

Athletics in Catholic schools believes that every child should get a chance to play. In professional sports, if you're not good enough, you're out. But because we believe in good sportsmanship more than we believe in winning, we want every kid to have a chance. It would make sense to offer a sports program if every kid was a winner, but it's a sign of our love for children that we give them a chance even if they're not very good.

St. Paul says that it would make sense for God to offer salvation if every human being was good, but it's a sign of God's love for us that Jesus came even though we were sinners. When we reflect on our sin during lent, we're not just calling to mind how awful we are, but how marvelous God is.

Catholics use different ways to reflect on their sin during lent. Many review the ten commandments. Others critique how well they follow the simple formula Jesus composed, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." We have traditionally distinguished between categories of sin, mortal and venial. Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart by a grave infraction of God's law; it turns us from God and toward a lesser good. It has to involve three different components: grave matter, full knowledge, and deliberate purpose. In other words, for a sin to be mortal it has to be serious; you have to know it's wrong; and you have to want to do it. So if you intentionally kill someone knowing that it is wrong to do so; if you commit rape; if you abuse children; if you procure a partial-birth abortion you've probably fulfilled all three components. But we don't have a checklist of mortal and venial sins because there are so many variables. Even in the case of killing, there are occasions when the people responsible for the death did not intend for it to occur. God will be the ultimate judge of how to categorize our sins; we'll each have a good idea based on our religious formation and on our spiritual conversations.

I will tell you this opinion that I hold, and I stress that it's my opinion based on my study of the church's moral teaching and on my experience as a confessor: My opinion is that by and large, churchgoers do not commit mortal sin. I think mortal sin fits with a whole pattern of behavior; it's a sign that people have directed their lives away from God. My experience is that most churchgoers are directing their lives toward God, and although we all fail, we're generally not in the basket of souls teetering on the edge of damnation. By contrast, some people base their entire lives on something perverse; for example, drug abuse; almost every decision they make is based on how to get drugs; if they must steal, maim, or kill, that doesn't matter to them because respecting other lives isn't as important as getting the drugs they need. To me that's an example of an entire way of life geared toward destruction; I'd be more concerned about mortal sin in those cases than with a faithful Catholic who misses Sunday mass due to travel, illness, or charitable responsibilities at home.

Catechumens, incidentally, fall into a different category. Since they have not yet been baptized, they get off the hook a little bit with their sin. They have lived outside the grace of baptism and without the full support of the Christian community; they have been more susceptible to sin. That's why we conduct scrutiny rites on three Sundays in lent. We pray

that they will be freed from whatever gripped them in life apart from Christ, and that Christ will strengthen their resolve to follow the gospel. For them baptism forgives all their sins.

When we come face to face with our personal sin, the church invites us to the sacrament of reconciliation. There we can meet the humbling mystery of Christ, who came to save us not because we earned it, but in spite of our sin.