

The Wages of Sin Paid by the Innocent

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After years of bankruptcy litigation, my diocese has just agreed to a record \$330 million payout to victims of sexual abuse by clergy. The Archdiocese of Los Angeles made even that hefty sum look small with an \$880 million settlement. In these and many other cases, all of the diocese's parishes will be forced to contribute to the debt. Which means parishioners will be paying for the sins of their priests.

Not a few Catholics are as angry as our Lord was when He chased the money changers from the temple. **Why should the innocent pay from their wages to cover the sins of the guilty?**

This conundrum reformulates an old question that cries out with the blood of Abel and continues until today: **Why does a good God allow the innocent to suffer?**

Sin destroys the innocent far more rapidly than the sinner. The drunk driver kills an ordinary pedestrian. The philanderer tears out his wife's heart. The sexual abuser shatters his victim physically and emotionally. The effects of sins ripple outward; they impact family, friends, and parishioners – and even people many degrees removed from the sinner.

We do not have ready answers to why this is so. It's tempting to reject God who seems capricious and unjust as we survey the innocent destroyed by the guilty.

But there is a compelling reason not to turn away from God. He may not be forthcoming with straightforward replies, but He is

not a hypocrite. **He personally entered our messy human life and suffered unjustly: our sins put Him on a Cross. “For our sake [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)**

Though we do not entirely understand what this means, by suffering without needing to – **by suffering for us – God touches us deeply. With that assurance, we can grow to trust Him, to believe that, somehow, His plan may work out because He, too, has suffered the sins of the guilty.**

Theology teaches that **God tolerates evil because He can bring a greater good from it. What good comes from sin striking the innocent? One good could be the innocent crying out to God for salvation. Yes, Christ saves sinners. He also saves the brokenhearted, the exploited, the ill, and the innocent who have to pay for the sins of others in multiple ways. In their desperation, the innocent turn to the only One who can see them through. They long for the Blessing while enduring the curse.**



Agnus Dei by Francisco de Zurbarán, c. 1635–40 [The MET, New York]

These injustices create an unexpected Via Dolorosa that leads to the resurrection. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:10)

If we are to be Christians worthy of the name, we have to suffer as He did. “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict which you saw and now hear to be mine.” (Philippians 1:29-30) **This includes suffering others’ sins and their effects** – even opening our wallets to pay for the odious sin of sexual abuse.

Yet a twinge of dissatisfaction remains when it comes to atoning for sins we did not commit. “I didn’t do anything! This isn’t fair!” **Paying for others’ sins runs counter to our innate sense of justice.** Rage and pride swell, blinding us to Christ’s call to suffer in union with Him. **Instead of meditating on God’s love and law, resentment consumes us.**

Through our emotional and intellectual turmoil, the call to follow the Lord to Cavalry persists. There we hear Him teach through His agony: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)

Forgiveness is the only path out of the natural resentment we feel at watching the innocent suffer and at paying for the sins of others. To forgive is not to forget the pain. It is to let go of resentment. It is to will the good of those who wronged us. It is to pray for their repentance and salvation.

Forgiveness would be beyond our human capacity without God’s grace, which endows us with power to imitate Jesus rather than yield to our passions. God asks us to forgive our brother seven times seventy times and to pray

daily to “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

In this painful moment of paying off the debt of sin, Catholics also have to forgive the Church. We let go of our anger for the evils committed. We pray for the repentance of the guilty. We pay our money to facilitate healing and reconciliation.

Perhaps financial reckoning can be a turning point for the Church in America. The lay faithful can decide to come forward not with clenched fists, but with open wallets so they can help the Church compensate victims and then move forward to live the Gospel with zeal.

The innocent suffer from the sins of the guilty. But redemption comes through the innocent, when they open themselves to God and, rather than returning evil to the guilty, offer their sufferings for them. The Church in America, hemorrhaging members and bereft of vocations for years now, needs this moment of redemption. **It’s not time for the faithful to walk away. It’s time to come forward and lead the charge for spiritual renewal.**

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