



A Texas Size Penance **by Joe Sixpack**

In last week's piece, one of the things I touched on was artificial contraception. Artificial contraception is a perversion of nature, and people who engage in perversions of nature, or perverted activity, society calls perverts. Sorry, that's just the way things are. Now, I'm not talking about artificial contraception this week, and I won't belabor the point; I'll just let my last two sentences hang in the air for contemplation.

Although I'm not handling the topic of artificial contraception this week, that topic does inspire this week's subject. This week's piece is on the topic of reparation (penance) for our sins. The artificial contraception issue made me think of a friend of mine in Texas.

My friend—we'll call him Jimmy—founded and operates what is perhaps the most successful prison apostolate in the nation. He operates only in the Texas penal system. His apostolate makes boat-loads of converts, and (prepare to be astonished) his effort is showing signs of actually producing saints out of the flawed material of hardened criminals (but then aren't we all flawed). This would not be so significant if it were being done in medium and minimum security facilities where violence is far less prevalent, but this Catholic apostolate is operated *only* in the most deadly and violent maximum security facilities in Texas.

Is its reputation for success mere hype? Well, the most cynical people in the world when it comes to "jailhouse conversions" are prison wardens. This prison apostolate began in just one Texas maximum security facility—a state that has 50 prisons—and was reluctantly and cautiously welcomed by the warden. As of this writing, my friend's prison apostolate is now in three of Texas' maximum security facilities... all by invitation of those same cynical prison wardens. The reason the wardens want his apostolate in their prisons is strictly (and cynically) for security motives. These wardens say that wherever my friend's apostolate is, violence in the form of stabbings, assaults, rapes, and murders drops substantially. Almost all of the men touched by this apostolate were members of violent gangs that make their money from the sale of dangerous drugs and don't have any compunction whatsoever about hurting or killing people who get in their way. Furthermore, many of those prisoners who were associated with the apostolate are purported to have returned to their communities, began living positive and productive lives, and take an active role in the life of their parishes.

This apostolate is proof of two things. The first is, even hardened criminals can change... with God's help. And we owe them the benefit of the doubt, otherwise we must wash our hands of the Apostle Paul—a man who was a murderer of early Christians. The second thing it proves is that any good work God is involved in will be successful. Let's talk about God's involvement in this particular apostolate.

Several years ago, I asked Jimmy why he would risk his life to go into the bowels of a dangerous maximum security prison to spread the Catholic faith as founded by Christ when he could sit back and enjoy his life as he approached retirement. His response surprised and edified me.

It seems Jimmy was admittedly like most Catholics in modern America. He claims he went to Mass every Sunday and holy day, followed by confession during Lent, but that is pretty much where his Catholicism ended. He admits he didn't really have a good knowledge or understanding of the faith. So what changed in Jimmy's life?

There was a tragedy in my friend's life that forced him to turn to God—a thing we can nearly all relate to. But in the process of turning to God for help, he was forced by circumstances and the reading materials providentially placed in his path to admit he was ignorant of many of the most important tenets of the faith, and that he had been far less than 100% committed to it. So Jimmy began reading and studying every classic Catholic resource he could get his hands on. (For those of you interested at this point, I would recommend any book, CD or DVD from TAN Books, and Ignatius Press—two sources that can always be trusted.)

As Jimmy learned and grew in the faith (a journey his wife made with him), he realized that all the child-bearing years of his marriage were lived in mortal sin. Jimmy and his wife had immorally practiced the sexually perverse sin of using artificial contraception. He realized that they'd spent their entire married life seriously violating the 5th and 6th Commandments. Jimmy also realized that all those years of mortal sin required many years of reparation.

Now, let me digress here a moment. It's important to point out that, due to the prevalent faulty catechesis of the '60s and '70s, Jimmy didn't know he was committing mortal sin all those years. As the prisoners he works with will tell you, ignorance of the law is no excuse, but God is more gracious than that. Although he and his wife *objectively* committed mortal sin, they didn't do so subjectively. In other words, God doesn't hold anyone accountable for things they do out of ignorance.

But there still has to be reparation. Just because you aren't aware of the damage you cause doesn't mean you don't have to pay for that damage. Reparation has to be made in this life or the next in purgatory. Since the pains of purgatory are like hell, but they lessen over time and end when the reparation is done, it just makes good sense to make reparation in this life.

So Jimmy made up his mind to make reparation to God by working in this prison apostolate. How it started I do not know, but there are two things I do know.

First, Jimmy rightly surmised he had to make reparation, and God blessed his efforts as a result. He's not only managed to build a stellar reputation with Texas prison authorities (in our last conversation I discovered he was helping one warden grow in his Catholic faith), but he's been able to share the Catholic faith with men who desperately need it. Oh, and let's not forget how he shares the Catholic faith with wardens and guards by way of shining example. Second, in the course of making his reparation, Jimmy has been able to perfectly fulfill one of the seven corporal works of mercy—an obligation all Catholics have, six of which are spelled out by Jesus Himself in the 25th chapter of Matthew.

All of us have committed grave sin in our lives. Many times we have committed those sins without realizing we're doing it, due to our ignorance of Christ's commands and the Church's teachings. It was only after I became a Catholic that I realized I was required to make reparation for my sins, despite that the sins had all been forgiven. Some of the deliberate sins—things I knew were evil even before becoming Catholic—I've been making reparation for ever since my conversion. Some I'll never stop doing penance for—like my friend Jimmy, who recognizes the immensity of the evil he committed.

Jimmy committed Texas size sins, and now he's doing a Texas size penance. Why? Well, that's because it's What We Believe...Why We Believe It.

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