

Sin Reconsidered: A Comparative Study of Classical Theology and Murphy-O'Connor's Pauline Anthropology

Mira F. Armia

Assumption Antipolo, Maryhill School of Theology, Quezon City, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a comparative theological analysis of classical theology's conception of sin and Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's reinterpretation of Pauline anthropology. Classical theology, shaped by figures such as Augustine and Aquinas, traditionally frames sin as an inherited flaw - legalistic, inward, and individualistic - emphasizing moral acts, personal guilt, and the necessity of sacramental remedies. This framework has dominated catechetical instruction and moral theology for centuries, often fostering a pessimistic view of human nature.

In contrast, Murphy-O'Connor's reading of Paul redefines sin as a structural condition rooted in the false value systems of the world. Rather than focusing on individual transgressions, he emphasizes the societal forces that alienate humanity from its authentic self. Authentic existence, according to Murphy-O'Connor, is not achieved through isolated moral acts but through participation in a community modeled on the humanity of Christ. The Christian community, as the Body of Christ, becomes the barrier to sin, empowering individuals to move from "death" (inauthentic existence) to "life" (authentic being).

This study employs a comparative framework to highlight the theological, anthropological, and pastoral implications of these two paradigms. It draws on historical sources, doctrinal developments, and Murphy-O'Connor's pastoral anthropology to explore how communal belonging reshapes moral responsibility.

The findings suggest that reframing sin as a structural condition invites a shift in catechesis and religious education from individual moralism to relational ethics rooted in community. This approach fosters a deeper understanding of Christian identity, moral formation, and the liberating power of grace as mediated through authentic relationships. Ultimately, Murphy-O'Connor's insights offer a hopeful vision of redemption that challenges the pessimism of classical doctrine and affirms the transformative potential of Christian community.

Keywords: Structural Sin, Authentic Humanity, Christian Community, Pauline Anthropology, Catechesis

INTRODUCTION

Classical theology has traditionally viewed sin as a personal moral failing rooted in original sin, emphasizing guilt, legalism, and individual responsibility. This perspective, shaped by influential thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas, has profoundly shaped Christian doctrine and catechetical instruction for centuries. Augustine's doctrine of concupiscence and inherited guilt, along with Aquinas's notion of sin as a privation of original justice, contributed to a framework that often portrays humanity pessimistically as inherently flawed and in need of sacramental remedies. This legalistic and individualistic approach has dominated moral theology, reinforcing a view of sin as a violation of divine law and focusing on personal culpability and confession.

In contrast, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's interpretation of Pauline anthropology offers a compelling alternative. He redefines sin not as an internal flaw but as a structural condition embedded in societal norms and false value systems that alienate individuals from authentic humanity. According to Murphy-O'Connor, sin is overcome not through individual moral acts but through participation in the Christian community, which embodies the love and freedom of Christ. This community serves as a transformative space where individuals are empowered to live authentically and resist the corrosive influence of societal structures.

By comparing these theological frameworks, this article seeks to illuminate the shift from individualistic to communal understandings of sin and salvation, offering insights for theological reflection and pastoral renewal in contemporary religious education.

The Classical Theology Of Sin

Classical theology, particularly as developed by Augustine and Aquinas, presents sin as a deeply personal moral failing rooted in the doctrine of original sin. Augustine's formulation emphasized the inherited guilt and concupiscence passed down from Adam, portraying humanity as fundamentally wounded in its will and desires. For Augustine, sin was not merely an act but a condition—a state of being alienated from God, inherited through human generation, and only remediable through divine grace. His view was deeply pessimistic, casting humanity as a *massa peccati* (mass of sin), incapable of choosing the good without the intervention of grace. This pessimism was reinforced by his belief that even infants, though seemingly innocent, were guilty by virtue of their participation in Adam's sin, thus requiring baptism for salvation.

Aquinas, while influenced by Augustine, offered a more systematic and metaphysical account. He defined sin as a privation of original justice—a loss of the original harmony between human faculties and between humanity and God. In Aquinas' view, original sin is not a positive stain but a lack, a deprivation of the supernatural gifts that once ordered human nature rightly. Though he retained the notion of inherited sin, Aquinas emphasized the rational structure of the human person and the role of free will, albeit weakened by concupiscence. His synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian doctrine contributed to a moral theology that was both legalistic and hierarchical, focusing on the classification of sins, degrees of culpability, and the necessity of sacramental remedies.

Over time, this classical framework evolved into a juridical and individualistic model of sin, especially during the scholastic and post-Tridentine periods. The development of penitential manuals, the emphasis on confession, and the categorization of sins into mortal and venial types reinforced a view of sin as primarily a violation of divine law. The confessional became a tribunal, and the priest a judge, with sin understood in terms of legal transgression and guilt. This model, while offering clarity and structure, often neglected the relational and communal dimensions of sin, reducing moral theology to a system of rules and punishments.

Murphy-O'connor's Pauline Insight On Sin And Authentic Humanity

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor reinterprets Paul's theology to present sin not merely as a personal moral lapse but as a structural and existential condition that defines inauthentic humanity. Drawing from Paul's letters, Murphy-O'Connor argues that sin is not simply a series of wrongful acts but a pervasive force, a societal and cultural condition, that enslaves humanity and distorts its capacity for authentic existence. In this framework, "Sin" (with a capital S) is not just an internal inclination but a dominating power embedded in the very structures of the world, shaping human behavior through inherited false value systems. This aligns with Paul's assertion that humanity is "sold under Sin" (Rom 7:14), indicating a condition of bondage rather than isolated acts of disobedience.

For Murphy-O'Connor, Paul's anthropology reveals that authentic humanity is not achievable through individual effort alone, especially within a world corrupted by Sin. Instead, authentic existence is made possible only through divine intervention, which restores the human capacity to choose rightly. This intervention is not abstract but incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ, whose life and death exemplify the creative love that defines true humanity. Christ becomes the criterion of authentic existence - his self-giving love, culminating in the Cross, reveals what it means to be truly human.

Crucially, Murphy-O'Connor emphasizes that this transformation is not merely individual but communal. The Christian community, as the Body of Christ, becomes the locus of authentic humanity. It is within this community that individuals are empowered to resist the corrupting influence of Sin. The community embodies the love, freedom, and mutual responsibility that characterize life "in Christ." It serves as a protective environment, a barrier to Sin, where believers are no longer subject to the false values of the world but are

instead formed by the “mind of Christ” (Phil 2:5). In this way, the community does not merely reflect Christ; it becomes the living presence of Christ in the world, mediating grace and enabling authentic existence.

Thus, Murphy-O’Connor’s Pauline insight offers a profound theological alternative to the classical, legalistic view of sin. Rather than focusing on individual guilt and juridical categories, he presents sin as a condition of alienation from authentic being, and the Christian community as the redemptive space where divine love restores human dignity and freedom.

Comparative Framework: Classical Theology Vs. Murphy-O’connor’s Pauline Insight

| ASPECT | CLASSICAL THEOLOGY | MURPHY-O’CONNOR’S PAULINE INSIGHT |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Source of Sin | Rooted in the doctrine of original sin, sin is understood as an inherited flaw passed down from Adam. It is internal, ontological, and affects the soul from birth. Augustine emphasized concupiscence and guilt as intrinsic to human nature. | Sin is not primarily internal but structural. It is embedded in the societal and cultural systems that shape human behavior. Paul, as interpreted by Murphy-O’Connor, sees Sin as a dominating force, “the world”, that conditions humanity toward inauthentic existence. |
| Human Agency | Human beings are moral agents responsible for individual acts of sin. Free will is central, though weakened by concupiscence. Moral culpability is assessed through personal choices and intentions. | Human agency is constrained by the societal structures into which one is born. The false value systems of the world limit freedom, making authentic choice impossible without divine intervention. Agency is relational and communal, not purely individual. |
| Role of Community | The community (Church) plays a sacramental and instructional role but is not central to the definition or remedy of sin. Sin is primarily a personal matter between the individual and God. | The Christian community is essential. It is the living Body of Christ and the only environment where authentic humanity can flourish. It serves as a barrier to Sin, empowering individuals to live in freedom and love. |
| Redemption | Redemption is mediated through sacraments (especially baptism and confession), obedience to divine law, and moral effort. Grace is infused to heal the soul and restore righteousness. | Redemption is experienced through belonging to an authentic community that embodies the love of Christ. The community mediates grace existentially, not just sacramentally. Transformation occurs through shared life, not isolated acts. |
| Moral Responsibility | Defined legally and categorically: mortal vs. venial sin, based on gravity, intention, and knowledge. The confessional system reinforces a juridical model of guilt and absolution. | Responsibility is relational and existential. Sin is a failure to live authentically in love and community. Moral discernment arises from the “mind of Christ” shared in the community, not from abstract legal norms. |

This framework reveals a fundamental shift from a juridical and individualistic model of sin to a relational and communal anthropology. Classical theology, while rich in metaphysical and doctrinal clarity, often isolates sin within the soul and its moral acts. Murphy-O’Connor, through Paul, reframes sin as a condition of alienation not just from God, but from authentic being and others.

Where classical theology emphasizes law, guilt, and sacramental remedy, Murphy-O’Connor emphasizes freedom, love, and communal transformation. The Christian community is not just a support system but the very space of salvation, where divine grace becomes existentially real.

Implications For Catechesis And Religious Education

Reframing sin as a structural condition rather than merely a personal moral flaw invites a transformative shift in catechesis and religious education. It moves beyond the traditional focus on individual guilt and moral transgression toward a more holistic understanding of human formation—one that emphasizes relationality, community, and the existential nature of moral responsibility.

Murphy-O'Connor's interpretation of Paul highlights that authentic humanity is not achieved in isolation but through belonging to a community that embodies the love and freedom of Christ. In this view, the Christian community is not just a support system but the very space where grace becomes real, where individuals are empowered to resist the false values of the world and live authentically.

Catechetical Emphases

To emphasize the developmental and transformative goals of catechesis, Christian Living Education should not just about doctrinal instruction but about shaping authentic discipleship. Catechetical instruction should therefore:

1. Emphasize the communal nature of salvation, rooted in the Body of Christ.
2. Teach that freedom and moral responsibility are relational, not merely individual.
3. Encourage students to see the Church as a living community of transformation, not just a place of worship or moral instruction.
4. Promote critical awareness of societal structures that shape moral choices and identity.

Practical Activities for Community Building

To embody these theological insights in the classroom and parish setting, the following activities can be integrated into Christian Living Education modules or youth formation programs:

1. Circle of Trust: Sharing and Listening Sessions

Students gather in small groups to share personal experiences of feeling isolated, judged, or misunderstood. Emphasis is placed on active listening, empathy, and affirming each other's dignity. Facilitators guide reflection on how community can be a space of healing and authenticity.

2. "Body of Christ" Role Mapping

Students create a visual map of the Body of Christ, assigning symbolic roles to each member (e.g., eyes = vision, hands = service, heart = compassion). They reflect on their own gifts and how they contribute to the unity and mission of the Church. This reinforces the idea that each person's authenticity is realized in service to others.

3. Community Covenant Creation

As a class or group, students draft a "Community Covenant" that outlines shared values, commitments, and ways of supporting one another. This document becomes a living expression of their desire to build an authentic Christian community.

4. Service-Learning Projects

Students engage in outreach activities (e.g., visiting the elderly, environmental clean-ups, solidarity with marginalized groups). Reflection sessions follow, connecting their actions to Paul's call to "bear one another's burdens" (Gal 6:2) and live out the "mind of Christ" (Phil 2:5).

5. Sin and Society: Critical Media Analysis

Students analyze popular media (ads, films, social media trends) to identify false value systems that promote inauthentic living (e.g., consumerism, individualism, status obsession). They discuss how these structures influence behavior and how Christian community offers a counter-narrative.

6. Liturgical Participation and Symbolic Rituals

Organize a class-led liturgy or prayer service focused on themes of reconciliation, community, and transformation. Include symbolic acts such as foot washing, communal blessing, or lighting candles to represent shared light in the darkness.

These activities not only reinforce theological concepts but also cultivate habits of relational responsibility, empathy, and communal discernment. These are key elements in forming an authentic Christian identity. By integrating Murphy-O'Connor's insights into catechesis, educators can help students move from abstract moralism to lived discipleship rooted in love, freedom, and community.

CONCLUSION

This comparative study reveals a profound theological evolution in the understanding of sin and redemption. Classical theology, shaped significantly by the towering figures of Augustine and Aquinas, offers a foundational framework that has deeply influenced Christian thought for centuries. Augustine's doctrine of original sin and Aquinas's metaphysical synthesis provided the Church with a coherent anthropology, a robust moral theology, and a sacramental system that emphasized the necessity of grace, the seriousness of moral failure, and the hope of divine forgiveness.

We must be thankful for classical theology, not only for its intellectual rigor but for its enduring pastoral value. Augustine's emphasis on the wounded will and the need for divine grace reminds us of our radical dependence on God. His reflections on concupiscence and the *massa peccati* (mass of sin) underscore the gravity of human brokenness and the depth of divine mercy. Aquinas, on the other hand, offers a more systematic and hopeful account, portraying sin as a privation of original justice and emphasizing the rational structure of the human person. His integration of Aristotelian philosophy with Christian doctrine laid the groundwork for centuries of moral reasoning, sacramental theology, and ethical discernment.

Yet, while classical theology provides clarity and structure, it often leans toward a pessimistic view of humanity. One that can isolate sin within the individual soul and reduce moral formation to legal compliance. This is where Murphy-O'Connor's Pauline anthropology offers a liberating alternative. By shifting the focus from individual guilt to communal transformation, he reframes sin as a structural and existential condition. One that is embedded in the false value systems of the world and perpetuated through societal norms.

In Murphy-O'Connor's reading of Paul, redemption is not merely a juridical transaction or a private spiritual experience. It is a communal reality, made possible through divine intervention and embodied in the life of the Christian community. The Church, as the Body of Christ, becomes the locus of salvation, a space where individuals are empowered to resist the corrosive influence of Sin, rediscover their freedom, and live authentically in love and mutual responsibility.

This vision invites a renewed approach to theology, catechesis, and pastoral ministry. It calls us to move beyond moralism and toward a spirituality of solidarity, where salvation is not just about avoiding sin but about becoming fully human in relationship with others. It affirms that while humanity may be wounded, it is not without hope. Through the grace of Christ and the witness of the community, we are invited to participate in the ongoing work of redemption—a work that transforms both persons and the world.

In honoring both the classical tradition and the insights of contemporary theology, we embrace a fuller, richer understanding of sin and salvation - one that is intellectually grounded, pastorally sensitive, and spiritually empowering.

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