A Response to Mr. Bruce Sullivan’s Critique of “The Healing of Families” Book

- Authored by the HOF Team -

Some background on Mr. Bruce Sullivan might be helpful for putting the reliability of his Critique in perspective. Mr. Sullivan is not a theologian, as some people have thought. He was raised a Baptist, and was a Church of Christ minister before finally discovering the Catholic faith. His condensed story can be found at THIS LINK (a book-length conversion story is given in Christ in His Fullness). He is undoubtedly someone who treasures his relatively newfound Catholic faith, and is to be commended for the time he put into the research and composition of his Critique.

In questioning his opinions we do not question Mr. Sullivan’s obvious love of his faith. Notwithstanding, he makes substantial errors in his analysis which we hope to clarify here. Whereas, a detailed review of his Critique could be provided, and will be available at a later date, it instead seems more immediately useful to the reader to make a few pertinent comments that can easily be retained as references.

1. The One-sidedness of Mr. Sullivan’s Quotes and Comments

A. More Than Meets the Eye

Mr. Sullivan obviously has many points of disagreement with “The Healing of Families” (HOF) which he attempts to defend from Scripture and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Yet, he says not a single word about his view on the true scriptural approach to healing according to Jesus.

So, we should start by asking ourselves whether Jesus even healed at all, and whether He authorized us to heal – yes or no. Scripture is certainly not silent on healings performed by Jesus, nor on the clear authority given to “those who believe” to heal in Jesus’ Name (Mark 16:17-18). Thus, if Mr. Sullivan thinks that HOF is going about healing in a way that’s inconsistent with the authority given by Jesus, then what in Mr. Sullivan’s opinion is the right way to go about healing? Furthermore, can Mr. Sullivan say that HOF goes about healing in the wrong way, when healings obviously result from its method?

This gap with respect to healing in Mr. Sullivan’s Critique cannot be an oversight. It would seem that Mr. Sullivan’s discomfort is more with healing itself than with a book about healing. The Critique’s drawn-out criticisms may be a means to cover that discomfort with lengthy disputation, yet without admitting the source of the discomfort. Indeed, when one reads Mr. Sullivan’s severely truncated Catechism extracts on sickness, a minimization of healing is in evidence from the unwarranted selectivity of his quotes, which project a meaning that falls far short of the full Catechism texts.

B. Examples of the Minimization of Healing

In Mr. Sullivan’s Catechism snippets (Critique, II. Contradicts Church Teaching on the True Cross of Sickness, part C., page 5), the compassionate Christ is missing who was “moved by so much suffering [that He] not only allows himself to be touched by the sick, but … [also] makes their miseries his own: ‘He took our infirmities and bore our diseases’” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1505). Despite the fact that Mr. Sullivan extracts words from the very same no. 1505, this quote is absent in his
emphasis. Also absent from his emphasis is that “The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, his work of healing and salvation ...” (no. 1421); that “he [Jesus] has come to heal the whole man, body and soul; he is the physician the sick have need of ...” (no. 1503); and that God’s universal standard for sickness is healing (Isaiah 33:24), which God proclaims through “Isaiah [who] announces that God will usher in a time for Zion when he will pardon every sin and heal every illness” (no. 1502). All of this in no way denies that illness can be a way to conversion – HOF itself leads participants along a path of conversion – but Mr. Sullivan appears to make illness an end in itself, and to forget that God’s interests look beyond sickness to the healing His forgiveness brings: “For I am the Lord, your healer” (Exodus 15:26).

Neither is emphasis given in the Critique to the healing Christ of Scripture: “healing every disease and every infirmity among the people” (Matthew 4:23); “[who] healed all who were sick” (Matthew 8:16); “healing every disease and every infirmity” (Matthew 9:35); “[calling] to him his twelve disciples and [giving] them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity” (Matthew 10:1); “[who] healed them all” (Matthew 12:15).

Instead, Mr. Sullivan emphasizes that “Jesus did not heal all sickness” which, contrary to the Matthean scriptures just quoted, can be interpreted by the unwary reader to mean that Jesus did not heal some people who came to Him. Moreover, this selective quote ignores the fact that Jesus couldn’t heal all the sick in the world because of the human limitations God placed Him under: “[Jesus] answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’” (Matthew 15:24). Thus, while Mr. Sullivan’s quote is not unfaithful in wording – it is nearly word for word from the Catechism’s no. 1505 -- it is unfaithful in meaning by conveying a slanted view composed of partial truths about Jesus’ healing ministry, and the Church’s understanding of it. In response, Mr. Sullivan might protest that he listed the complete Catechism texts at the end of his Critique. But our point is that he did not discuss the complete texts, without which he introduces an imbalance to his opinions.

Nor do we see only isolated examples of this. Mr. Sullivan’s analysis repeatedly presents only those parts of the Catechism texts which support his narrative, thereby missing (excluding?) the full truth that healing is a gift which Jesus left us that is active in the world today, and which He allows to be exercised to the maximum extent: Jesus placed no limitations on the gift, only specifying belief in His Name (“these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name ... they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover” [Mark 16:17-18; cf. John 14:12-14]). As another example of unwarranted selectivity, Mr. Sullivan quotes that “Not even the most intense prayers necessarily obtain physical healing“(no. 1508), but he leaves out the preceding sentence from the same Catechism number which says that “The Holy Spirit gives to some a special charism of healing so as to make manifest the power of the grace of the risen Lord”, and he ignores the critical role free will plays in whether healing occurs or not, particularly where that free will exercises conflicting desires. Again, Mr. Sullivan’s Catechism quotes are completely accurate, yet one-sided in their selectivity, and so one is left with a picture which is wrong from being regrettably incomplete.

While we are on the topic of selective and incorrect or incomplete interpretations, we must point out that Mr. Sullivan also does a similar thing with Scripture, such as his quote of Wisdom 1:13, with which he attempts to prove that God punishes in this life: “For God did not make Death, he takes no pleasure in destroying the living”.
Certainly, this can be found word-for-word in the New Jerusalem Bible, but is Mr. Sullivan’s interpretation correct that this particular verse speaks of the wicked dying by God’s hand? Even in that Bible translation, the preceding verse 12 says that destruction comes from the hands of the wicked: “Do not court death by the errors of your ways, nor invite destruction through the work of your hands”.

In fact, the true interpretation is that God does not destroy the living, precisely because He did not make death – as the words say - and precisely because He takes no pleasure in it – as the words say. Again, Mr. Sullivan is imposing his selective interpretation, which is exactly opposite of what the words say. Consistent with the straightforward interpretation, a number of other Bibles do not have God as the cause of the death of the living in verse 13. They die, but not at God’s hand, with God regretting their death: “he does not delight in the death of the living” (e.g., RSV and NAB, the latter rendering “delight” as “rejoice”). Mr. Sullivan takes further liberties with 4:19 by attributing to God what happens to the wicked out of their wickedness, as the wicked testify of themselves in 5:13: “we had no sign of virtue to show, but were consumed in our wickedness” (RSV), and by interpreting literally what are plainly meant as images, as illustrated by the following: “the prolific brood of the ungodly ... will be shaken by the wind, and by the violence of the winds they will be uprooted” (4:3-4). Mr. Sullivan literally has God creating corpses in 4:19, and yet, while the wicked suffer demise, the language does not have God “kill”, or any equivalent, but only “shatter … fling … [and] shake them …” in what is clearly poetic imagery.

C. HOF Cannot Be Heresy When Healings That Occur by It Increase Love of God

Again, this one-sided narrative is not an oversight. Since the whole issue with Mr. Sullivan is whether HOF is proceeding in a Catholic way, and since HOF’s focus on generational healing is not Catholic in Mr. Sullivan’s opinion (refuted in section 2), it is at the very least odd that Mr. Sullivan is completely silent on what would be the Catholic way to approach healing of generational problems, according to Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. Or does he deny as well that generational problems exist?

Thus, Mr. Sullivan evades an evaluation of HOF based on whether generational healing occurs from God through it – a question we will not evade - but instead launches his assault on whether its teachings are Catholic according to his opinion.

So, again, we ask how Mr. Sullivan can say that HOF goes about healing the wrong way, when bountiful healings result from it. The most Mr. Sullivan will admit is that these are only “apparent” healings, and are “subjective”. In a communication with Father Joseph, Mr. Sullivan attempts to explain this away with the analogy that healing through Protestants doesn’t mean that God validates the incorrect aspects of Protestant belief. While this is true, there is a rather large inconsistency in Mr. Sullivan’s point that nullifies it.

Protestant prayers for healing in Jesus’ Name follow Scripture, and so one would expect God to answer them, because they are praying out of the truthful part of their belief. In marked contrast, Mr. Sullivan says that HOF is heretical through and through, yet doesn’t deny that healings occur, which reduces God to healing through heretical prayer. But is “God [bearing] witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will” (Hebrews 2:4) in response to heresy, or in response to those who do His healing will? For this is precisely the elephant in the room that Mr. Sullivan is not talking about, namely, that God is actually and right now healing scores of people through this kind of prayer.
Mr. Sullivan wants to all too quickly dismiss this important fact, explaining that miracles can occur anywhere, and in and of themselves don’t prove authenticity of doctrine and God’s presence and work. This last part is true, and yet another one of Mr. Sullivan’s partial truths. Mr. Sullivan doesn’t go so far as to claim that they could even be signs of the devil, because satan can in fact perform miracles, but they must be from God if they are not from satan. Still, let us look at this extreme possibility, that is, let us allow that they could be signs of the devil instead of God’s signs – including the discernment Mr. Sullivan leaves out - and so arrive at what these HOF healings authentically are.

Fr. Joseph immediately addresses satanic mimicry in his seminars, in talking about the third access point, and explaining that satan can also heal. And so healing in and of itself doesn’t automatically mean that it is God who is working. But where there is God’s work, how is it evidenced? By signs and wonders anyway (Hebrews 2:4), because God will not stop manifesting His signs and wonders as a signature of His presence and work, just because His signs can be artificially mimicked by satan. The fact that the magicians of Pharaoh were going to imitate His sign of authenticity through Moses – of the staff becoming a serpent - didn’t restrain God from showing that sign and wonder anyway (Exodus 7:8-12). Thus, there will always be something else about the sign that would eventually identify it as God’s sign, simply because it is God’s. God proceeds in this way because He still remains the authentic owner of signs and wonders, and so He will keep on using them; He will not be dissuaded from them by the impostor satan. So therefore, when there is God working, there will be signs and wonders, but since they can be counterfeit by satan, we should then go ahead and discern to whom belongs the signs and wonders that we see.

But we shall first ask: what are the signs and wonders accompanying Mr. Sullivan’s objections? We will also ask: to what can Mr. Sullivan point in the HOF signs and wonders themselves that definitively identify them as not from God? To start things off, there have to be some signs and wonders for us to evaluate them at all, to determine whether they belong to God or satan. And yes, we will allow that, simply to start off the discussion, the HOF signs and wonders could either be from God or the devil. And so what do we have in the way of signs and wonders on Mr. Sullivan’s side, to show that what he proposes is of God? Precisely nothing – just words, and they are not correct words, as we show in the other parts of this discussion. On the other hand, what do we have on the side of the HOF ministry? Hundreds and hundreds of signs and wonders; still, which in principle could either be from God or the devil - no problem with admitting that for starters - before our discernment begins. So then, from the point of signs and wonders, which of the two sides stands a better chance of being God’s work in the sense of Hebrews 2:4? The one with signs and wonders (HOF), still to be discerned to be sure, or the side with no sign or wonder at all to show, such that there is not even anything to discern? And here is what we discern that accompanies the HOF signs and wonders that is clearly of God: the most frequent response accompanying this ministry is that people fall so deeply in love with God the Father, hardly remembering when they last had that experience, or that they have even had that experiences ever before, blossoming in so many concrete ways in service of the Church and deeper participation in its spiritual life. Can we imagine that being satan’s sign, making people love God so intensely?

As to the approach of healing through generational prayer, Mr. Sullivan says that it is unknown in the Tradition of the Church (we will say more about Sacred Tradition in section 2). And yet, truthfully, the Church has decades of experience with this kind of prayer. Unknown? Most certainly not unknown! Both Fathers Hampsch and De Grandis wrote their historic documentaries – “Healing Your Family Tree” and “Intergenerational Healing” -- close to 30 years ago. Mr. Sullivan conveniently ignores this history
of generational healing, that is, he levels scathing criticisms against it, but doesn’t take the time to become aware of its rich history. Indeed, in attempting to explain things away, Mr. Sullivan cannot simply focus on Father Joseph; he must explain away so many people doing so much spiritual good with this prayer.

Fr. Joseph himself has hundreds of testimonies to HOF in emails. Another priest who has been using this prayer method in his parish recently said that he had about 200 positive testimonies from using this prayer - in a period of less than one year! This has been the steady experience from this prayer everywhere since the HOF book was published 3 years ago, “For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush” (Luke 6:43-44).

In summary, then, there is real healing, followed by people falling more deeply in love with God, and so whose must all this be? God’s.

2. Misunderstanding of Church Tradition

A. The Form Which Sacred Tradition Takes

Mr. Sullivan’s position is that anything new is by that fact not Catholic because, in his opinion, Sacred Tradition is defined by the past, and is fixed. While he says “Sacred Tradition is, indeed, living”, he nevertheless argues against an expanding Tradition.

However, we see in Scripture (directly below) Jesus describing those “instructed in the kingdom of heaven” as bringing forth both “the new and the old”, and constantly journeying toward “all truth”. This sounds future-looking and expanding, rather than strictly past-looking at something fixed. For example, did the Church define the morality of human cloning in apostolic times, nearly 2000 years ago, or did the Church do that in our times, after the technology had been developed?

“[Jesus said] Do you understand all these things?” They answered, "Yes". And he replied, "Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old" (Matthew 13:51-52); and

"I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth" (John 16:12-13).

To explore this matter more deeply, what form does this Tradition of the Church take? Is it static, immovable and dead? Or living and dynamic? If the Tradition of the Church is static, immovable and dead, then HOF prayer is dead wrong; Mr. Sullivan is right. But if Mr. Sullivan is correct that Tradition is fixed, and cannot include anything from the present, when did that fixing point occur ... a century ago ... 5 centuries ago ... 20 centuries ago? And, if that fixing point was a century or 5 or 20 ago, then why were things not fixed before that time, and then all of a sudden became fixed? And what Church document can Mr. Sullivan point to that established that time of fixing?

In fact, Church Tradition is living and dynamic. It has happened in the past, but it will also happen in the present and future. It doesn’t ever contradict itself, but it does develop, and it grows in new areas, and is in each time expounded better, with the emphasis depending on where the Church is in its journey
of faith at that time. There never was a Church document that proclaimed “That’s it – Church Tradition is now fixed!” and there never will be.

If Church Tradition was understood as Mr. Sullivan understands it, then there would never have been a Vatican II Council. See how many new good things began happening in the Church that were hitherto inconceivable! All these new Ecclesial movements we see, for example, are the result of Vatican II.

But are they completely new? They may look completely new, but their foundation is actually old – they are just a new way of living the same good old faith. A good example of something new but very old is the Charismatic Renewal – new in our time - but the first 300 years of the Church were marked with frequent exercise of the charismatic gifts, and healing was prevalent; in fact, healing was a prominent means of evangelization.

Speaking to the new and the old in the Church, St John Paul II says in no. 18 of Tertio Millennio Adveniente: "In the history of the Church, the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ are always closely interwoven. The ‘new’ grows out of the ‘old’, and the ‘old’ finds a fuller expression in the ‘new’. Thus it was for the Second Vatican Council and for the activity of the Popes connected with the Council, starting with John XXIII, continuing with Paul VI and John Paul I, up to the present Pope."

The canonization of Pope John XXIII was a move by the Church to recognize him as an authentic interpreter of Church Tradition, that is, someone who guides Tradition to new ground by continuing to pull out of God’s treasury both the new and the old for the Church, even if the things he ushered in were things which up to then were unseen in the Church.

Thus, the Popes could look at the "new" that was coming out of the Council, and confirm it as belonging to Church Tradition -- even if hitherto unseen, even if it had just now been created. So, Tradition is not always recognized by looking back into the past; it can lie in the present and future as well as the past. And here is the other key point: who determines what authentically belongs to Church Tradition, even if seemingly new, and what does not belong? Who ultimately determines that it is the Spirit of God leading us along to all Truth (cf. John 16:13)? It is the Magisterium of the Church, not a Mr. Sullivan.

B. Discernment of Sacred Tradition with Respect to the Continuing Influence of Past Sins (Bondage)

So, now let us move on to the discernment process of the Church: is the Church increasingly gaining awareness of this fact of past sin, which is not the personal sin of those in the present, yet still affecting those in the present? Yes, it is, as evidenced by the following: in no. 34 of Tertio Millennio Adveniente (November 1994), in the context of sins against ecumenism, Pope (now Saint) John Paul II said: "These sins of the past unfortunately still burden us and remain ever present temptations. It is necessary to make amends for them, and earnestly to beseech Christ's forgiveness.” In other words, there is a need to make amends for, and seek Christ’s forgiveness for, sins which we did not personally commit, but which “unfortunately still burden us and remain ever present temptations”. This idea -- of a burdening influence from sin of the past, which still tempts the Church, and for which the Church makes amends and seeks forgiveness -- is bondage, and it is a new idea to the Church.

The Pope’s approach is precisely the approach of the prophet Daniel in Daniel 9, as shown in the HOF book, and which is the same stance the Pope himself will again take during the celebration of the
Jubilee year six years later (2000). In the midst of the celebrations of that Jubilee Year, speaking this time in the context of general sin, in his homily during the Day of Pardon Mass in March 2000, John Paul II said: “Because of the bond which unites us to one another in the Mystical Body, all of us, though not personally responsible and without encroaching on the judgment of God who alone knows every heart, bear the burden of the errors and faults of those who have gone before us.” Moments later, the Pope, along with the Cardinals present, publicly take a stand of generational repentance, and begin to ask God for forgiveness for a whole list of sins committed by members of the Catholic Church over the centuries. This exercise concluded with a prayer that included these words: “Grant that our forebears, our brothers and sisters, and we, your servants, who by the grace of the Holy Spirit turn back to you in whole-hearted repentance, may experience your mercy and receive the forgiveness of our sins.” The Pope was expressing repentance for sins committed by past generations (as well as present sins), which is exactly the meaning of generational repentance for bondage.

Meanwhile, despite all this evidence of generational prayer in the practice of Church leaders, Mr. Sullivan claims that generational prayer is unknown. Mr. Sullivan claims that generational prayer has not grown organically into the Church’s Sacred Tradition, yet here it is on Pope John Paul’s Day of Pardon in the prayer of the whole Church. But as we discussed above, Mr. Sullivan missed that generational healing prayer has been in the Catholic Church for over three decades now and, in addition, has also missed that the Church has a position on generational healing prayer, which we now present.

C. The Church’s Recognition of Generational Healing Prayer

In 2007, the doctrinal commission of the International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Services, headquartered in Rome, published the "Guidelines on Healing Prayer" out of a colloquium at which was notably present Cardinal Bertone, then secretary of State of the Vatican. Intergenerational healing prayer is listed as one of those healing prayers that are under "study, discernment, and pastoral oversight" (definitely NOT condemnation). It is under study for the simple reason that the Church, even though it now prays this kind of prayer, doesn’t have much experience with it. But this is not the only healing prayer in this category. St. John Paul II has spoken about the “Healing of Memories”, and that, too, is under study, discernment and pastoral oversight - even though it was mentioned by a Pope – because, again, the Church doesn’t have much experience with it. The third type of prayer mentioned in the same document is the prayer for healing of the land. And so, in this phase of the Church’s discernment, we practitioners of generational healing prayer make available our experience of all these prayers mentioned on page 39 of the Guidelines, and we explain them as best we can, such that, from our experience, the Church has something in hand with which to judge, when the time comes for its judgment. And so, we can legitimately pray this way because the Church is keenly aware. Obviously, the Church would have no data if nobody did these prayers. That’s why the Church does not forbid them, like some would like to do, not content to wait on the wisdom of the Church, and ignoring the fact that the Church herself has prayed this way. The Church needs the experience, which it cannot have if there is no experience being produced.

Meanwhile, Bishop Julian Porteous of Australia has published a "Manual of Minor Exorcisms" with an Imprimatur from Cardinal George Pell, Archbishop of Sydney, and a Nihil Obstat from Rev. John Flander. On page 59 of this manual we find this prayer: "Send the sword of your Holy Spirit to sever and break any spells, curses, hexes, including all negative genetic, intergenerational and addictive
material, past, present or to come, known or unknown, against me, my relationships and family, finances, possessions and ministry." Thus, even though a judgment has not been rendered as such, generational healing prayer is getting well established in the language, prayer, and study of the Church.

This is not to say that a few errors in application don’t happen. Yet these errors do not argue against generational healing prayer, which even the Church prays, because the problem is the error, not the prayer. People sometimes condemn because the first way they heard it included some badly flawed explanations. This is exactly what happened in Korea, where the Korean Bishops banished the "Family Tree prayer" because those who first took it there spent all their time speaking about ancestral spirits, which too easily got associated with ancestral worship, which is the traditional pagan religion in much of Asia. In the Bishops’ place, we would have done the same. Likewise, if a Cardinal comes from Rome, for example, and he is supposedly informed, but in fact misinformed, about HOF as a ministry where a certain priest is preaching generational sin (when in fact he’s not), then what do you think the Cardinal is bound to say? He will speak against HOF, but according to the misinformation he was given. And once the Cardinal speaks against HOF, you will hear: “Aha, you see? Even a Cardinal has condemned this prayer!”

Let’s put it more truthfully: the Cardinal has been manipulated into condemning something, and while he applied the right standards, he has of course been misinformed. Again, in the Cardinal’s place we would do the same. But anybody carefully reading the HOF book will understand very well that the HOF prayer is not centered upon generational sin but on generational consequences of sin, which is a completely different thing, and a very readily observable fact of everyday life. When someone admits, as Mr. Sullivan indeed admits, that yes, there can be consequences of parents actions that can deeply affect their children in one way or another, the next question to ask is whether parents and their children are just heaps of flesh with no spirit to them?! Definitely, we are a spirit that animates a body. And if you admit that these children are also spiritual, then whatever concerns them in the body also concerns them in the spirit. And that puts you right in the middle of where negative generational entanglements are generated. In consequence of these lingering effects of sin in an individual (see 4-B, Pope John Paul II’s General Audience), and because the hereditary aspect of our bodies reveals the hereditary aspect of our spirits, the lingering effects of an individual’s confessed sins can be inherited by later generations. It is only a myopic materialistic vision of life that stops at just what meets the eye. Everything about us is also spiritual because we are not just pounds of flesh, we are also simultaneously spiritual beings. The HOF book explains this point in depth as the first of the five Cardinal Points in chapter 4.

So, often people complain about what they have heard, because there is a real error in the information to complain about. However, when correctly informed, it is so easy to understand. Fr. John Hampsch tells a story, when he first published his book “Healing Your Family Tree” 30 years ago, that six US Bishops called him up in succession, each one asking him what this whole thing was about, and where he got it from? And as you may know if you’ve read it, that book is loaded with Scripture, and that was his strong point. In the end, not only were the six Bishops convinced one by one, in the end all six became his promoters. That is how Fr. Hampsch has done Healing of Family Tree Masses for 30 years all over country, and still does them, being joined today by scores of priests in and out of the US who discovered its effectiveness.

No one will read the 5 Cardinal Points in chapter 4 of the HOF book without understanding what is going on in our family systems, and why we pray the way we pray - unless, of course, one doesn't want
to understand. But there are many people in positions of Church authority who do understand. One Bishop, after reading the HOF book, wrote and said that in his 40-year experience of doing healing prayer, he had never came across anything as comprehensive as this book on the entire subject of healing prayer. And yet another Bishop wrote back to express gratitude for the book because he had found immediate and effective applications of it in areas in his diocese. He even gave his permission to add his name as a supporter of this ministry.

3. God and Punishment

A. Part of Not Knowing the Father (Luke 10:22) Was the Idea of Punishment in This Life for Sin

Mr. Sullivan puts forth the opinion that (at least some) bad consequences in life are engineered in by God as punishment for sin, albeit administered as discipline by a loving Father. However, this raises the very basic and simple question: would God punish you if you have already punished yourself? Or put another way: would God need to bother punishing you again after you have already punished yourself?

The HOF book leads the reader in a very particular reflection on this point. The reader is not obliged to accept it. The reflection is not an article of faith. But this whole reflection has to boil down to one of three options, not mentioned in the HOF book: 1) There are two Gods, the angry and punishing God of the Old Testament, and another gentle and loving Father of Jesus in the New Testament; or 2) There is one God, the same one of the Old Testament as in the New Testament, but in between the two Testaments He converted, and the punishing God of the Old Testament became the gentle and loving Father of Jesus in the New Testament; or 3) There is one God, the same one of the Old Testament as in the New Testament, but who had been perhaps not completely understood in the Old Testament, with part of the Son’s mission being to reveal His unknown Father completely in the New Testament, for as Scripture says: “no one knows … who the Father is except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Luke 10:22).

And what in addition to Luke 10:22 puts the third option on the table is this: the Son in the New Testament will not only not even one time speak of His Heavenly Father in those Old Testament punishment terms, but He will even go so far as to invalidate them – more than once.

The first instance is the man born blind from birth (John 9:1-7). The idea that bad consequences in life were punishment for sin was deeply entrenched in the Jewish mind, so much so that Jesus’ disciples ask Him “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” Here, then, is the perfect opportunity for Jesus to say that bad consequences in life are indeed God’s punishment for sin, or to explain how some bad consequences are God’s punishment but others aren’t, or simply to say no, not in this case. Instead, He invalidates the whole idea of life’s bad outcomes as God’s punishment for sin by giving the alternate explanation that “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him”.

The second instance where Jesus invalidates the idea that life’s bad consequences are God’s punishment for sin occurs in Luke Chapter 13. Jesus refers to the tragedies of “the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices” (13:1) and “those eighteen upon whom the tower in Silo'am fell” (13:4). Apparently, Jesus’ listeners assumed that these people were “worse sinners” and “worse offenders”, respectively, than their contemporaries in view of their plight. But Jesus says “I tell
you, No...” No, Jesus says, their plight didn’t occur because they were worse sinners. And he makes the point – twice - “but unless you repent you will all likewise perish”. So, again, here would have been another perfect opportunity to say “unless you repent, God will punish you”, in order to say that bad consequences in life are God’s punishment, which is what His listeners were assuming, and Jesus knew it. Instead of reinforcing that notion, He invalidates the whole idea of God’s punishment for sin through life’s bad consequences by saying “perish”, as from the sin, and not “punish”, as from God.

B. The Punishments for Sin Follow from the Nature of Sin and Not from God

Jesus teaches that sin is its own punishment, and this is what we see in the Catechism under “The punishments of sin”:

1472 To understand this doctrine and practice of the Church, it is necessary to understand that sin has a double consequence. Grave sin deprives us of communion with God and therefore makes us incapable of eternal life, the privation of which is called the "eternal punishment" of sin. On the other hand every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory. This purification frees one from what is called the "temporal punishment" of sin. These two punishments must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without, but as following from the very nature of sin. A conversion which proceeds from a fervent charity can attain the complete purification of the sinner in such a way that no punishment would remain.

So, contrary to Mr. Sullivan’s assertions, the notion that bad consequences in life are God’s temporal punishment for sin is a human misunderstanding. The Catechism says that temporal punishment arises “from the very nature of sin”, which means that it cannot even be fatherly correction. Punishment through bad consequences was a misunderstanding that was rampant in the Old Testament, as well as in Jesus’ day. And Jesus was not silent about that notion – He invalidated it.

4. Baptism and Generational Bondage

A. It Is Inconsistent to Say Bondage Doesn't Remain When So Many Other Influences of Sin Do

Mr. Sullivan insists (incorrectly) that Baptism produces absolute freedom, when in fact humanity is not free from the consequences of sin. He specifically argues that Baptism must have removed the influence of sins from past generations – what we are calling bondage – and yet admits that many other influences remain, such as concupiscence, temporal consequences, illness, suffering and death. By singling it out, his idea that bondage is the only influence of sin which is removed by Baptism is another inconsistency in his position. As well, it is an inconsistency with the Church, which does pray against the influence of past sins (see section 2), because there is a general category called "the effects of Original Sin" which do remain after Baptism.

A clear distinction has to be made here. Baptism, and the Sacrament of Confession for that matter, clear us of the guilt of sin - Original Sin in the case of Baptism, and our personal sin in the case of
Confession. However, these two Sacraments don't wipe out the consequences of sin, which are of a different nature altogether than sin itself. That is why we retain the tendency to sin after Baptism, and that is why we may retain the tendency to either return to our sin after personal Confession, or to suffer in some way from the sin, even after the sin has been forgiven.

If you kill a man and later go to Confession, God forgives your sin if you are sincerely repentant, but the man remains dead. He doesn't wake up just because you have repented and God has forgiven you. His remaining dead is the consequence of your sin of killing. Likewise Baptism, by cleansing us of the only sin whose guilt we ever inherit -- Original Sin -- frees us from all which would jeopardize our salvation – the guilt of Original Sin – even if it remains that we have to choose to work for that salvation. Like personal sin whose consequences remain after Confession, with sin from past generations (the past sins of others to whom we are attached) we only inherit the consequences of that sin, not the guilt of that sin. And though it is within the ability of our free will to resist the consequences, sometimes we end up in sin from succumbing to the generational consequences by our own choice. But by the grace and mercy of God, the HOF prayer deals with generational inheritance of consequences of familial sin, freeing us from a lot of unnecessary burdens.

Another fallacious argument which Mr. Sullivan makes is to argue against a parallel between the effects of Original Sin and bondage on three counts. According to him:

1. Original Sin affects all humans, whereas bondage affects only certain family lines;
2. The effects of Original Sin are permanent, whereas the effects of bondage can be removed;
3. The effects of Original Sin "cannot harm those who do not consent", whereas he says bondage is supposed to harm those who do not consent.

Mr. Sullivan is mistaken on all three counts:

1. The potential for bondage is not limited only to certain family lines. All kinds of families sin (cf. Romans 3:23). Therefore, the potential for influence of bondage exists in all kinds of families - but not all succumb. So, bondage is not necessarily evident everywhere, since a person need not automatically succumb to the influence (see point (3) and discussion in 4-B), which gives the impression that not all kinds of families are influenced. But it’s the succumbing we see, not the influence. Thus, bondage does resemble the other effects of Original Sin in that it does influence every kind of family.

2. The effects of Original Sin are not permanent; none of them survive into heaven. Some specific effects are even eliminated in this life, such as the suffering of a person who is cured of cancer. So, like the influence of bondage which is not permanent (if addressed), none of the effects of Original Sin are permanent, and like bondage some are even eliminated in this life.

3. Like the other effects or Original Sin, bondage "cannot harm those who do not consent" to its influence.

And so, there are indeed strong parallels between bondage and the other effects of Original Sin. It is precisely these parallels that definitively place bondage with the other effects of Original Sin.

B. A Fundamental Misunderstanding of Generational Bondage as Sin

In his long argument, Mr. Sullivan completely misunderstands generational bondage to mean generational sin, that is, the incorrect notion of inheriting the personal sin of another generation, and not just the consequences of that sin. No wonder it is so difficult for him to understand how generational bondage could remain after Baptism. We would have the same difficulty ourselves. We
will say it yet again, generational bondage belongs to the order of the consequence of sin, and not to the order of sin itself. Therefore, while his argument that generational sin does not survive Baptism is correct, it is off the point; nobody said it did. Generational bondage remains after Baptism, just as concupiscence remains after Baptism. Yet with generational bondage, where it has a behavioral orientation, for example, nobody says we have to consent to the bondage. What we call satan’s “rights” is simply an ability to exert a particular influence, which Mr. Sullivan equates to absolute and inevitable enslavement, but HOF never says that. We retain responsibility and free will for whatever we do -- even while in generational bondage -- as the HOF book clearly states: “... there will not be a situation where someone has to do something evil. We cannot be obliged to do evil” (page 173). It is just a harder struggle not to go the way of the bondage, than if the bondage weren’t exerting its influence. Mr. Sullivan vehemently dislikes the term “rights”, but cannot deny that God allows satan to influence us when we choose him, nor can he deny that this lone word “rights” serves well the purpose of conveying that reality.

Even the Catechism no. 1264 that Mr. Sullivan quotes doesn’t say that Baptism wipes us clean of everything:

1264: Yet certain temporal consequences of sin remain in the baptized, such as suffering, illness, death, and such frailties inherent in life as weaknesses of character, and so on, as well as an inclination to sin that Tradition calls concupiscence, or metaphorically, the tinder for sin (fomes peccati); since concupiscence “is left for us to wrestle with, it cannot harm those who do not consent but manfully resist it by the grace of Jesus Christ.” Indeed, an athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules."

Moreover, Mr. Sullivan misinterprets no. 1263’s reference to “nothing remain[ing] that would impede their entry into the Kingdom of God” as an enduring state, from which he argues that such a thing as generational bondage cannot exist. Yes, the effects of Baptism endure - the forgiveness of Original Sin, and of personal sins committed prior to Baptism - but the moral state does not endure due to personal sin after Baptism. But more to our point, generational bondage, just like the consequences of Original Sin, does not impede our entry into the kingdom of God. It only makes our ascent unnecessarily harder.

And to show that the Sacrament of Confession doesn’t completely cleanse us of the consequences of sin, we have the words of St. John Paul II in his General Audience on Indulgences on September 29, 1999 (no. 2):

“...it is not difficult to understand how reconciliation with God, although based on a free and abundant offer of mercy, at the same time implies an arduous process which involves the individual's personal effort and the Church's sacramental work. For the forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism, this process is centered on the sacrament of Penance, but it continues after the sacramental celebration. The person must be gradually 'healed' of the negative effects which sin has caused in him (what the theological tradition calls the 'punishments' and 'remains' of sin).” (**)

It follows from the fact that the negative consequences of sin linger that they can therefore be
transferred, by (spiritual) inheritance or otherwise, as we have already shown from the prayer of the Church. The HOF prayer is exactly centered on this no. 1264 of the Catechism. And this lingering of negative consequences of sin, of which St. John Paul II speaks, occurs even after the sacraments have been applied (in this temporal life, not in the afterlife in Purgatory).

(**) Some of the Pope’s comments may lead to the mistaken conclusion that he portrays God as willing punishment upon the sinner in this life, such as:

“**At first sight, to speak of punishment after sacramental forgiveness might seem inconsistent.”**

“The Old Testament, however, shows us how normal it is to undergo reparative punishment after forgiveness.”

“God's fatherly love does not rule out punishment …”

However, these cannot be taken as presenting God willing the punishment. First of all, they do not say directly that God is the One who punishes. In addition, we must account for what else the Pope says, such as that the condition of suffering caused by the punishment arises from the sin:

“The person must be gradually ‘healed’ of the negative effects which sin has caused in him (what the theological tradition calls the ‘punishments’ and ‘remains’ of sin) (no. 2).

“...temporal punishment expresses the condition of suffering of those who, although reconciled with God, are still marked by those "remains" of sin ...” (no. 3).

Finally, it would be illogical for God to will temporal punishment upon the sinner, on the one hand, while on the other hand providing the specific means of indulgences to remit that punishment.

5. “Praying right”

Obviously, for one who believes and trusts in God, it sounds strange that we would talk of “praying right” to God. It sounds like behind it all there are certain magic tricks we have to know and use in order to manipulate God. Surely God, who is Father and knows our intentions, should be able to redress our prayer, in case it is wrong, and give us what we need! After all, does He not see that we are only children?

And yet the idea of praying right or wrong is not alien to Scripture: “... you pray and do not get it because you pray wrongly, with the wrong motive of indulging your pleasures,” (James 4:3). Such was the prayer of the Pharisee in Luke 18:11, who used his prayer to glorify himself instead of God. In Job 42:8, we see God insisting that Job pray for the forgiveness of his companions who had spoken wrongly of God, rather than allowing the companions to pray for themselves (their sacrifice was in atonement, not for prayer): “Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has”. So, can we not straightforwardly conclude that any prayer that considers God wrongly might meet with less than success according to the request of that prayer?

Obviously, no one who prays asking God to alleviate their suffering is praying for the wrong motive of indulging their pleasures, even if when healthy that person is very sinful, since in general we take it that praying for good health is a very good motive, simply because God wants us healthy. But at least we see from James 4:3 and Luke 18:11 that there can be such a thing as praying wrongly, that it is not a completely strange idea as it may sound at first to Mr. Sullivan.
As regards the HOF prayer, however, praying wrongly consists in asking God the Father to remove that which He did not put in place – the influence of the consequences of past sin in our family systems - which influence in addition is in our lives by our choice, or our families’ choice - which is the same thing as saying that we are not created as individuals only, but attached to our families as well - and for which we are therefore totally responsible, and that therefore He would not touch because He will not violate our free will. As the illustration on pg. 188 of the HOF book shows, the intruder on our back is in agreement with us, even if we may have been tricked – and we are most of the time – into not knowing it; he is not in agreement with the Father. And therefore, unless we assume our responsibility to take this intruder out, the Father whom we are entreating with all our being will not do it, because “the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable,” (Romans 11:29), and principal among those gifts is our free will, which He will therefore not interfere with. His duty is to instruct us, and then leave it to us (“When God, in the beginning, created man, he made him subject to his own free choice” [Sirach 15:14]).

Mr. Sullivan misunderstands quite a few things like this “praying wrong” on which he then spends a lot of time. We wanted to produce something easily readable on the major issues here, and not a point by point rebuttal of his Critique. In case the reader is interested in a fuller counter-critique, please write to: healingoffamilies@hotmail.com.

**NB:** Father Joseph retains from Mr. Sullivan’s Critique his complaint about page 41, and recognizes that the expression can easily lead to misinterpretation. That will be said differently in subsequent printings of the HOF book.

### 6. Conclusion

And finally, as a whole, the HOF prayer method is not a theology, it is not a doctrine, and it is not a dogma. The basic truths that we Catholics believe are found in the Creed, and if you believe the Creed in its entirety, then you are in; if you skip even one article of faith in there, then you are out of the Catholic faith.

The HOF prayer is only a healing prayer method. That is why two successive Bishops of Fr. Joseph in the Pensacola–Tallahassee diocese did not think his book needed an imprimatur, as explained in the FAQs of his website. As a healing prayer method, one may take it or leave it. One can go to heaven without healing. Healing is only for down here to aid us in our tough journey to heaven. It is not an absolute necessity in that journey, even though Jesus healed, and wishes us to continue that in His Name. No doubt, the journey will be extra tough without healing, since healing includes also spiritual healing, and God heals us because He knows we need it. But it will not be an impossible journey.

The HOF book has absolutely no problems with anyone who for some reason wishes to hold onto their pain and suffering, and doesn’t want to ask God for healing. That is a free choice. Only on the essentials of our faith do we have to agree. On other matters, it is our choice. Did you know, for example, regarding the apparitions of our Lady on earth, that even after the Church has painstakingly made the long and tedious investigations, and is finally able to declare without a shade of doubt that surely Our Lady on such and such a day came to, say, Fatima, and spoke to three shepherd children, etc., did you know that you as a Catholic are not obliged to believe it? You are not obliged to believe it
because that is not doctrine, and it is not a dogma, and it is not an article of our faith. In God’s word, in
the Creed, and in the doctrines and dogmas of the Catholic Church, you have more than enough to get
you to heaven. Believe and live those, and you will be fine. And so the Church itself makes a distinction
between what you must believe, and what is your choice to believe or not. The HOF prayer method
does not belong to the former category.

Our point is that while HOF doesn’t have to be believed, HOF prayer is believable, that is, spiritually
well-founded.