

Where's the Sin? - Reflecting on LUMEN FIDEI



The word sin never once appears in the English text of *Lumen Fidei*, the new encyclical letter released last month by Pope Francis. (It does, however, appear in a quotation in the Latin text that is clipped in the translation.) Neither Francis nor Pope Benedict XVI (whom Francis acknowledges as the author of the encyclical's first draft) are afraid to speak of sin. Yet *Lumen Fidei* discusses faith as it relates to Scripture, salvation, reason, theology, the Sacraments, and society, all without much explicit mention of sin.

On the one hand, that's a problem. Part of preaching the good news entails reminding people explicitly of the bad news. You can't fully talk about salvation without talking about why we need it. And no one is ever saved in an abstract sense; we're always saved from something. Yes, Jesus called some "blessed," but he said "woe" unto others. To acknowledge this is not to wish that the encyclical had had more hellfire and damnation in it. It is to say, however, that more explicit mention of sin would have enhanced the pope's message, not diminished it.

On the other hand, an unexpected word does appear in *Lumen Fidei*: idolatry. As is characteristic of his evangelical boldness, Francis notes that in the story of the golden calf, "the opposite of faith is shown to be idolatry." Faith demands a kind of patience. It requires us to abide the hiddenness of the God we long to see. The pope notes Martin Buber's definition of idolatry, which he in turn took from the rabbi of Kock: "Idolatry is 'when a face addresses a face which is not a face.'" Idolatry takes place when we refuse to abandon ourselves to God, when we look at a faceless thing that we can grasp instead of the face of God which sometimes remains invisible. The pope writes,

[Idols exist] as a pretext for setting ourselves at the centre of reality and worshiping the work of our own hands. Once man has lost the fundamental orientation which unifies his existence, he breaks down into the multiplicity of his desires; in refusing to await the time of promise, his life-story disintegrates into a myriad of unconnected instants. Idolatry, then, is always polytheism, an aimless passing from one lord to another. Idolatry does not offer a journey but rather a plethora of paths leading nowhere

and forming a vast labyrinth.

Sin and idolatry fragment us. They keep us from living whole, integrated lives. When our hearts do not have the one who is the Good itself at their center, we run hither and thither pursuing lesser goods. Freed from obedience to a higher law, we become slaves of our own whims and desires. We buy more stuff. We trade sexual partners like cards and then drink to cover the pain. We harbor jealousies against our co-workers. We kill the inconvenient. We forget the poor.

Faith, on the other hand, grounds us. It gives us the lenses through which we see the world rightly and thereby begins to put our desires back in order. Faith frees us from the tyranny of self-mastery. Francis continues: “Herein lies the paradox: by constantly turning towards the Lord, we discover a sure path which liberates us from the dissolution imposed upon us by idols.”

Dissolution, after all, does not mean only immorality, but being broken apart, in this case by desires that leave a bitter taste in our mouths when we satisfy them. By contrast, God is able “to gather into one the scattered strands of our lives.”

The law of God is a roadmap to wholeness, the thread that lets us escape the labyrinth of our conflicting desires and live lives of mercy and love. But the law of God is not a do-it-yourself manual. In a passage that could be helpful for ecumenical dialogue, the pope makes clear that people who consider themselves justified on the basis of their own works are in fact self-centered. They forget that goodness comes from God: “Those who live this way, who want to be the source of their own righteousness, find that the latter is soon depleted and that they are unable even to keep the law. They become closed in on themselves and isolated from the Lord and from others; their lives become futile and their works barren, like a tree far from water.”

By contrast, Francis asserts, “The beginning of salvation is openness to something prior to ourselves, to a primordial gift that affirms life and sustains it in being. Only by being open to and acknowledging this gift can we be transformed, experience salvation and bear good fruit.” This accent on the priority and necessity of Christ’s love serves as a welcome vaccine against the soft Pelagianism present in many circles of Catholicism. It reminds us that we cannot be good or do good without the gift of God’s love.

What about those who do not have explicit faith in Christ? Earlier this year, reporters jumped on some remarks Pope Francis made in a homily and suggested that the pontiff had declared that atheists could

go to heaven if they do good. *Lumen Fidei* explains what Francis meant. First, we should note that the blanket term atheists is imprecise. Francis is thinking not of those who want to disbelieve, but those who find themselves unable to believe. The difference is not so much in the intellect as in the will, not so much a matter of strict reason as a disposition of heart. These men and women who do not have faith in Christ “desire to believe and continue to seek.” And so, Francis writes:

To the extent that they are sincerely open to love and set out with whatever light they can find, they are already, even without knowing it, on the path leading to faith. . . . Saint Irenaeus of Lyons tells how Abraham, before hearing God’s voice, had already sought him “in the ardent desire of his heart” and “went throughout the whole world, asking himself where God was to be found,” until “God had pity on him who, all alone, had sought him in silence.” Anyone who sets off on the path of doing good to others is already drawing near to God, is already sustained by his help, for it is characteristic of the divine light to brighten our eyes whenever we walk towards the fullness of love.

These men and women are not along a generic road to an unspecified God; though they are not fully aware of it, they are on the way to Jesus Christ. Perhaps in this life they will discover that; perhaps they will wait until the next. That decision lies hidden in the mystery of God’s providence. In the mean time, to the extent that they are able to do genuine good, they do it by the grace of God. And by that grace, God draws them ever closer to himself.

Is this picture of human beings too optimistic? What about the depth of sin? It is no coincidence that Francis cites Irenaeus and not Augustine here. And yet Francis’ understanding is founded on one of the axioms of Catholic theology, that grace perfects nature. It presupposes that whatever embers of goodness and truth might exist in a person are further enkindled by approaching God, not snuffed out: “This respect on God’s part for our human eyes shows us that when we draw near to God, our human lights are not dissolved in the immensity of his light, as a star is engulfed by the dawn, but shine all the more brightly the closer they approach the primordial fire, like a mirror which reflects light. . . . There is no human experience, no journey of man to God, which cannot be taken up, illumined and purified by this light.” That light is the light of Christ, who enlightens every man that cometh into the world, who promises that he will not quench a burning wick and that those who seek, shall find.

At the same time, in *Lumen Fidei* as in other writings, Francis is clear about just how easy it is to become ensnared in the idolatry of the world. We need grace, the sacraments, and the preaching of the gospel. Those who do not profess Christ are not simply doing well on their own. Some of them may be on the way, but the dangers of sin are great. Hence the need for faith in Christ, for assent to the truth that sets us free. Hence the need for preaching that truth amidst the clamor of idols. Thus it may be that those who seek the Lord in truth—who could never seek him but for his own prior search for them—may find him and, by grace through faith, be set free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous in his

sight all the days of their lives.

Nathaniel Peters is a doctoral candidate in theology at Boston College.

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