



# Boston Catholic Journal



NIHIL NISI JESUM

DEDICATED TO MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

“Salus animarum Suprema Lex esto — The Salvation of Souls is the Supreme Law in the Church” (Canon Law 1752)

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## The Difference Between “Priests and Prophets” — and “Sins” and “Failures”



## Where is John?

**W**hat we have gone out to see, as in the days of John, was a priest and a prophet — we have looked and have found neither. Not a priest of God, not a prophet of God — but most often a priest of men and a prophet of the world. Saint John the Baptist was, in a sense, the prototypical Priest of the New Covenant, a Priest of God, a Prophet of God, not in the raiment of the world, but clothed as one on a mission and set apart by God for His people. He did not compromise with the world, nor did he compromise with Herod.

### “PRESIDER” ... BUT NOT PRIEST AND PROPHET

As Catholics, we have gone out each Sunday to see a Priest and a Prophet ... and in the pulpit, sadly, we have more often than not found an *entertainer*; a man who seems never to have had, or has long since lost, the understanding his sacred vocation as a fisher of men; a man of perfunctory gestures and signs who most often excels in tiresome or irrelevant anecdotes ... and for whom the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass appears to be something of an aside, something rote and quickly to be gotten over since “more pressing matters” await him ...

We have gone out to see ... *Christ!* — and we do not find Him. But *still* we stay, for we know He is hidden, not only remotely in the priest, but most especially under the appearances of bread and wine, in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar. We believe.

So we stay. Not because of the priest, but in a tragic paradox, despite him.

## WHY ARE PRIESTS SO AFRAID OF, SO RELUCTANT TO USE, THE WORD “SIN”?

Unlike John, how often our priests invite us to *“take a moment to call to mind our faults and failings”* ... **but not our sins!**

I *fail* in many ways during the day, and I have countless *faults* ... my employer can enumerate them, my spouse can clearly point them out, my children may often remind me of them ... but none of them, not one, is a sin.

Are the words, then, interchangeable? Are they tautologies? Do they mean the same thing? Are *faults* the same as sins? Are *failures* sinful?

Perhaps something very commonplace can put this into perspective. The next time that you dent someone's fender or cause someone to drop their groceries, look that person in the eye and utter, “My sin ... Sorry”, rather than, “My fault. I apologize.” Or perhaps the next time that you fail to meet a deadline on the job, or to close a sale, try telling your employer, “I have sinned. I am sorry.” ... and not “I failed. I’m sorry.”

In both scenarios you will likely find people looking at you in astonishment. They will tell you that your utterance is not simply odd, but really out of context, out of place, inappropriate; that your *fault* or *failure* had nothing whatever to do with God and sin. They may also suggest a good therapist ... Certainly they will look at you askance and make a mental note to avoid you in the future.

## WHO WILL TELL OUR PRIESTS?

Did John, then, call the people to repent of their “*faults and failures*?”

No! He called them in no uncertain terms to repent of their *sins*! Did he accuse Herod in his adultery of being at *fault* ... or of *failing*? Or did he accuse him of **sin**? *Herod* made no mistake about it, and had John’s head for it!

Why have we found it so expedient to have so many euphemisms for *sin*? Why are we reluctant to speak of it in no other terms? Why are we so solicitous of the sensitivities of men — and so hardened against the pronouncements of God Himself? It is not simply an *odd* state of affairs; it is a scandalous state of affairs!

Sin has largely become distributive, something social, and not personal. It is politely reduced to a mere solecism of sorts, and not an affront to God. It is subtly redefined into something for which there is no real personal accountability before God; it does not attain to a sense of our *own, unique and personal responsibility*. It is the sin “of

the world”, sin inherent in the anonymous “structure of society” ... which then becomes far less my *own* sin. Our personal *complicity* in sin is absolved — just as our own unique *identity* is an aside to, evanesces in, the notion itself of “society”, and “the world”. It is, oddly, a whole which is less than, and not equal to, the the sum of its parts.

We are clever. We know that if we indict the whole world, we indict no one. This was the rabble that called for the crucifixion of Christ. The “people” demand His crucifixion, and therefore no individual is guilty of it. Despite public lamentations from the pulpit, there is no “collective sin”. There is the sin of men, and each is complicit in the crime — and each responsible for it!

## WE WANT IT NAMED FOR WHAT IT IS

We want to hear John because we want to be told of sin — *for we know it, and we recognize our personal complicity in it!* And we seek deliverance from it!

When wolves come in sheep-skins and tell us that what we know to be inescapably true – true of *us*, and therefore likely true of the rest of mankind – is *not* true, or is something *other* than we *know it to be*, we turn away. This is the evangel of the world. We hear it day in and day out. And we know it is false. This is not why we came out, this is not what we came to see, to hear — at Church ... at the foot of the Cross during the most Holy *Sacrifice* of the Mass.

So often it seems that not only has “the world” either forgotten or discarded the notion of sin – but that our very Priests have as well ... in a deeply misguided attempt to console us, to assuage our consciences — *rather than save our souls*. But that is not what John was sent to do.

If the pews are less peopled, *it is most often the case* that the people *had come to find John ...* and found, instead, “*a reed swayed by the wind*”, a popular wind; one who seems to understand less of sin, of the gravity of sin, of the reality of sin, than even *they do ...*

The wilderness is all about us.

Where is the voice crying out within it?

Editor  
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