

“Are You Calling Me a Pharisee?”

I knew something was wrong the moment Mrs. Murphy’s teenage daughter opened the door. The Murphy’s were a large Catholic family that I had been visiting for several weeks, trying to share the gospel. The young girl greeted me with a tense hello and a warning: “You really got my mom mad the last time you were here!”

From the tone of her voice, it was clear that the daughter had also taken offense at something I had said, but my mind was blank as to what it could be. As she led me into the living room, I quickly tried to recall my previous visit two weeks earlier. But the effort was unnecessary. There in the center of the room stood Mrs. Murphy. Squared-off like an aggressive boxer eager to begin a bout, she was waiting for me.

“Are you calling me a Pharisee?” Mrs. Murphy demanded.

Normally one of the sweetest persons I knew, the bite in her voice told me that she was really worked up over something.

“What do you mean?” I asked sheepishly. “I never called you a Pharisee.”

With her eyes locked on me like heat-seeking missiles, Mrs. Murphy took a quick, deep breath as she prepared to launch a long-planned offensive. At the last moment, however, I was granted a stay of execution. Arrested by her normally prudent nature, Mrs. Murphy stormed out of the room in a huff.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I called after her. My plea went unheard. Mrs. Murphy was gone.

“What’s this all about?” I asked her daughter.

“It was something you wrote down and gave to my Mom the last time you were here. She said you called her a Pharisee.”

“So that’s it!” I said, finally realizing what must have happened.

During my previous visit, Mrs. Murphy and I had talked about the meaning of sin. I had tried to help her understand that she was a sinner who needed to be saved, but she would have nothing of it.

“I’ve lived a good and decent life,” Mrs. Murphy had objected.

“The Scriptures tell us that all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment,” I answered.

“What’ve I ever done?”

“Have you always put God first in your life?”

“Of course!”

“Have you ever used God’s name in vain?”

“No.”

“Have you ever lied?”

“What would I have to lie about?”

“Have you ever stolen anything?”

“No!” she answered confidently.

“Have you ever had an unclean thought?” I asked, fully aware that I was treading on sacred ground. In Irish families mothers with seven or more children like Mrs. Murphy are considered living saints. Predictably, she lost her patience.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you. Your generation might be obsessed with sex, but I don’t have those kinds of thoughts.”

Realizing that the topic had progressed that day about as far as it was going to, I decided to make a tactical retreat. Taking a note pad, I wrote out a Scripture reference for Mrs. Murphy and handed it to her, asking, “Will you read this passage and see what the Bible has to say about sin?”

Mrs. Murphy, believing that she had successfully staved off my attack on her personal righteousness, accepted it cheerfully. Her warm farewell as I departed left me unprepared for the hostile reception that I was now receiving on this, my following visit.

“It wasn’t me who called your mother a Pharisee,” I said to Mrs. Murphy’s daughter. “It was the Scriptures.” I said goodbye, promising to return another day.

Deceived as to Their Sins

Mrs. Murphy is typical of a great number of Catholics. A hard-working mother living a simple life, she viewed herself as a good person. Her conscience may have troubled her from time to time, making her feel guilty about something she had said or done. But any idea that she was a sinner who had offended God and deserved eternal punishment was out of the question. Her Church, her culture, and her own heart had convinced her that, though she may not be perfect, she was ready to stand in the judgment. And woe to the person who dared to say otherwise!

For some Catholics it wouldn’t matter if even God Himself through His Scriptures was the one accusing them of sin. This point was illustrated to me while talking to an elderly

Irishwoman. A friend and I met her while visiting farm houses in rural County Galway, Ireland. Like Mrs. Murphy, she also claimed to have never committed a sin of any consequence. Standing at her doorstep, I opened my Bible to Romans 3:23, and holding it toward her for her to read, quoted the verse: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

"Paper doesn't refuse ink," she retorted without missing a beat. In other words, you can print what you like, but that doesn't make it so. She was no sinner regardless of who was accusing her, even God through His inspired Word.

As she slammed the door in our faces, we had a taste of how God must feel when sinners close their hearts to Him. We also had a reminder that the Roman Catholic Church has misled its people as to the most basic spiritual truth about us all: we are guilty sinners unfit to dwell in the presence of a Holy God. Catholics understand neither their true spiritual condition nor the seriousness of their sins.

Most Catholics think that the majority of their sins have no eternal bearing on their soul, and so dismiss them as unimportant. I spoke to one Catholic woman in her 50's who was only willing to admit to having committed 20 sins over the span of her life. Others, like Mrs. Murphy, can't recall a single sin. Misled by the Church, these people are living under a delusion. How else could someone like Mrs. Murphy claim to be without sin, and yet weekly participate at Mass in the Penitential Rite? One of the prayers recited by Catholics during this rite reads:

I confess to almighty God, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do; and I ask blessed Mary, ever virgin, all the angels and saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God.¹

At Mass on the Sunday before I visited Mrs. Murphy, she had repeated this confession of guilt along with the priest. As she did, she softly struck her breast with her fist as instructed by the liturgy. This expression of sorrow over sin has its roots in the very passage of the Bible that I had asked Mrs. Murphy to read and at which she took such offense. It is the parable that Jesus told "to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt" (Luke 18:9). It was written to people just like Mrs. Murphy.

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, "God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified

rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted.

—Luke 18:10-14

God used this portion of Scripture to help Mrs. Murphy see herself as He saw her. And though at first she took offense, later she repented. Having come to understand the full magnitude of her sin, she trusted Christ as her only hope of salvation.

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ⁱ Liturgy of the Mass, the Penitential Rite.