



God, the ultimate Artist, we honor you.
You who paint sunrises and sunsets,
the plumage of birds and the camouflage of insects.
You, who with your finest brushes,
watercolor the wings of butterflies
and the costumes of flowers,
we honor you.

Sin Gets A Bad Rap

I was almost ten and I decided I wanted to go to mass daily during Lent, before cycling three miles to school at the “North Mon”. It wasn’t that big a deal; the church was literally on the other side of the fence at the end of our back garden; a back garden that, under my grandfather’s skill, produced spuds and cabbage, carrots and parsnips, turnips and green beans for the entire family for several months each year.

One morning the gospel scared the living daylights out of me. In it, Jesus proclaimed, “Whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment... and whoever says, ‘you fool,’ will be liable to fiery Gehenna!” At that time, I didn’t know precisely where Gehenna was located, but it didn’t sound like a whole lot of fun.

I was frozen to my seat. I couldn’t go to Holy Communion, because less than 24 hours earlier my brother, Séamus and I had gotten into it pretty good and I delivered myself of a few choice words. There was only one thing for it: on my way to school, I’d be passing right by the “North Chapel” (the name Corkonians gave to the city’s cathedral.) Each morning one of the priests would hear confessions, in order to keep God’s wrath away from the north side of the city. I would go and be shriven, and pray diligently as I cycled through Cork’s hilly streets, that God - or the devil - wouldn’t put it into the heart of the driver of a double-decker bus to run me down and send me to hell, or worse still, to Gehenna.

Gratefully, I dodged all of the traffic and arrived, panting, sweating and trembling with guilt outside the confessional box with Father Hart’s name on it. The light was on; the doctor was in. I stepped into the dark cubicle and knelt down, hoping for, yet dreading, the sound of the grille sliding back. At the other side I could hear the muffled, indecipherable whispers of another penitent - some lucky guy who was probably a mere serial killer.

Back slid the grille and Fr. Hart's face appeared.

"Yes, my son?"

"Bless me, father, for I have sinned.

It's nearly a week since my last confession, father."

"And what have you done in the last week?"

"I called my brother a fool, father."

This was where I expected him to shout, tear his hair out and scream, "You WHAT?! How could you!? Don't you know what that means?!?" Instead, there was a gentle sigh and he asked,

"And is he?"

"Is he what, father?"

"Is he a fool?"

"Kinda, father"

"How old is he?"

"He's nearly eight, father."

"Arra, sure God love him, he's only a child.

Go easy on him;

Sure he probably doesn't know any better.

Say three 'Hail Mary's' and try to be more patient with him."

"I will, father!"

"Ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis...."

I floated out of the church, willing to become road-kill for any double-decker bus, utterly confident that my soul was as shiny as a new penny. Which brings me to the topic of Sin. It's had a colorful history. It wasn't always about breaking laws. Here's how I think it evolved.

When Homo Sapiens Sapiens developed language, about 50,000 years ago, one of the first uses to which he put it was to wrestle, awe-filled, with the notion of the Transcendent. In time, the old shamans developed rituals and found "thin places" to encounter the numinous. But meeting Source without preparation, context or cosmology could lead quickly to one of two conditions, narcissistic inflation or tribe-threatening madness. So they set up safeguards to ensure that only through initiation rites and mentoring and preparation would these encounters happen. They placed taboos to protect these safeguards. So the first notion of sin was the breach of a taboo.

Later, as people got cockier, and claimed to have special relationships with particular divinities, they believed that they could enter into sacred covenants with the gods - or, more usually, with a specific god. Like any contract, there were obligations on both sides, and now sin changed its meaning; it was the breach of the contract. The tribe was regarded as a “corporate singularity,” so that if any individual broke the contract, the entire group was guilty. It would have seemed as ridiculous for the tribe to proclaim its innocence and point out that only one person erred, as it would be for a modern-day defendant in a murder trial to plead for the amputation of his right index digit because, after all, only it pulled the trigger. So the rest of him should be set free.

Later still, covenants gave way to detailed road maps. The generic, “you worship me and offer me sacrifices, and I will make you my special patrimony and give you land” morphed into moral codes and liturgical injunctions. And, once more, sin got a facelift. Now sin was the transgression of precept, and the fault was laid squarely at the feet of the individual. And that is pretty much where it’s been stuck even 2,000 years later, in spite of Jesus’ attempt to pull it into the next phase - the interiorization of the God-connection, alignment with Source. Now, sin means the conscious, deliberate decision to stay asleep, if you don’t mind the intended paradox. There really is only one sin, the refusal to wake up to the reality of God within all of Her manifestations. Precepts, contracts, covenants and rituals are merely the electric paddles used in the ER to jumpstart the stalled heart of spirituality.

Neither covenant-keeping nor law-abiding can lead to enlightenment; only love-living can do that. Which is why Jesus said that repentant whores enter the kingdom easier than careful attorneys. Because you can’t negotiate your way into heaven; you can only love your way in.

May God continue to hold you tenderly in the hollow of Her hand.

Namasté,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sean". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.