



Saint and Sinner

Fr Peter McVerry, Jesuit and social activist, reflects on the definition of saint and sinner. He uses the idea of 'social sin' to help us understand what sainthood can look like in the modern world.

A saint is not a perfect human being – some saints were quite odd, and some were difficult to get on with – nor is a saint someone who has done great things. St Alphonsus Rodriguez was a Jesuit brother who spent forty-six years as doorkeeper of a Jesuit college, and St Stanislaus Kostka died at the age of eighteen, still a Jesuit novice with no achievements to his name. No, a saint is a 'sinner who knows that they are a sinner'. Knowing this, they strive to change.

The opposite of a saint is a 'sinner who believes that they are better than other sinners'. Most of us are in that category – we believe that we are not as bad as others. We tend then to think that God owes us something because we are not as bad as others. This is what Jesus condemned most strongly. 'I thank you Lord that I am not like other people ...' (Lk 18:11).

This raises the question 'what is sin?' In our traditional understanding, sin is some act, or omission, that is committed by a clearly defined person who is called to repentance. Yet, today our understanding of sin has expanded to include what theologians call 'social sin'.

For example, the apartheid system in South Africa was an appalling injustice that inflicted enormous

suffering on Black people over many decades. This system we call a 'social sin', because when we ask who is responsible for this sin, we cannot point the finger at any one individual. Those responsible are the politicians who created the apartheid system, those in the police and army who imposed it by force, those who supported it because they benefitted from it and those who chose to remain silent and not condemn it, perhaps out of fear or in the mistaken belief that 'they could do nothing to change it'. Millions of people share the responsibility for the sin of apartheid.

At home, we have the failure of our society to provide appropriate accommodation for travellers, who sometimes have to live on the side of the road or in 'emergency' sites in sometimes dangerous conditions. This is an injustice to travellers, causing great hardship to some of them. Who is responsible? Certainly, those politicians and other officials who have failed or refused to provide appropriate accommodation. Also, those who have objected to travellers being accommodated anywhere near them, those who have discriminated against travellers seeking employment, or seeking access to venues and those who have



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not spoken out in protest – which is most of us.

If I buy a shirt that was made in Bangladesh by workers who are poorly paid and working in dangerous conditions, because the price is right, then I share responsibility for the injustice that is being done to those workers. If I buy a pair of shoes, because the price is right, that were made by child labour in Vietnam, then I share in the responsibility for the injustice being done to those children. If we all refused to buy the shirt or the shoes, then the employer would have to change the pay and conditions of

the workers, but that will mean that the price we pay will be higher. But by doing nothing, we share in the sin that inflicts such injustice. The problem is increased in that without this labour many poor people will have no jobs and are happier doing this work than being poorer in unemployment.

Mary Manning, and her colleagues, who refused to sell South African produce in Dunne's Stores during the apartheid era, because her conscience would not allow her, was a sinner who knew she was a sinner and tried to do something about it, at great price to herself. She is my sort of saint. ❤️