Editor's Note: This article was originally published in the November 2017 print edition of *Catholic Family News* (subscribe HERE) as part of an ongoing series entitled "Meditations on *The Spiritual Exercises*: Words of Wisdom for Growth in Holiness" by Fr. Jeffery Jambon. We reprint it today in honor of the feast of St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and author of *The Spiritual Exercises*. May Fr. Jambon's meditation on the horror of sin serve to remind us all – and especially the Church's hierarchy (in light of ongoing clergy sexual abuse scandals) – that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

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Imagine for a moment the nature of God, for example, His *omnipotence* (all-powerful), His *omniscience* (all-knowing), and His *eternity* (absolutely no beginning or end). Contemplate the fact that *God always was*, that millions and billions and trillions of years are as nothing before His infinite, unchanging, perfect Being. Consider that, during the infinite expanse of eternity, not once did God ever experience the slightest displeasure in His Trinitarian Life.

And then there came a point in time when "displeasure" arose in the Heart of God for the first time. What was it that caused the eternal God of perfect serenity to become "displeased"? The answer to that question is *sin*. When Lucifer, the most exalted of all the angels, said to his Creator *non serviam* ("I will not serve"), the eternal God was displeased. What a mystery of iniquity, which we cannot fully comprehend! God was displeased in the same way when Eve, "the mother of all the living" (Gen. 3:20), succumbed to Lucifer's temptation – "that old serpent, who is called the devil and satan" (Apoc. 12:9) – and ate the forbidden fruit, together with Adam. God was "displeased." Try to grasp this phrase: The *eternal* God was *displeased* for the *first time*! If we understood even one percent of what this means, we would fight tooth and nail against ever sinning again.

Sin and Conversion

The great founder of the Jesuits, St. Ignatius of Loyola, wrote in his book *The Spiritual Exercises* about the reality of sin. In the first retreat exercise, he outlines the goals and petitions. In his first prelude,[1] he wants us to pay attention to the way we pray. He says, "I will beg God, Our Lord, for the grace that all my intentions, all my actions, all my operations, will be directed purely to the praise and service of His Divine Majesty." This implies, of course, that any intention, action, or operation not directed purely to the praise and service of His Divine Majesty would be a cause of "displeasure" for Him.

In the second prelude, St. Ignatius says, "I will ask God, the Lord, for what I want and desire." We *want* that which we *desire*, so if we want to be holy we must truly desire to eradicate sin from our hearts and lives. To possess this noble desire is a grace for which we

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must beseech the Lord, as the prophet Jeremias prayed: “Convert us, O Lord, to Thee, and we shall be converted” (Lam. 5:21).

While reflecting on his own sinful past, St. Ignatius recognized with a certain bewilderment the great mercy shown to Him by God: “I see how many have been lost on account of one mortal sin. And how many times I have deserved eternal damnation because of the many grievous sins that I have committed.” He even speculates that the sins which caused the eternal ruin of some souls are less in number and gravity than his own, yet he obtained mercy while others did not. Consequently, he asks in the second prelude of the second exercise for “a growing in intense sorrow in tears for my sins.” In the first colloquy of the third exercise, St. Ignatius again asks for, “First of all, a deep knowledge of my sins and a feeling of abhorrence for them.” Secondly, that “I may amend my life and put it in order.” And thirdly, “To be filled with horror at the world, all worldly things I will eliminate from my life.”[2]

Seriousness of Sin

While he was still Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI rightly said we are immersed in a relativistic world, “a dictatorship of relativism.” All around us there are voices clamoring for *tolerance* and *compromise*. These voices of relativism, which insist that absolute truth does not exist, claim we should put up and play around with errors/sins and only be concerned with practicing “charity” or “mercy.” As long as we don’t offend anyone, everything will be fine. But that is a pernicious lie because sin is destructive by its nature; and, furthermore, true charity “rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth with the truth” (1 Cor. 13:6).

It is a very grave error to think that sin is no big deal. God *hates* sin – it is contrary to His very nature, which is *charity* (see 1 John 4:7-8, 16) – and He calls us to hate it, too, as St. Paul says: “Hating that which is evil” (Rom. 12:9). A small venial sin, even though it does not kill the life of grace in the soul, is nevertheless an infinite offense against the infinite God. So even a venial sin, a small sin, because it is committed against an infinite Being, is therefore an infinite offense.

Sometimes when we talk about such basic truths of our Faith as sin, it is helpful to return to simple explanations. After all, Our Lord tells us: “Amen I say to you, unless you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). The Baltimore Catechism[3] explains the seriousness of sin as follows:

> **Q. 44:** ***What happened to the angels who did not remain faithful to God?***
> They were cast into hell and are called bad angels or devils.

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> **Q. 45:** ***What is the chief way in which the bad angels try to harm us?*** By tempting us to sin.

> **Q. 46:** ***Do all temptations come from the bad angels?*** Some do, but others come from ourselves or from the persons and things around us.

The Catechism goes on to explain the sin of Adam and Eve (the Fall of man) and its dreadful consequences for human nature:

> **Q. 57:** ***What has happened to us on account of the sin of Adam?*** We, his descendants, come into the world deprived of sanctifying grace and inherit his punishment [e.g. ignorance, concupiscence, suffering, death], as we would have inherited his gifts [e.g. grace, great knowledge, control of passions by reason, freedom from sickness and death] had he been obedient to God.

> **Q. 58:** ***What is this sin in us called?*** It is called original sin.

Original Sin

While we all experience the *reality* of original sin, the *concept* of it can be difficult to understand. How is it, for example, that a little child who is not yet baptized is displeasing to God because of someone else's sin (original sin)? Perhaps the following illustration will bring clarity to this mystery.

Imagine a beautiful log cabin in Alaska, where the temperature outside is 68 degrees below zero. Inside this cabin, there are several people enjoying the warmth and coziness of the fireplace blazing. There is also a massive window in the cabin. Everyone is laughing, eating, sitting by the fire, singing songs, and enjoying themselves.

All of a sudden, one of the people in this beautiful log cabin decides to break the window. He picks up a brick and throws it right through the window. Instantly, the cabin is penetrated and soon enveloped by the frigid cold from outside the window. No one inside the cabin can escape it. The cold is affecting everyone and everything it touches. The entire room is frozen. Yards of thick ice are forming all around and, thanks to the terrible choice of

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one person, every person in the cabin is doomed to freeze.

As the broken window and the weather outside affected all the people in the log cabin, so also are we all affected by sin. We need a Redeemer to come in, fix the window, and rekindle the fire. The poor souls in the cabin who are frozen need to be brought near the fire in order to benefit from its effects – to warm up the heart and get rid of the frostbite. In other words, they need a Savior, and the same is true for all of us!

Actual Sin

In addition to original sin, we must also consider *actual* sin, that is, *personal* sin. Sin is possible for me through my own free will. I can commit sin. To help understand how the devil lures us into sin, let us reflect on a story about a wolf in an Indian village. The wolf comes and kills some of the chickens and some of the dogs, and after a while it even kills a baby Indian. The chief says, "Enough is enough," and devises a plan. He takes a big, long blade, puts animal blood on it, sticks it upright in the snow, and leaves it there.

When the wolf returns, he catches the scent of the blood. He licks cautiously around the blade at first, but after tasting the blood he begins to lick the blade itself in a frenzy of desire. What the wolf does not realize is that, since the freezing snow has numbed his tongue, he has cut his tongue in numerous places. As he slowly trots away, he begins to feel dizzy from the loss of so much blood and, eventually, he drops dead.

Actual sin is like the blade in the snow: the more numb and reckless we become, the more damage we do to ourselves and those around us. And the devil, like the Indian chief, knows how to entice us. In his hatred for us, who are destined to take his place in Heaven, he is on the prowl to devour (see 1 Pet. 5:8). He is the thief who seeks only "to steal and to kill and to destroy" (John 10:10) – to *steal* us away from God, to *kill* the life of grace in our souls, and to *destroy* our hope of eternal happiness in Heaven. Thus, he works tirelessly, by every means possible, to excite our fallen nature and entice us to offend God as he did. And just as the sin of Adam and Eve affected not only themselves but also their descendants, so do our actual (personal) sins affect both ourselves and others, sometimes in terrible ways.

King David – Legacy of Sin

A prime example of this reality is found in the life of King David. We read in Scripture that "at the return of the year, at the time when kings go forth to war…David remained in Jerusalem" (2 Kings [Sam.] 11:1). Kings usually went to war, but David chose to remain idle. He did not foster a militant spirit, he was not vigilant, and he was not prayerful. In Catholic terms, we could say he lost his sense of belonging to the Church Militant. Succumbing to

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complacency, he let down his guard and thus exposed himself to temptation. Scripture tells us: “In the meantime it happened that David arose from his bed after noon [perhaps an indication of laziness], and walked upon the roof of the king’s house [in other words, wasting time]. And he saw from the roof of his house a woman washing herself…and the woman was very beautiful” (2 Kings 11:2). It goes downhill from there. David ends up committing adultery with “Bathsabee the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Urias the Hethite” (*ibid*., vs. 3), which led to further grievous sins, including the intentional endangerment and ultimate demise of Bathsabee’s husband at David’s command.

David foolishly thought he could hide his wicked deed, but as the Book of Proverbs reminds us: “The eyes of the Lord in every place behold the good and the evil” (Prov. 15:3). The sins of David were “displeasing to the Lord” (2 Kings 11:27), so the Lord revealed his offenses to Nathan the prophet and “sent Nathan to David” (*ibid*., 12:1). Even in the Old Testament, there was no such thing as “just confess your sins to God in private and that’s it.” No, God used His prophet to intervene and hold David accountable. The same is true in the New Testament, when Our Lord breathed on His Apostles and told them: “Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them: and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained” (John 20:22-23). We hear so often, “My sins are private. As long as I don’t kill anybody, or as long as it remains secret, I can do whatever I want.” Wrong! Every sin affects the Mystical Body of Christ. Every sin affects others around us, society at large, and future generations. Every sin encourages evil and causes evil to spread.

Nathan helped David understand this reality, as well as the gravity of his own sins, by telling him a story:

> “There were two men in one city, the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many sheep and oxen. But the poor man had nothing at all but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up, and which had grown up in his house together with his children, eating of his bread, and drinking of his cup, and sleeping in his bosom: and it was unto him as a daughter. And when a certain stranger was come to the rich man, he spared to take of his own sheep and oxen, to make a feast for that stranger, who was come to him, but took the poor man’s ewe, and dressed it for the man that was come to him.” (2 Kings 12:1-4)

Nathan’s parable proved successful:

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> "And David's anger being exceedingly kindled against that man, he said to Nathan: As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this is a child of death. He shall restore the ewe fourfold, because he did this thing, and had no pity. And Nathan said to David: Thou art the man." (2 Kings 12:5-7)

David finally understands the great evil of his sins and repents of them. And God, although profoundly displeased with David, had mercy upon him and forgave him. But this is not the end of the story. God also imposed temporal punishments to further impress upon David and his family the destructive nature of sin. "The sword shall never depart from thy house, because thou hast despised Me" (2 Kings 12:10), the Lord said through Nathan. The first consequence was the death of David and Bathsabee's child conceived in adultery. Next, dissention and even civil war came to dominate the life of David's family and his kingdom, leaving two more of his sons dead. And two generations later, during the reign of David's grandson, Roboam, the rupture of the Davidic kingdom into opposing northern and southern kingdoms came to pass (see 3 Kings 12). So much suffering, so much strife, so much division resulted from David's sins!

All of this should lead us to consider the seriousness of our own sins. Truly, we must come to despise them. We also need to thank God for His mercy, not only for granting us forgiveness, but for giving us the graces we need to be sorry and ask for forgiveness in the first place. "Convert us, O Lord, to Thee, and we shall be converted" (Lam. 5:21).

Pope Pius XII said that the greatest sin of our modern age is the loss of the sense of sin. Even if we grasp only one percent of this meditation, we will regain or strengthen within ourselves a healthy sense of sin – its gravity and horror. We will wish to avoid it and try to persuade others to avoid it, even if this involves discomfort or persecution. And although a just man falls seven times a day (see Prov. 24:16), we must not become discouraged or deterred from pursuing virtue. On the contrary, our weaknesses should motivate us to fight all the more against sin, with the help of God's grace, and to strive for "holiness, without which no man shall see God" (Heb. 12:14).

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Notes

[1] See *The Spiritual Exercises,* Vintage Spiritual Classics December, 2000, p. 21.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 26.

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[3] All quotes taken from *The New Saint Joseph Baltimore Catechism* No. 2, Official Revised Edition (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 1962-1969).

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