



Sorry Day 2008

Action Resource: Understanding Structures of Sin

Taking Responsibility

Relatively few Australians alive today hold direct responsibility for the practice of forcibly removing Indigenous children from their families on the basis of descent. To understand why we need to take responsibility, both personally and collectively, for harms that we as individuals may not have directly caused, it is helpful to examine what Pope John Paul II called structures of sin.

This Action Resource Sheet explains the concept of structures of sin and reflects on the separation of Indigenous children from their families in the light of it. It also provides some starting points for reflection and discussion.

Structures of Sin

When we sin, we harm our relationship with God, we harm ourselves, and we harm others. Every personal sin affects others in some way, and in this sense has a social impact. We live in a world fractured by original sin, and so we encounter sin as a power operating in the world. In this context we are called to participate in building up the Reign of God.

Sin, strictly speaking, is a free act of an individual person. Structures, processes and institutions do not sin - people do. Social structures, processes and institutions, however, can reflect, reinforce and even encourage many personal sins. They can restrict our freedom to choose the good by conditioning and influencing us, but they can never completely absolve us of personal responsibility.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, John Paul II explained it in this way:

“Whenever the Church speaks of situations of sin, or when she condemns as social sins certain situations or the collective behaviour of certain social groups, big or small, or even of whole nations and blocs of nations, she knows and she proclaims that such cases of social sin are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins. It is a case of the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out

of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world, and also of those who side step the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of a higher order. The real responsibility, then lies with individuals.”
(RP, n 16)

The Sin of Racism

If the sin of racism had not been so prevalent within Australian society, could parliaments have passed laws enabling children to be taken away from their Indigenous families simply on the basis of mixed descent?

At the heart of these laws is an implicit assumption that Indigenous people are less able to care for children than non-Indigenous people, and that the dominant culture is superior to Indigenous cultures. The laws that undergirded the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families institutionalized racism. They were structures of sin. They both reflected racist attitudes and reinforced them.

Without the support of many individuals and organizations, how could such policies have been implemented for so long? How many good people failed to oppose these policies?

How difficult would it have been for individuals and church communities to have opposed these laws and refused to cooperate in their implementation?

A Sin of Omission

Structures of sin “... introduce into the world influences and obstacles which go far beyond the actions and brief life span of an individual ...” (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n 36) and can seem to take on a life of their own. The responsibility to address them belongs to all of us. To fail to address situations and structures of sin operating in the world constitutes a sin of omission.

We are all called to work for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This will require structural change, but also personal

conversion. Behind structures of sin, which may seem faceless, impersonal, or 'just the way things are', we find sinful people. While we continue to make excuses for our complicity in the policies that lead to the Stolen Generations, or to reject our responsibility to address this injustice, changes in policy or the negotiation of some form of compensation scheme will not be sufficient to facilitate healing.

Structures of Grace

And yet we know that God loves us, and that we can be reconciled with God, with ourselves, and with one another. The sacrament of reconciliation shows us the way in which we can open ourselves to God's forgiveness: acknowledging our sinfulness and understanding its effects; a commitment to turn back to God; and an undertaking to take action to restore relationships as far as possible.

Working for the building up of the Reign of God in our world calls us to counter structures of sin by building up structures of grace. By the grace of God we can work towards building social structures, processes and institutions that defend, promote and facilitate the common good.

An Environmental Example

We are beginning to acknowledge that the state of the planet reflects generations of abuse of God's creation. Current generations are not directly responsible for all the harm done to creation, but we do have a responsibility to address the situation.

At the heart of the ecological crisis lies the need to heal and set right the relationships between God, human beings and the rest of creation.

We can no longer simply shift the environmental costs of our lifestyles onto others. We are beginning to understand that we cannot lord it over the rest of creation, usurping the place of God. We can no longer claim ignorance and must not give in to the sin of omission through indifference.

New structures, processes and institutions will be needed at the national and international levels to encourage, support and facilitate the transformations required. A new planetary consciousness is needed, and it is emerging.

A Brand New Day

In a similar way, the Federal Parliament's apology to the Stolen Generations is a sign of a new consciousness of the pain inflicted on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in our name and with the complicity of the nation. It is also an important step in addressing the structures of sin

that encouraged and enabled these policies for so long.

By working towards healing and setting right the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, we acknowledge our proper relationship with God and with each other. We are all God's children – sisters and brothers to one another.

We need now to give the spirit of the apology flesh and bones in laws, policies, practices and the allocation of funds. We need to give the spirit of the apology flesh and bones in our social institutions and processes, and in the ways in which we relate to one another.

On Mission with Jesus

We are each called to participate with Jesus in his mission of building up the Reign of God in our world. In his 1991 encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II described the Reign of God in this way:

"The Kingdom aims at transforming human relationships; it grows gradually as people slowly learn to love, forgive and serve one another ...

The Kingdom is the concern of everyone: individuals, society and the world. Working for the Kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God's activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the Kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. In a word, the Kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God's plan of salvation in all its fullness" (RM, n 15)

When we work to address the consequences in the present of past injustices we are working for the Kingdom. When we work to replace structures of sin with structures of grace, we are working for the Kingdom.

For Discussion

- Can you think of examples where the way our society functions made it harder for you to live according to the values of the Gospel?
- Read again the quote from *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*. Do you recognise your own behaviour in these words?
- What are some ways in which we can transform structures of sin into structures of grace?