

AN UNPARDONABLE SIN?: GRIEVING THE HOLY SPIRIT

Each of us has blind spots, even within our presumed “area of expertise,” and I am no exception, feeling weak on Scripture. I find myself scratching my head more often than I wish to admit when faced with a vexing passage. One such conundrum is the **blasphemy against the Holy Spirit** taken from the Gospel of Matthew (12:31), that reads as follows: “Therefore, I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.” How could a merciful God fail to forgive? And to what exactly does “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” refer? These questions have intrigued me for years; thus a refresher study, though hardly exhaustive, is in order.

In the **Catechism of the Catholic Church**, this blasphemy is seen as the “deliberate refusal” to accept God’s mercy and forgiveness. That in itself is significant. If I deliberately refuse God’s mercy, in effect, I have inserted my own will directly against that of God. News flash— not a good move! The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches (para. # 1864): “There are no limits to the mercy of God, but anyone who deliberately refuses to accept his mercy by repenting, rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit. Such hardness of heart can lead to final impenitence and eternal loss.” So, why would someone refuse God’s mercy? It is hard to say, but I am surely aware of situations in which people, poised to receive sacramental forgiveness, change their mind at the last minute and do not follow through. It is for myriad reasons, some of which are related to the grievance against the Holy Spirit.

Catholic doctrine sees **mortal sin**, also known as “deadly” sin because of its gravity the life of the soul, as the single greatest threat to our salvation. But it is also “deadly” because it often is a symptom of a deadened conscience and of a hardened heart. It requires *grave matter*, meaning that the act in question must be fundamental and serious in itself. In addition, it requires *full knowledge* and *complete consent*, two additional factors that come into play. We are all disordered through original sin, but only through free and conscious choice could we ever be guilty of serious or mortal sin. Subjectively speaking, one does not mistakenly fall into mortal sin, even if objectively the offense is grave. At the same time, we have a duty to properly form our consciences, avoiding falling into situations in which by our actions we grieve the Holy Spirit with a deadened conscience.

Regarding the scriptural prohibition of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, then Pope John Paul II in his encyclical on the Holy Spirit (*Dominum et Vivificantem*, no. 46) clarified that this blasphemy “does not properly consist in offending against the Holy Spirit in words; it consists rather in the refusal to accept the salvation which God offers to man through the Holy Spirit, working through the power of the Cross.” Six types or species of this sin against the Holy Spirit have been identified over time: (1) Despair; (2) Presumption; (3) Impenitence or a firm determination not to repent; (4) Obstinacy; (5) Resisting divine truth known to be such; and (6) Envy of another’s spiritual welfare. It would be beneficial to discuss these in more detail today and in coming weeks.

Despair is the most troublesome of all, and it is dangerous because it plays upon our worst emotions and tendencies and can attack people in their weakest moments. Everyone, repeat everyone, has bad days. Many have a string of them, and for a few, they seem to persist for weeks and months on end. Despair differs from discouragement. **Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange** was a magnificent spiritual theologian who taught in Rome from 1909-1960! One of his students was a Polish seminarian by the name of Karol Wojtyla! In his monumental multi-volume work “The Three Ages of the Interior Life,” he wrote: “Discouragement might lead to spiritual sloth, to acedia, which makes a man judge the work of sanctification too difficult and turns him away from every effort in this direction. He might thus even fall into despair.” Despair is a sin against the first commandment which calls us to hope in the One Lord, our God. “By *despair*, man ceases to hope for his personal salvation from God, for help in attaining it or for the forgiveness of his sins. Despair is contrary to God’s goodness, to his justice - for the Lord is faithful to his promises - and to his mercy.” (CCC 2091) And if the Devil can bring us to despair, he wins and our soul is lost.

Many faithful Catholics are increasingly discouraged in the Church’s response to clerical abuse, even if much of what is reported lately centers upon ways of handling allegations decades ago. Still, there is enough that is

new (e.g. McCarrick scandal) to raise extremely troubling questions that justice demands be answered. Added to an already wearied laity, this becomes a devastating mixture of abhorrent behavior and failed oversight of a crisis. While acknowledging all this, it is not the same as despair, properly speaking. Despair occurs when we begin to question if God is really present and will even forgive us. I am comforted by these words from the Divine Mercy Chaplet: “Eternal God, in Whom mercy is endless and the treasury of compassion inexhaustible, look kindly upon us and increase Your mercy in us so that in difficult moments we might not despair nor become despondent, but with great confidence trust in Your Holy Will, which is Love and Mercy Itself.” May our discouragement never lead to despair. (To be continued)

- Assured of our prayers, **Fr. Gene Tiffany** is recovering well from hip replacement surgery, but will be unavailable to assist on Tuesday and Saturday mornings for some time. Fr. Mark Pavlak generously and capably assists us for two Masses each Sunday. No, he’s not avoiding the Saturday evening crowd! He teaches high school religion M–F, and so Saturdays represent his well-deserved “day off,” to catch his breath or as I recall from my ten years as a teacher, correct papers and work on lesson plans! Msgr. Jeffrey Steenson assists on some weekdays, for which I am most grateful!
- The nation of **Nepal** has banned internet pornography in an attempt to stem the high rate of sexual assault. This law will have teeth, including fines and potential prison sentences for internet providers and violators. Five million Nepalese have internet access, a ten-fold increase since 2009. I recall my amazement at seeing the scattered internet cafes (though with very spotty service!) and observing our Sherpa helpers chat on cell phones while hauling heavy packs (ouch!) on the trail to Mount Everest Base Camp.
- We hosted two special Masses last weekend and will host two sacred concerts this week. I value maintaining an active schedule of events in the parish but we need to ensure that we are not spreading our staff too thin, especially on weekends. Our monthly First Saturday program will be on hiatus this year as we discern how best to serve you given our resources.
- Envelopes are in the pews for All Souls Day. It is a salutary practice to pray for the dead. Envelopes are in the pews for All Souls Day. You may print names of deceased loved ones on the envelopes, and deposit them with your stewardship in the regular collection. The envelopes will be placed on the high altar for Masses that day.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector