy, and since a majority are either practicing or condoning it, I myself cannot conceivably be held responsible for it, even if I loathe it. In fact, I have no right to personally object to what is publicly acceptable, and moreover, no legal recourse, should I choose to. So ... I let it pass.”

We may recognize the evil, but believe that we can abstract ourselves from it and place the fault, the responsibility upon others. We distribute the blame, the guilt, until it becomes so suffuse that it is no longer morally tangible. That failing, any residual guilt can simply be ascribed to some impersonal corporate body, to the vast number — of which we, in fact, are part. This amorphous corporate body populated by real but somehow anonymous persons, becomes our scapegoat when the core meltdown of moral imperatives reaches critical mass and can no longer be ignored without catastrophic consequences to the individual and society at large.

We would do extremely well to reflect deeply upon the consequences of articulating morality through numbers.

### **“Let it pass ...”**

In Mel Gibson’s, *The Passion of the Christ*, a very brief, but memorable moment occurs when, amid the violence of the mob, an old woman stands, looking

quizzically upon the scene of personal carnage. She looks with detachment, indifference, neither incited nor perturbed. This is such a frightening vignette that encapsulates our moral indifference in the face of evil. Her indifference, coupled with her curiosity, makes her the metaphor of evil through omission, of complicity through indifference. In this sense, she is a more frightening figure than the soldiers.

“Let it pass ... what has it to do with me?”

Unknown to her ... everything, both in time and in eternity.

Collective sin is malice through mathematics,; and because it is rooted in exponential numbers, it is inherently cumulative. So much so, in fact, that the individual sense of responsibility is diminished by the same exponent through which the collective sin is multiplied. There is a clearly inverse proportion between the magnitude of the distributed number and diminished responsibility.

What, then, was your place, my place, in the crucifying of Christ? What is our place and what our responsibility in the starving of a child, in the “therapeutic” killing of a baby in the womb, of the little girl sold into the slavery of prostitution and pornography?

[Meditating on the Passion, how easily we abhor the weakness, the conspiracy of the crowd — failing to see that we persecute Christ in our brother, our sister before us ... with the same malice that motivated the Immolation of the Lamb ... when we ourselves are the wolves ...

Do you still think that you can take refuge in numbers, loose yourself in the crowd? And how long will you continue “to let is pass” — until it comes to your own doorstep?

Geoffrey K. Mondello  
for the Boston Catholic Journal



PO Box 80171 Stoneham, MA 02180 US

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