

Fr. Perozich comments —

In *The New Oxford Review* for December 2020, a headline in the “to the editor” section caught my eye. It read, “The Cadillac of Religions.” The author praised an article in the September edition by Frederick W. Marks entitled “The Ancient Game of Guilt Abatement”.

The commentator noted that by the time of his 1949 graduation from a Catholic high school with Benedictine sisters, he had attended Mass every morning, received catechesis Monday, Wednesday, Friday, bible study Tuesday and Thursday, monthly confession which formed him well to know that was expected of him as a Catholic.

The commentator then bemoans that only 20 years later Catholics do not attend Mass because they hold a faith that was taught in a moral vacuum, and are walking away from the church never to return.

In the same issue, the next commentator used all the classic argument fallacies to denounce Mark’s article: extremely narrow way of understanding God, portraying Him as a God of judgment anger and wrath, longing for the middle ages, stern half truths, servile fear, lack of balance. It reflects exactly the moral vacuum of which Marks speaks, exposing the commentator’s own moral vacuum and ignorance.

Personally, I feel I have been as guilty as anyone in excusing sin in favor of mercy from time to time in my own life and in the lives of those in my pastoral care, even though I grew up like the first commentator, just a generation later when the moral vacuum was beginning. Living in the ambiance of God presented as love, mercy, forgiveness without personal responsibility for one’s behavior, has affected me in my personal judgments and in pastoral care. I am not immune because I am a priest. Culture in society and the church is profoundly strong in forming the soul.

Marks’ article helped me with a reset that God’s love includes judgment and mercy to help me to be perfect as He is perfect through Jesus His Son in the Holy Catholic Church with its teachings of 2,000 years, and not just the last 40 years of winsome excuses for bad behavior.

It also dispels others’ abatement of guilt like Luther’s faith alone, Calvin’s predestination, Origen and von Balthasar’s all are going to heaven, reformation error that we can do nothing even after we’ve received God’s grace in baptism, born this way with DNA, everyone else does it, society’s fault, modernist God will forgive all because he loves us even if we are unrepentant.

Marks calls out preachers who out of fear placate and please the faithful by not preaching the hard truths. Certainly enough bishops have silenced priests who teach the classic faith of repentance from sin.

Marks article is NOT a regression to a former time of judgment and condemnation. Rather it is a correction to bring the pendulum back to a deep relationship with the Savior who makes known to us our sins, forgives us when we are repentant, and grants grace through the sacraments so that we can be holy as He is holy in order cooperate with His grace and be transformed to enter heaven when He comes again.

FREDERICK W. MARKS

THE ANCIENT GAME OF GUILT ABATEMENT

In-recent years Catholic churchgoers, along with the priests who minister to them, have bought into "feel-good" notions that act like a sedative on the conscience. I will examine a fair number of them. But before doing so, a word or two about the historical context. Guilt-suppression is as old as man. It began with the blame game played by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and it has been replayed many times over in classical literature.

Frederick W. Marks, a Contributing Editor of the NOR, is the author of ten books, including, most recently, *Confessions of a Catholic Street Evangelist and Pro-Life Champion: The Untold Story of Monsignor Philip J. Reilly and His Helpers of God's Precious Infants*. Frederick W. Marks, a Contributing Editor of the NOR, is the author of ten books, including, most recently, *Confessions of a Catholic Street Evangelist and Pro-Life Champion: The Untold Story of Monsignor Philip J. Reilly and His Helpers of God's Precious Infants*.

Among dramatic figures, few are more

villainous than Hedda Gabler in Henrik Ibsen's eponymous play, who is scripted to say, ***"Something comes over me. I just have to give way to meanness."*** In Verdi's opera *Rigoletto*, a malevolent hunchback blames "nature" and a debauched court, rather than his own folly, for the misfortune that befalls him. In the movie *African Queen*, Charlie Allnut, a tough ship mechanic (played by Humphrey Bogart), gets drunk and terrorizes a lady named Rose (Katherine Hepburn). When he comes to, he blames his overindulgence on human nature. To which Rose replies, ***"Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above."***

Religious leaders have come up with their own formulas to lessen the pain of guilt, all of them at odds

with Scripture. Martin Luther's contention that salvation is gained by faith alone conflicts with the teaching of Jesus (cf, Mt. 19:17), along with that of St. Peter, St. James, St. John, and St. Paul. **John Calvin's theory of predestination clashes with the biblical assurance that God "wishes *all* men to be ' saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). The evangelical dogma "once saved, always saved" is belied by Paul: "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he *fall*" (1 Cor. 10:12).**

More recently, **folks have shifted the blame for sin onto the shoulders of society or DNA 'and this, too, runs afoul of Scripture: "Say not 'it Was God's doing that I fell away' If you choose, you can keep the commandments" (Sir. 15:11, 15).**

Catholic homilists cannot be faulted for playing the blame game, but the aim of the game many of them have been playing

remains the same. They **seek to please and placate.** First on their list of comforting canards is the idea that we need not fear God, that He will love us no matter what we do. Such assurance would be unobjectionable were it not for its **lack of balance.** Yes, the Lord loves saints and sinners alike. Indisputable, too, is the fact that He is on our side in the battle against evil, ready to give us *all* the help we need to gain Heaven. But there is a caveat. God is demanding. He can be angry at times, and when His wrath rises, He will punish. In the imagery of American poet Julia Ward Howe, He tramples out "the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored."

'The late *Avery* Cardinal Dulles, Whose views were anything but reactionary, believed that more education was needed to "convince people that they ought to fear God, who, as Jesus taught, can punish soul and body together in hell" (McGinley Lecture, Nov. 2002). Just so. Fear of God is "the beginning of wisdom" (Sir. 1:12), and wisdom is one of the seven gifts of the

Holy Spirit. St. Paul advises us to work out our salvation "with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12), which is what St. Augustine, St. Jerome, and *all* the other saints have done.

St. Vincent de Paul, the father of organized charity, told his flock, "I have only one sermon and that is fear of God." St. Ignatius of Loyola rightly regarded as "pious and *very*' *holy*" even servile fear of the kind cast out by "perfect *love*" (cf. 1 In. 4:18).

It is natural for children to fear punishment if they misbehave _ natural, too, for students to fear an "F" if they slough off. Why, then, would it not be natural and salutary for us to fear God, provided we are serenely confident that, with reasonable effort, we will be with him forever in heaven? As it is put in the Book of Sirach, also known as *Liber Ecclesiasticus*, we ~ are to "fear the Lord, [and] hope for good things" (2:9). As an aside, it should be said that Sirach, the conduct guide of the early Church, was included in the Greek version of Hebrew Scripture known as the

Septuagint, and the Septuagint was 'the Bible favored by the four evangelists. Eighty percent of the Old Testament quotations found in the New Testament are from the Septuagint.

Old-time preachers have been accused of dwelling on the torments of Hell to the detriment of souls inclined to be *overly* scrupulous. Perhaps. But the pendulum has swung *wildly* in the other direction. Everyone nowadays lines up for Holy Communion while few go to confession, and those who do seek reconciliation are likely to wind up with a penance of "two Our Fathers and three Hail Marys" _ 'small change compared with medieval penances that could put the penitent on bread and water for a year or deny him wine and meat for two years. The parents of St. Therese of Lisieux told their daughters that Heaven is for good children, and that God would not love them anymore if they sinned. In the mind of today's critics, such simplifications of divine truth intended for the ears of the young are likely to appear misguided, if not traumatic.

A second half-truth lulling folks into prideful presumption is the idea that God is nothing but love and mercy. Though music to the ears, the notion falls short of the mark theologically because it conflicts with Scripture: "*Of forgiveness be not overconfident, adding sin upon sin. Say not 'great is his mercy, my many sins He will forgive.' For mercy and anger alike are with Him. Upon the wicked alights his wrath*" (Sir. 5:5-7).

There are those who claim that mercy is God's *principle* characteristic. But this cannot stand either. Mercy might be His most *popular* characteristic, but to count it as more important than His justice does violence to divine revelation. A single sin on the part of a single couple caused the Lord to pass a death sentence on all mankind. The same God who struck Onan dead for wasting his seed destroyed Sodom for sexual perversion. Time and again, when the Hebrew people failed to obey, He delivered them to their enemies. He turned Miriam, Moses' sister, into a leper for questioning the

legitimacy of her brother's leadership. Human wickedness caused him to strike down 250 sinners on one occasion, 14,700 on another, and practically the entire human race at the time of Noah (cf. [RSV] Num. 16:35; 16:49; Gen. 7:23).

Once again, someone is likely to object, saying, "That was the Old Testament God; Jesus in the New Testament was divinely merciful!" Divinely merciful He was. He forgave the woman caught in adultery and pardoned the good thief, along with the soldiers who nailed Him to the Cross. But there is more. He fashioned a whip of cords and used it to drive moneychangers from the Temple (cf. In. 2:15). He also bludgeoned religious leaders with the rod of His tongue, using language more scathing than anything out of the mouth of an Old Testament prophet. Calling them "hypocrites," "blind guides," and "whited sepulchers," He willed the destruction of their Temple, as well as the abolition of their priesthood and the banishment of their people, because they failed to recognize

the "time of ... [their] visitation" (Mt. 23:13,16,27; Lk. 19:44). Withal, the suffering visited upon the Jews during what St. Luke describes as "days of vengeance" was worse than anything they had ever experienced (21:22). If you want to go further, Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead for lying to Peter about the extent of their charity (cf. Acts 5:1-11).

Taking his cue from Scripture passages such as these, St. Augustine believed that God brought affliction on Rome as a punishment for its decadence, and St. Charles Borromeo regarded a deadly plague that wracked Milan for two years as God's way of awakening contrition.

A third half-truth, and one closely related to the second, is the notion that we are saved by God's mercy, not by our deeds. The first part of the proposition passes muster. Without Christ's sacrifice on Calvary, no one would enter Heaven. Consequently, we cannot "earn" salvation.

But to claim, as Luther did, that we needn't do anything concrete to attain salvation makes liars of all the inspired writers who taught, as Jesus did, that we will be judged at the end of our life on the basis of our works -(cf. e.g., Mt. 16:27; 1 Pet. 1:17; Rom. 2:6; Rev. 2:26). Again and again in Scripture, love of God is spelled out in terms of what we *do*, not what we *believe*. "You are my friends," Jesus said, "if you *do* the things I command you" (In. 15.:14; italics added). In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we can't "earn" salvation, but we can "merit" the necessary graces (no. 2010).

Those who deny the need for deeds point to the fact that we are helpless without the gift of God's grace, and this, too, is true. Everything happens in God's good time, and no one can be forced to believe. But to portray the convert as somehow grasped by a grace that overpowers his will goes too far. Such grace is always available (cf. Sir. 51:26; Wisd. 6:13). God sets the parameters. He metes out the challenges and decides who will

cross our path , on a given day. Anyone, though, who suggests that we need a green light from above to embrace the truth is mistaken. God's light is always green! Scripture defines faith as *evidence* of things unseen (cf. Heb.11:1), and it describes such evidence as "readily perceived" (Wisd. 6:12). St. Paul and the author of Sirach are both clear that conversion must not be delayed (cf. Sir. 5:8; 2 Cor. 6:2). A delinquent character named Rufus Johnson in Flannery O'Connor's short story *The Lame Shall Enter First* is a perfect example of spiritual procrastination. He knows he should repent, but he doesn't because he is "not ready to be saved."

If we were supposed to wait for some kind of grace-filled balloon to alight on our heads before following the dictates of our conscience, Paul would not have demanded immediate belief on the part of his listeners (cf. Acts 13:46). Neither would Jesus have warned Jewish leaders that without conversion they would die in their sins (cf. In. 8:24). Many are the converts who, after

failing to respond to signals given them by the Lord, have recognized their failure and urged others to act on God's terms, not their own.

Still another notion sapping the strength of modern-day Catholics is the idea that we must not judge others or discriminate socially. Since when are we excused from the obligation to speak up when folks misbehave simply because God alone judges souls? If fraternal correction were not a Christian duty, Jesus would not have enjoined it (cf. Mt. 18:15-17). Neither would the author of the Book of Sirach, who does so four times within the space of five verses (cf.19:12-16) .. No one is obliged to cast pearls before swine (cf. Mt. 7:6), but when we see a neighbor walking blindfolded toward the edge of a cliff, it is time to say something. The very act of evangelization involves judgment - judgment about someone else's faith (or lack thereof). Jesus told a Samaritan woman that she was in the wrong, both morally and spiritually, and He did so in the most inoffensive manner possible

- by humbly begging a favor (cf. In. 4:1-24). . .

To shrug off the importance of evangelization, as many have done, by suggesting that it is enough to set an example of virtuous living, flies in the face of the *Catechism*, which states that evangelization is "necessary for salvation" (no. 1816). It is equally incompatible with John's description of Mary as the mother of all who keep the commandments *and witness* to Jesus (cf. Rev. 12:17). How far would the Apostles have gotten had they relied on the example of virtue alone? No, the Apostles took their message to the streets. St. Francis of Assisi is often quoted as having said, "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." But there is no evidence that he ever said this, and it makes no sense. After training his men to be street preachers, he crossed enemy lines during a crusade to evangelize the Egyptian sultan - using words.

As for shunning, Christianity abhors discrimination based on race or ethnic background.

Nevertheless, certain types of discrimination are not only acceptable, they are mandatory. When it comes to the choice of friends, Paul bids us stay away from any member of the faith who is immoral, foulmouthed, greedy, or a drunkard. "Evil companionships," he warns, "corrupt good morals" (1 Cor. 5:9-13; 15:33). Jesus may have dined with sinners, but He did so in His professional capacity, likening Himself to a doctor attending the sick (cf. Mt. 9:11-12). And the sinners with whom He broke bread were most likely repentant. At the very least, they were willing to change.

Moving on from half-truths to notions that are totally false, there is a widely held belief that few people, if any, go to Hell. We can trace this idea back as far as the sixth century, when a theologian named Origen maintained that all eventually go to Heaven. For this, he was excommunicated at the Second Council of Constantinople. But his heresy didn't die; it merely went underground. Evidence of its durability surfaces every time

the celebrant at a funeral Mass tries to console mourners by saying the deceased is in Heaven. Congregants are left to wonder why prayers are being offered for the repose of the loved one's soul.

Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote an entire book in defense of a thesis similar to Origen's, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"*? It made a splash when it came out in 1988, but Balthasar makes no mention in the text, or even in the notes, of what Jesus Himself had to say on the subject: "Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there are who enter that way. How narrow the gate and close the way that leads to life. And few there are who find it" (Mt. 7:13-14; Lk. 13:23-24). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus likens the wicked to chaff that is separated from wheat and burned, and the burning, He said, is "everlasting" (3:12). Later, in the same Gospel, He makes a similar comparison between goats and sheep (cf. 25:31-46). In addition to turning Scripture on its head, von Balthasar's theory sets aside the opinion of every

saint, Doctor, and Father of the Church who ever dealt with the subject. It also runs counter to what Our Lady told the seers at Fatima. Even St. Faustina, witness *par excellence* to the expansiveness of God's mercy, had a vision of Hell and was astonished to see how large and extensive the place was, with "seven tortures" manifesting God's anger.

A second proposition totally devoid of truth yet extremely popular is the idea that most people are good. The notion is appealing because there is good in everyone, and everyone can be good. If it were compatible with the *Catechism* and Sacred Scripture, there would be no problem. But the *Catechism* states that all are "inclined to evil" (no. 407), and we have seen above what Jesus had to say about the "few" and the "many." Our Lord was not using Hebraic hyperbole when He described human nature as "evil and adulterous" (Mt. 12:39; see also Mt. 7:11). Nor was Paul exaggerating when he referred to mankind as "depraved and perverse" (Phil. 2:15). John the

Baptist had a similar name for the scribes and Pharisees who came to him for baptism in the Jordan. He called them a "brood of vipers" (Mt. 3:7). It is all of a piece.

Jesus' parables are positively laced with examples of human nature at its worst. One man sows weeds in his neighbor's field (cf. Mt. 13:25). Another refuses to help a needy friend because the hour is late, and he is in bed (cf. Lk. 11:7). Christ cures ten lepers, but only one returns to give thanks (cf. Lk. 17:11-19). A priest and a Levite, representatives of the spiritual elite, look the other way when they pass a wounded traveler on the road to Jericho (cf. Lk. 10:25-35). As for the Twelve, they renounced all their earthly possessions for the sake of the Kingdom, and for this they stand well. But Judas stole from the common purse (cf. In. 12:6), and the rest were never virtuous enough during their three-year internship to satisfy the Master. Jesus could have praised them. Instead, He frequently took them to task for their failings.

Few religious leaders today are anxious to be known as

preachers of hellfire and brimstone. But Jesus was! His celebrated Sermon on the Mount, anything but "pastoral" by current standards, contains no fewer than four references to Hell. It is hard to imagine Our Lord describing the good man as one who is simply kind, compassionate, caring, and nonjudgmental. Hitler, Stalin, and Mao were saints by this measure, as all three were tolerant of sin and champions of the poor. Gangsters and prostitutes who are generous with their friends make the grade as well.

No. If Christ were to mount the pulpit today, we would be hearing more about the evils of lust, dishonesty, intemperance, and profanity. There would be homilies on the Ten Commandments and the Four Last Things. Those in church two days a year - on Christmas and Easter - would be advised that missing weekly Mass without a serious reason is a mortal sin.

The man in the pew would also be cautioned against falling for the seamless-garment theory popularized by the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago. According to Bernardin, **if a Catholic approves of Senator X's support for welfare spending and disarmament, he may disregard Senator X's support for taxpayer-funded abortion, same-sex marriage, and euthanasia.** It isn't always easy to differentiate between practices that risk the loss of one's soul and those that don't. But it can be done. On issues such as welfare relief and citizenship for illegal aliens, good men may disagree, but not when it comes to grave offenses against God that put a person's soul, along with the soul of the nation, at risk.

Congregants have a right to know that pro choice politicians who call themselves Catholic are not in good standing with the Church, and that any one involved in formal cooperation with abortion is automatically excommunicated. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger put it very

simply while serving as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

Not all moral issues have the same moral weight If a Catholic were to be at odds with the Holy Father on the application of capital punishment or the decision to wage war, he would not, for that reason, be considered unworthy to present himself to receive Holy Communion Regarding the grave sin of abortion or euthanasia, when a person's formal cooperation becomes manifest ... his pastor should meet with him, instructing him about the Church's teaching, informing him that he is not to present himself for Holy Communion until he brings to an end the objective situation of sin, and warning him that he will otherwise be denied the Eucharist. (Letter to Theodore Cardinal McCarrick and Bishop Wilton Gregory of the u.s. Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 2004)

Truth-telling is never easy. Truth is heavy regardless of time and place. Politically correct enemies hounded Louis Pasteur out of Paris for championing unconventional scientific theories. Soviet commissars forced Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to leave his country when he deviated from the party line. Here in the United States there is an obstacle standing in the way of spiritual renewal that makes truth-telling far more difficult than it would normally be. We know from the Old Testament that whenever God's people prospered, they fell from grace. Conversely, military defeats and the chastening effect of natural disasters brought them to their senses. Things have not changed. The U.S. has experienced half a century of peace and prosperity. It is number one in the world materially. With a headwind such as this in their faces, American homilists anxious to please will be tempted to teach less than they should. Many will assume falsely that what folks don't know won't hurt them. In one of Jesus' parables, two servants displease their master.

One knows his master's will; the other doesn't. The one who knows is severely punished, while the one who doesn't is also punished because he should have known it intuitively (cf. Lk. 12:42-48). Priests who make themselves complicit in the sins of their congregation by withholding truths, preaching half truths, or propagating falsehood are like the worker who knew his master's will but failed to do it, the only difference being that homiletic malpractice can lead souls to Hell.

The good news is that before Christ ascended to Heaven, He promised to send the Advocate, the spirit of truth, to enlighten His Church and remain with her forever. If a priest mounts the pulpit in earnest, armed with Paul's sword of the spirit, he should be equal to any challenge. Many of today's priests, especially the younger ones, are doing just this. They are on fire for the Lord. To walk as Jesus walked and talk as He talked is their sole desire. Let us pray with all our heart that they will continue to have the courage and tenacity needed to effect the

transformation of a culture -
from one of desire to one that
reverences life, eschews
escapism, walks humbly with its
God.