

Saint Paul does not use the specific term "social sin," he understood that some kind of collective sin is found in groups and in communities.

Why? Some of us find advantages in social structures that at the same time cause disadvantage to others, for example, tax structures, salary structures, and access to health care. This biblical appreciation of social sin was revived shortly before and again after the Second Vatican Council. The Council itself alluded to sinful structures that make a society unjust. John Paul II again went even further. He said that social sins are the "collective behavior of certain social groups, big or small, or even of whole nations or blocks of nations" (*On Social Concern*, n. 65). However, he maintained that unjust collective behavior of social groups ultimately remains the responsibility of persons. Social sin becomes personal sin of individuals through complicity, indifference, or reluctance of those in a position to exert influence for change who do not do so. John Paul admonished those who "take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world" and who "sidestep the effort and sacrifice," and thus make "social sin" their "personal sin" (*On Social Concern*, n. 65).

The development of even further understanding of social justice in society has led to greater awareness of the social sin that stands behind sinful structures. This calls for social conversion. The first step, and often most painful step, toward social conversion is the need to unmask unjust realities that hide behind legitimized structures or institutions. The followers of Jesus are to oppose sin in all forms and manifestations. To bring into light of day the dark and hidden unjust realities of commonly respected social institutions goes to the heart of what it means to work for social justice. This is why social justice is about both personal and social conversion. This demands a high price, but the followers of Jesus remember his teaching: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for

righteousness' sake" (Matt 5:10). To be effective, however, drawing public awareness to hidden social sins of respectable institutions must be done in a manner that does not condemn but invites conversion and embrace of the gospel.

A clear example of social sin in the United States is the racism that has permeated the social fabric of U.S. life from its origin. Racism predated the founding of the United States. When initial social structures in the new republic were formed, racism in the form of slavery was accepted by the founding fathers as a given social reality. This social sin was already present in those who settled the United States, and they sealed this sin into the structure of U.S. life. The social structure of slavery provided profit for the economy and furthered the development of the nation. Many people enjoyed the economic benefits that flowed from a social system based on the oppression of those who had been abducted from their African homeland. So it is easy to understand why the U.S. court system, in the Dred Scott decision of the court of St. Louis, declared that black people were property that could be bought and sold. Even after the abolition of slavery, the social sin of racism continued to marginalize black persons and deny them access to work, education, and housing.

In this horrible social sin, most generations of Americans have been uncritical active accomplices (*What Are They Saying about Social Sin?* 58–75). It took Rosa Parks (d. 2005), a seamstress who in 1955 refused to give up her seat to a white person on a public bus, to unmask the sin of the accepted social and legal structure that relegated her to the back of the bus. When she sat down where it was not permitted for black persons to sit, she stood up to an unjust system. At that moment began a social conversion known as the civil rights movement, which can rightly be called work for social justice. Confession of this social sin of racism was an important step forward for Americans to begin to make their

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