

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: DISTINCTIONS AMONG SINS; SINS OF THOUGHT

A. Not all sins are equally serious

5 Some have thought that all sins are equally serious. If moral evil is understood as unreasonableness, one can suppose that its unreasonableness is in its inconsistency with the first moral principle. One cannot be more or less inconsistent with a principle. Hence, it might seem that one cannot do more or less moral evil. Similarly, if sin is understood as an offense against the infinite goodness of God, one can suppose
10 that the offense involved in every sin is infinite.

However, common sense and divine revelation agree in excluding the position that all sins are equally serious. In His trial before Pilate, Jesus states that the one who handed Him over is guilty of a greater sin than Pilate's, since Pilate has some authority in the matter although he is abusing it (cf. Jn 19.11). Warning against officiousness
15 in fraternal correction, Jesus says: "You hypocrite! Remove the plank from your own eye first; then you will see clearly to take the speck from your brother's eye" (Mt 7.5). The beam and the mote are both sins, but the sin of the hypocrite is far greater than the small fault he or she is eager to correct in another.

St. Basil makes the important point that even among sins which are serious, not all
20 are equally grave. A combination of circumstances can make a sin more or less grave.

Suppose it is fornication that is brought to judgment. But the one who committed this sin was trained from the beginning in wicked practices; for he was brought into life by licentious parents and was reared with bad habits, in drunkenness, reveling, and with obscene stories. If someone else, however, had many invitations
25 to better things--education, teachers, hearing more divine discussions, salutary readings, advice of parents, stories which shape character to seriousness and self-control, an orderly way of life--if he falls into the same sin as the other, how were it possible, when he is called to account for his life, that he would not be regarded as deserving of a more severe penalty than the other (FEF 957)?

30 This analysis also develops a saying of our Lord: "When much has been given a man, much will be required of him. More will be asked of a man to whom more has been entrusted" (Lk 12.48). This point is one which ought always to be borne in mind by those who receive special graces to share in the Lord's work.

In general, sins differ in seriousness either by differences in the seriousness of
35 what one does, or by differences in the awareness of wrong with which one acts, or by differences in the appeal of the morally acceptable alternative to one's sinful choice. The more serious the matter, the more clear the judgment of conscience which forbids an act, and the easier a right choice of an appealing good alternative would be, the worse the sin.

40 Moral evil does consist in unreasonableness, but unreasonableness is not simply in the violation of a unitary principle. The first principle of morality is violated by violating various goods in various degrees, and also by violating diverse modes of responsibility. Hence, the unreasonableness of immoral action is subject to degree. Similarly, morally evil action is sinful not by violating divine goodness in itself--which
45 is inviolable--but by violating it in its participations. Hence, although all sin offends God, not all sin is equally offensive to Him.

B. How do sins differ in seriousness?

50 Theologically, the distinction between mortal and venial sin is most important. I will treat this distinction in sections C and D, below. Before doing so, I now explain how sins differ in seriousness according to differences in the seriousness of what one does, setting aside, for the present, differences arising from degrees of awareness or the appeal of the good alternative. (Awareness will be considered in chapter twenty-eight; the appeal of alternatives in chapter twenty-nine.)
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In chapter twenty-two, sections B and C, I explained how the various modes of responsibility have normative force in various ways. In three different ways, Titus brings about the death of another person, and in each case other factors are assumed constant. The sin which violates the seventh mode of responsibility is more serious than that which
60 violates the fifth, and the sin which violates the fifth mode is more serious than that which violates the first. The reason for the difference is not in the damage done, yet it is in what Titus does, for what he does is not simply to bring about three deaths, but to determine himself wrongly in three diverse ways with respect to the good of human life.

65 In general, other things being equal, violations of the seventh mode of responsibility are more serious as to what one does than are violations of the eighth mode, since by the former one more completely determines oneself incompatibly with the goods to which one ought to be committed. Violations of either of these modes are more serious than are violations of the second through the sixth modes, in which there is some
70 commitment to a good, but a defect in this commitment. Violations of the first mode of responsibility are least serious. If violations against the second through the sixth modes are compared among themselves--always assuming other things equal--I think (although I do not care to try to show) that violations of the fifth mode are more serious than the others, then violations of the sixth mode, next of the fourth and third, and
75 finally of the second.

It is important to bear in mind that the same act can violate several modes of responsibility at once. If it does, its seriousness is increased. For example, many violations of the seventh and eighth modes of responsibility also involve a violation of the fifth mode. Most abortion and euthanasia of defective persons violates both sanctity
80 of life and fairness; such acts are more seriously wrong than would be the mercy-killing of a person who really wished to be killed, for such a killing would not be unfair although it would violate the sanctity of life.

The seriousness of what is done also differs according to the good which is violated. In the light of faith and within the perspective of the life of faith, acts

which directly violate the religious relationship are more serious than those which of themselves violate only a relationship among human persons or groups, and the latter are more serious than those which of themselves violate only the harmony within oneself. Moreover, the tradition seems to indicate that violations of truth are more serious in themselves than violations of life, although the comparison is hard to apply since acts in which diverse goods are violated are not similar in all other respects. Clearly, the basic human good of excellence in performance has thus far hardly been regarded by the Christian conscience as a principle whose violation by itself can make an act seriously wrong.

In comparing the seriousness of what is done according to differences in the good which is violated, one must bear in mind that the same act can and often does violate several goods at once. For example, a Christian who commits adultery using a contraceptive to prevent pregnancy violates the religious good of the sacrament, fairness to the injured spouse or spouses, the true good of sexual communion, and human life in its genesis.

The seriousness of what is done also differs according to the extent to which the relevant good is violated. For example, those who seek revenge act in a more seriously wrong way if they intend to kill than if they intend only to injure; injuries to a person are more serious than comparable injuries to an extrinsic good of the person--for example, it is worse to scratch an enemy's face than to scratch the finish on his or her car. Such differences generally can be distinguished easily enough by asking which injury one would more wish to avoid to oneself. The extent of violation of a relevant good also can be measured by the number of persons adversely affected. For example, the killing of a whole family for revenge is worse than the killing of a single member of the family.

The seriousness of what is done also differs according to the extent to which the wrong is carried through to completion. Other things equal, it is worse to desire and carry out a wrong than only to consent to the desire. Similarly, other things equal, the length of time through which one does wrong differentiates seriousness.

Considering seriousness from a properly Christian perspective, what one does is more seriously wrong if it is more clearly inconsistent with the teaching of the Gospel; likewise, what one does is more seriously wrong if it more greatly impedes the life and activity of the Church.

The preceding distinctions--which are not necessarily exhaustive--do not form a single system. Differences in seriousness can be measured in many incomparable ways. One might imagine that if all of these could be applied simultaneously, one could discern a gradation in seriousness proceeding by very small steps from the most grievous to the least serious matters. However, we are in no position to construct such a hierarchy, nor is there any real need to attempt it. God, who reads hearts, can make whatever distinctions are required.

Someone might suppose that in admitting comparisons between sins according to the seriousness of what is done, I admit consequentialism. This supposition would be false. Consequentialism consists in an effort to commensurate the incommensurable--to determine morally what possibility ought to be chosen by comparing various human goods without the use of a prior moral standard to measure them. The comparisons made in the present section involve no such effort. Moral standards are used in making the comparisons; moreover, the conclusions reached about comparative evils are not determined by the comparisons in a way which would eliminate the possibility of choice.

50 C. Theological foundation of the distinction between mortal and venial sins

It is worth noticing at the outset that the difference between mortal and venial sins is proper to theology. Ethical theory can make most of the distinctions discussed in the preceding section, and these distinctions account for the universal human sense that there are very important moral evils and comparatively insignificant ones. However, ethical theory by itself probably would lead to the hypothesis that there are moral evils of various degrees, practically constituting a continuum. The distinction between mortal and venial sins makes a sharp cut.

In each of the two categories, there remain many degrees of seriousness. But the worst venial sin differs altogether in its significance from the least evil mortal sin. That this is so, according to faith, is the point of the present section. The formal statement of the distinction will be given in section D. The fuller explanation of this distinction will not be given until chapter twenty-seven.

In the Old Testament, an expiatory offering was required for sins of human frailty and inadvertence (cf. Lv 4.1-6.7). However, other sins, which have the character of crimes against the covenant community and its God, cannot be expiated; they are punished by death or by the cutting off of the sinner from the community (cf. Lv 7.25, 17.9-10, 19.8, 20.3, and so on). The words "venial" and "mortal" are not used, but the distinction obviously is implicit in the difference between faults which can be expiated ("venial" means "pardonable") and crimes which cannot. Someone cut off from a community is dead so far as that community is concerned; among a nomadic people, exclusion from the community probably often was tantamount to a death penalty.

The New Testament maintains this distinction. In teaching His own to pray, Jesus directs them to seek forgiveness for daily transgressions (cf. Mt 6.12; Lk 11.4). By contrast, He threatens His determined opponents with the condemnation of Gehenna (cf. Mt 23.33). Certain sins exclude one from the kingdom forever (cf. Mt 25.45-46); some sins are unforgivable in a way that others are not (cf. Mt 12.31-32; Mk 3.28-30). Similarly, in the epistles, there are daily sins of which everyone can be guilty (cf. Jas 3.2; 1 Jn 1.8). By contrast, there is slavery to sin which leads to death (cf. Rom 6.16); certain particular sins call for excommunication (cf. 1 Cor 5.13). These more grave sins exclude one from the kingdom (cf. 1 Cor 6.9-12; Gal 5.19-21; Phil 3.9; 1 Jn 2.24).

In the First Epistle of John, there is a concise statement which at first sight seems to mark perfectly the distinction between mortal and venial sin:

Anyone who sees his brother sinning, if the sin is not deadly, should petition God, and thus life will be given to the sinner. This is only for those whose sin is not deadly. There is such a thing as a deadly sin; I do not say that one should pray about that. True, all wrongdoing is sin, but not all sin is deadly (1 Jn 5:16-17).

5 The lack of examples and explanation makes it impossible to know exactly what the author has in mind. Many commentators suppose that he has in view the especially pernicious type of sin--which has been called "sin against the Holy Spirit"--which I will discuss in chapter thirty (cf. Mk 3.28-30; Mt 12.31-32; Heb 6.4-6). Probably this conclusion is
10 drawn because petition for pardon is limited to cases of nondeadly sin.

However, it seems to me that the distinction in view could be precisely our distinction between venial and mortal sin. By prayer Christians can obtain pardon of the former for one another, but prayer for another's deadly sin is not sufficient to obtain its remission. On this interpretation, only this type of intercessory prayer, not any
15 and all prayer, is excluded in the case of deadly sin. One might (and should) pray that the mortal sinner be moved to do penance, that the impact of mortal sin on others be mitigated, and so forth.

Another passage which in a long tradition has been taken to mark the distinction between venial and mortal sin is in St. Paul. Paul says that people build differently
20 on the foundation which is Christ, some with gold, silver, and jewels, others with wood, hay, or straw. Judgment will test the quality of each one's work; one whose building burns (because of its poor material) can be saved, but as fleeing through a fire. But others utterly destroy God's temple, for they separate themselves from Christ; at judgment, these will be destroyed, not saved (cf. 1 Cor 3.10-17). [1]

25 Among the Fathers of the Church, the distinction between venial and mortal sins is clearly marked. St. Jerome, for example, says:

There are venial sins and there are mortal sins. It is one thing to owe ten thousand talents, another to owe but a farthing. We shall have to give an accounting for an idle word no less than for adultery. But to be made to blush and to be
30 tortured are not the same thing; not the same thing to grow red in the face and to be in agony for a long time (FEF 1382).

Augustine points out that it is a mistake to make light of lesser sins; they can lead to grave sin. Hence, lesser sins should be confessed and overcome with works of mercy (cf. FEF 1846). The lesser sins, for which everyone needs pardon, are distinguished from
35 crimes; every crime is a sin, but not every sin is a crime (cf. FEF 1918). St. Caesar of Arles, writing before the mid-sixth century, briefly lists mortal and venial sins, basing himself on the lists in St. Paul and on the sense of the faithful. Those dominated by mortal sins must do penance, give alms, and amend their lives. The lesser sins can be remitted, even if one dies with them, through purgatorial fire; Caesar identifies
40 this with the fire that according to St. Paul will burn away the wood, hay, and straw of those who nevertheless build on Christ (cf. FEF 2233).

Against the Pelagians, the Church interprets Scripture and firmly teaches that even the upright Christian sins (cf. DS 228-230/106-108). The Council of Trent teaches that
45 not all sins take away grace; there are venial sins (cf. DS 1537/804). Without a special divine privilege, such as that given Mary, even a justified person cannot altogether avoid venial sin (cf. DS 1573/833). St. Pius V condemns the view that no sin of its nature is venial, that inherently every sin deserves hell (cf. DS 1920/1020).

The Council of Trent also teaches that a person can lose the grace of justification not only by a sin directly against faith by which faith itself is lost, but by a variety
50 of sins which exclude even the faithful from the kingdom. Sins other than infidelity still can be grave and enormous; Trent invokes St. Paul (cf. 1 Cor 6.9-10) in support of this point (cf. DS 1544/808; 1577/837). Trent further teaches that Catholics must confess all of their mortal sins which they can remember after a careful examination of conscience. These sins can include sins of thought without any external act. Mortal
55 sins have the character of crimes; they must be submitted to the Church, in the person of the confessor, with enough precision for judgment. Venial sins also may, but need not, be confessed (cf. DS 1679-1681/899).

Already in the time of St. Thomas, centuries before Trent, there was substantial agreement among the Church's teachers not only on the points concerning which Trent insists but also on the sorts of acts which constitute mortal sins. In the centuries
60 since Trent, moral theologians whose works were authorized for use in the formation of confessors reached even more detailed and precise agreement concerning the kinds of acts which are grave matter. As I explained in chapter fifteen, section J, this common body of Catholic moral teaching seems to meet the conditions for teaching infallibly proposed
65 by the ordinary magisterium. Therefore, it not only is a matter of faith that there is a definite line to be drawn between mortal and venial sins; the faithful Catholic in many cases is in a position to say whether a certain kind of act falls on one side of the line or on the other.

70 D. What is a mortal sin?

From the preceding, it is clear that a mortal sin is a sin which deprives one of divine life. Those who commit and remain in mortal sin are excluded from the kingdom of God; they are separated from Christ; they evict the Holy Spirit from their hearts; they
75 incapacitate themselves for active participation in the life of the Church, particularly for the reception of Holy Communion, which expresses and nourishes the living unity of redeemed humankind in Christ. Like criminals or outlaw members of political society, mortal sinners deserve no part in the common life of the Church; the grace of repentance and the sacrament of reconciliation are given by divine mercy and the Church's pastoral
80 solicitude, not dispensed as if the sinner were entitled to them.

The conditions required for a mortal sin can be stated briefly, but precise understanding of these conditions is not easy. Therefore, the following must be regarded as a mere outline, which will be more fully developed in later sections and chapters.

For a mortal sin there must be grave matter, sufficient reflection, and full consent.

For grave matter, it is enough that the person who is willing to sin believe that the matter is a grave one. One who is willing to violate conscience in a matter considered grave is guilty of the degree of moral evil willingly accepted. Similarly, one who is prepared to act with some suspicion that the matter might be that of grave sin, and who does not take reasonable care to eliminate doubt, is guilty of the grave moral evil suspected.

The common theological teaching is that certain kinds of acts are of themselves light matter--for example, idle talk, lack of diligence in prayer, and so on. Other kinds of acts are of themselves grave matter--for example, killing the innocent, adultery, theft, lying, and so on. However, of the latter, some in the nature of the case admit of no division or smallness in the harm which is done--for example, in killing the innocent the victim cannot be only somewhat dead and in committing adultery the marriage bond cannot be only slightly violated. Others in the nature of the case admit of a division or smallness in the evil which is done--for example, in stealing one can take only a newspaper without paying for it or can take someone's entire livelihood; in lying one can make a harmless joke or one can deceive someone about a matter on which life depends. Kinds of acts which admit of smallness in the evil done (parvity of matter) are prima facie grave, but can be the matter of venial sin due to the specification of the matter as light.

The question of the principle of the distinction between grave and light matter is a difficult one, much debated today. I will discuss this question at length in chapter twenty-seven, where I will examine and criticize various current views and state my own conclusion on this point.

For practical purposes, Catholics should consider to be grave matter what the Church teaches to be such, since Catholics ought to conform their consciences to the Church's teaching, as I explained in chapter fourteen, section O. When the precise teaching of the Church is not clear, two points should be borne in mind.

First, when the Church clearly teaches that a certain kind of act always is wrong, then any more specific kind of act which includes all the characteristics of that general sort of act also is always wrong. For example, since the Church teaches clearly that any positive act intended to impede procreation from following upon marital intercourse always is gravely wrong, the more specific act of impeding procreation by anovulant drugs in order to limit the size of the family to a reasonable number also is always gravely wrong. Similarly, since the Church teaches clearly that any act intended to kill the innocent always is wrong, the more specific act of intending to kill millions of innocent persons by a retaliatory strike in case of nuclear war also is always gravely wrong.

Second, when the Church's teaching is not clear--for example, when there is disagreement even among the classical theologians--that something is grave matter, then no one on his or her own judgment ought to tell anyone else that the matter is grave. For example, although I think that stealing materials from a library is mortally sinful, I would not be justified in propagating this opinion in a library bulletin. A priest who is convinced that his parishioners ought not to vote for a candidate who favors euthanasia ought not to tell his congregation that such a vote would be a mortal sin. Although failure to do works of mercy can be mortally sinful, the obligation in any particular instance is not easy to determine; therefore, someone urging contributions to a special collection to alleviate starvation should not say that failure to contribute is grave matter.

For sufficient reflection, there must be awareness not only of what one is doing (without such awareness there is no human act at all) but also that what one is doing is seriously wrong. In other words, reflection is sufficient only if one acts in violation of one's conscience, does what one knows to be grave matter. As I stated already, willingness to act with a doubtful conscience without making a reasonable effort to eliminate the doubt constitutes grave matter; such a state of mind also constitutes sufficient reflection.

At the relevant time, one must be actually aware of the wrongness of the act; it is not sufficient that one could and should be aware, for in such a case one is primarily responsible for the failure to form conscience, not gravely responsible for each evil that is consequent upon this failure.

The relevant time is the time of decision, not the time in which the decision is carried out. For example, a person who decides upon a career in the rackets, knowing this to be a vicious style of life, remains responsible for all the choices and actions overarched by this choice, even though he or she later ceases to think about the morality of daily acts of murder, bribery, and so on. Similarly, an alcoholic who realizes that he or she has a grave obligation to seek help and who foresees future neglect of family duties if help is not sought at once remains responsible for the neglect overarched by the choice to delay seeking help, even though he or she later ceases to think or care about unfulfilled family responsibilities.

One's judgment of conscience must be that the act will be or might well be gravely wrong. It is not enough that one realize that there is something somehow bad about what one does. However, one does not have to think specifically about that in which the wrongness of the act consists. For example, a public official might realize that there is something seriously questionable about accepting a certain contribution without knowing exactly where the corruption would lie.

One need not think explicitly that the act is an offense against God or that it will rupture one's relationship with Him. However, a well-instructed Catholic is hardly likely to realize that any act would be seriously wrong without some awareness of this, most important implication of sin; therefore, a real lack of awareness of it in such a person is a likely sign that the seriously wrong character of the act was not clear enough for sufficient reflection.

Abnormal states of consciousness in which one does not attend clearly to what one is about to do can render reflection insufficient. For example, a person who is half asleep, partially sedated by alcohol or another depressant, caught unawares in a situation of great pressure, or distracted might not be in a position to reflect sufficiently for full responsibility. In such cases, signs of insufficient reflection will be that

the individual in no way planned the act in that situation, that it is out of character, and that it is at once firmly rejected as soon as it is considered with full attention.

I will say more about the implications of ignorance and error for moral responsibility in chapter twenty-eight.

5 Full consent is an actual choice. I described choice in chapter eight, sections G and H. Even when one has reflected sufficiently to realize that an act would be gravely evil and is aware that one should not do the act, one has not sinned mortally until one makes a definite choice. The choice itself need not bear upon a wrongful performance. It is enough that one foresee and accept consequences one is gravely obliged to avoid, 10 that one choose to omit doing what one is gravely obliged to do, or that one make a certain choice while foreseeing that as a consequence one probably will omit doing something one is gravely obliged to do.

One can make an actual choice without expressing it in words or carrying it out in any sort of action. Moreover, one can make a choice in the course of deliberation which 15 leaves open a range of possibilities to be settled by one or more additional choices. For example, a person can decide upon revenge and then proceed to choose the precise modalities of revenge; similarly, a person can decide to indulge in some form of illicit gratification, and then continue to deliberate about the details of the projected "good time." In such cases, the actual choice required for mortal sin is committed as soon as 20 a proposal including grave matter, however generally understood, is accepted with sufficient reflection.

It also is important to notice that judgments of conscience not only can bear upon other acts, but also can bear upon the very processes and acts of deliberation and choice themselves. If an individual is sufficiently aware of a grave obligation to deliberate 25 or decide about a certain matter and chooses not to do so, or is sufficiently aware of a grave obligation to block a course of deliberation (for example, by directing attention to other matters) which has been initiated spontaneously and chooses to continue the deliberation, then the individual has made an actual choice which is mortally sinful.

As I will explain in section F, once a mortally sinful choice is made and not re- 30 pented, subsequent voluntary acts and omissions in grave matter sufficiently known as such can continue and unfold the initial sin, even without further, distinct actual choices in every further instance of sin.

Emotion can interfere with the ability to make free choices. I will discuss the implications of emotion for moral responsibility in chapter twenty-nine.

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E. Sins of ignorance, of weakness, and of set purpose

St. Gregory the Great formulated a distinction between sins in terms of causal factors in the sinner:

40 You must know that sin can be committed in three ways. It is done either in ignorance, in weakness, or of set purpose. And certainly the sin committed in weakness is more grave than that done in ignorance; but that done of set purpose is much more grave than that done in weakness (FEF 2314).

To have made this ranking, Gregory must have considered the ignorance virtually blameless and such as to eliminate sufficient reflection, and the weakness to be an unwanted emotion against which the sinner struggled unsuccessfully. "Set purpose" in some later authors, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, becomes "resolute malice."

The distinction is not helpful analytically, except to the extent that it marks out the areas of knowledge and emotion for special consideration, to which I will devote 50 chapters twenty-eight and twenty-nine. However, from a pastoral point of view, the threefold classification has considerable importance.

In some cases, the moral inadequacies of a Christian's life depend very greatly upon lack of adequate instruction. Ignorance not only extends to the kinds of acts which are sinful and the recognition of possible choices as pertaining to these kinds, but 55 also to the seriousness of sin, the reasons for avoiding it, and the ways to overcome it. To the extent that good catechesis can make a difference for the better in someone's life, his or her sinful defects can be attributed to ignorance.

In some cases, the moral inadequacies of a Christian's life depend very greatly upon lack of emotional integration. When emotions are not aroused, a person wishes to 60 do what is right, but emotions come into play against good resolutions, and the person gives in to temptation. In these cases, the traditional ascetical practices are needed to establish emotional control: the sinner must pray, practice self-denial, avoid avoidable occasions of sin, follow a healthful regimen to promote emotional balance, and put emotional energy to work constructively.

65 Ignorance and weakness are the common sources of sin in the lives of persons who are making a sincere effort to live the Christian life. These factors are not always so great as to eliminate sufficient reflection and full consent in grave matter; mortal sins of ignorance and/or weakness remain a possibility. But sinners with these difficulties are in a much less dangerous position than those who sin of set purpose.

70 Sin of set purpose (or resolute malice) arises in three ways. Most obviously, one who already has committed serious sin, decided not to repent, and has occasion to commit further sin (particularly along the same lines) can choose to do so without any particular defect of reflection or force of emotion. But also, a person who has sinned through ignorance and/or weakness can sin through set purpose by coming to the point of repentance, when the mind is clear and passions calm, and deciding to persist in sin. Finally, 75 a person without prior serious sin can deliberately and without special emotional pressure choose to do what is realized to be grave evil for the sake of attaining a particular objective. For example, a person can deliberately and after long and calm consideration take a false oath to avoid a great loss, knowing the act to be a serious sin.

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F. According to which modes of voluntariness is mortal sin possible?

In chapter nine, sections G through N, I distinguished diverse modes of voluntariness. The doing of a positive act by free choice is the central mode of voluntariness,

but there are numerous others. In which of these is mortal sin possible? In the following examples, I always assume sufficient reflection prior to the relevant choice.

Obviously, mortal sin is possible in the voluntariness with which one adopts a proposal, whether that proposal is adopted for its own sake or as a means to an ulterior end. For example, mortal sin is present in the adoption of the proposal to kill a person out of revenge or to kill a person one otherwise would have to support in order to avoid this burden.

Mortal sin also is possible in the voluntariness with which one accepts foreseen consequences which one ought not to accept. For example, to market a product which one foresees will imperil the life and health of many who use it could be a mortal sin, although one neither intends this peril as an end nor chooses it as a means. (Whether the sin is mortal or not--indeed, whether there is any sin at all--will depend upon whether and how great an injustice one is willing to do.)

The voluntary in cause, discussed in chapter nine, section K, can involve mortal sin. One who needlessly enters the occasion of mortal sin commits mortal sin; one who gives easily avoidable scandal which one foresees will likely lead to mortal sin commits mortal sin. For example, ordinarily people who produce and people who consume pornography commit mortal sins in this way, since the choice to do either ordinarily responds to no moral requirement and is likely to lead to mortal sins (at least of thought) in oneself or in others.

Executive willing is the acceptance without an additional choice of significant aspects of one's actions which come to attention only in the performance of them. Because there is no mortal sin without sufficient reflection and full consent, it seems to me that there will be no mortal sin in executive willing unless it occurs in the performance of an act already mortally sinful. For example, if a person venially sins by deliberately getting into a quarrel with another, and knowingly but without a further choice carries the quarrel to the point that the matter is grave (begins to inflict serious harm), the voluntariness involved in executive willing does not make the venial sin to which there has been full consent into a mortal one. However, executive willing in the carrying out of a mortally sinful choice can specify the sin, making it worse than it otherwise would be. For example, when Ma Fia, bent on mortally sinful revenge, is glad to carry it out when she learns it involves homicide, then her sin becomes murder, although her original choice was not specifically to commit murder and in the press of action she makes no new choice. A person who makes a mortally sinful choice to embark upon a certain way of life will be responsible for the gravely wrong acts done in the course of unrepentantly living that life, even though many of these acts will be done without further thought about their sinful character or a distinct choice to do each wrong act.

Omissions in which there is a choice can be mortal sins. For example, if one chooses to kill a baby by withholding food and fluids, then one is as guilty of homicide as one would be if one chose to kill it by drowning it in the bath. (One who chooses to kill by the purposeful omission also might be guilty of an additional sin of cruelty, to the extent that the suffering of the child is foreseen and accepted as a means of avoiding the legal implications for oneself of straightforward homicide.) Also, omissions incidental as foreseen consequences can involve mortal sin. For example, people who foresee that they are likely to miss Mass altogether if they do not get up for an early Mass commit a mortal sin if they stay up very late partying, knowing that they never will be able to get up for early Mass.

It seems to me that omissions which in no way depend upon a mortally sinful choice cannot be mortal sins, since mortal sin requires the full consent which is present only in choice. Thus, the parents who know they should do something about their child's health and who fail to make up their minds to do (or not to do) anything are morally guilty of neglect but the sin is not mortal, unless it is an outcome of some earlier, unrepented, mortally sinful choice. The person who is being tempted by lustful desire can be at fault for failing to resist the temptation, but there will be no mortal sin if there is not a choice--for example, an earlier mortally sinful choice which has led to the present temptation and failure of resistance, or a current choice to continue to entertain a temptation one knows one should set aside.[2]

Similarly, the modes of voluntariness discussed in chapter nine, section N, can involve venial sin but not mortal sin. One whose spontaneous willing is disorderly because of past mortal sins of commission or omission, one who does wrong with no present awareness because of past mortal sins which led to present obtuseness or error, and one who is ready to sin seriously but has not chosen to do so was guilty of mortal sin in the past or might be guilty of it in the future, but is not guilty of it now by these derivative modes of voluntariness. (Of course, one who has not repented a past mortal sin remains guilty of it now.)

In sum, the inadvertent faults and unknown sins which arise in voluntariness apart from choice cannot be mortal sins. Mortal sin is present only when either there is a choice to do or to omit doing something one is gravely obliged not to do or not to omit, or there is a choice with the acceptance of some foreseen consequence, action, or omission which one is gravely obliged to avoid.

However, one who chooses to commit a mortal sin and who (by executive willing) does something specifically more serious than what was chosen is guilty of what he or she knowingly and willingly does in carrying out the original mortally sinful choice. Similarly, one who makes a mortally sinful choice which leads to subsequent, gravely evil acts and/or omissions can be guilty of these grave sins even if sufficient reflection and/or an actual choice are not given in each and every instance of sin which makes up a sinful life.

80 G. Personal responsibility for social sins

Social bodies as such can act, as I explained in chapter eight, section N, and the modes of responsibility which govern individual action also govern social acts, as I explained in chapter twenty-three, section A. It follows that communities can commit sins.

For example, a nation can carry on an unjust war; a club can sponsor impure entertainments; a Christian family can fail to respect the religious practices of Jewish neighbors; a married couple can practice contraception. Social sins can be mortal sins of either commission or omission.

5 The question is: To what extent do members of groups participate personally in the sins of the groups to which they belong? Especially: To what extent can one be guilty of mortal sin by one's involvement in a group which acts in a seriously wrong way? The answer to this question has two parts. First, one must consider the responsibility of a group-member for his or her own involvement. Second, one must consider the respon-

10 sibility of a group member for the actions of other members of the group. In what follows, I always assume sufficient reflection prior to the relevant choice.

Societies do not engage in any positive act except by the personal acts of some of their members. Those who do personally what is necessary for a seriously immoral social act are responsible both for their personal wrongdoing and for the social wrongdoing

15 they further. For example, the leaders of a nation which carries on an unjust war are guilty both of abusing their office and of the injustices which make up the unjust war.

A society cannot gravely omit to do something unless some of its members could and ought to have acted in a manner which would have constituted a social act. Those who choose to omit acts required to fulfill social responsibilities or who choose to act in

20 ways which will make it impossible for their society to fulfill its moral responsibilities can be gravely responsible for their own omissions and for the social omissions to which they lead. For example, if a student in a boarding school is becoming deranged, other students can have a collective responsibility to acquaint the rector with the problem. If the situation is serious enough (always assuming sufficient reflection and the

25 relevant choice), those who could and should act and who fail to do so are gravely responsible not only for their personal failing but also for the irresponsibility of the student body to which they belong.

Frequently a society engages in an action which some of its members consider to be seriously immoral, or omits to do something which some of its members believe it has

30 a serious obligation to do. In such cases, the responsibility of members cannot extend beyond their power to affect the action of the society. For example, if one's country carries on an unjust war, one's responsibility cannot extend beyond one's power to stop the immoral action and to withhold personal participation in it.

In cases which require positive acts of members of groups to rectify the policies

35 and actions of the groups as such, the responsibility of individuals is *prima facie*. A conscientious person can be aware of innumerable wrongs done by societies to which he or she belongs; an active attempt to rectify every such wrong would exhaust all of one's time and talents. The norms for resolving conflicts of duties, discussed in chapter twenty-three, section J, come into play in such cases.

40 If one's whole life is already organized by upright commitments, then one who fulfills these commitments generally is free of responsibility for taking a rather nonactivist stance toward social wrongs. For example, a cloistered nun or the mother of a large family probably is not morally responsible to do the political work which might be necessary and useful to change unjust public policies toward underdeveloped nations:

45 However, a person whose life is not organized by personal vocational commitments and who spends much time and energy in self-gratifying amusements could have a grave responsibility to become politically active in the cause of justice.

In cases which require only an omission in order that a member not contribute to the immoral act of a group, the responsibility to omit still is *prima facie*, since the

50 relevant act can be done for some other good purpose. For example, a citizen furthers all the evil acts of society by paying taxes and could obstruct all of them by omitting to pay taxes. However, most societies also do many good acts, and citizens can be justified (and usually are morally obliged) to pay taxes to further these good purposes and to avoid imposing unfair burdens on those less able to evade taxes. One who believes

55 that a war is unjust and who is summoned to register for service has a *prima facie* obligation to refuse to do so; however, one could be justified in registering to avoid the legal penalties for failure to register.

It remains, however, that no member of a group is justified in doing things he or she can refuse to do if these things directly contribute to the wrongdoing of the group

60 and of themselves do nothing else. For example, a person who thinks a certain war is immoral has a grave obligation not to take an active part in acts of war. The fact that refusal could entail legal penalties such as imprisonment or death will not justify taking part in acts one judges to be wrong.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this section, members of groups not only have

65 responsibility for their own actions as members, but also some responsibility for the actions of other members of the group. This responsibility is twofold. First, one who sins gravely in doing or omitting anything in an official capacity is thereby responsible for the grave evil done by the group as such and by the share of other members in this grave evil (always assuming sufficient reflection and the relevant choice). Second,

70 there is the responsibility involved in cooperative action and helping others, discussed in chapter nine, section O. When one foresees that in consequence of what one does, others will be enabled and/or facilitated in doing evil, then one has a *prima facie* obligation to avoid the act with this consequence.

Still, one might be morally required to do the act and accept the consequence of

75 enabling or facilitating others' immoral acts. For example, one can be required to teach the truth about the moral character of certain forms of warfare, although one foresees that such truth will facilitate the military success of unjust enemies willing to use such means against one's own country. Again, a stationary engineer who must earn a living to support his family could have an obligation to fire the boilers which supply heat

80 to an abortion clinic, thus to facilitate the killing of the innocent.

H. How are mortal sins distinguished in species?

The question of the distinction of sins in species is the question: What sin was committed? The question of the distinction in number is the question: How many times was it committed? The theoretical discussion of these questions could be very complicated, and will not be undertaken here. However, these questions have a certain practical importance, since Catholics are obliged, as the Council of Trent definitively teaches, to confess mortal sins not only in general--"I have sinned mortally"--but in species and number (cf. DS 1679/899; 1707/917). Therefore, I will treat these questions from this practical point of view.[3]

The first point to notice is that the obligation to be specific and precise in confession is an affirmative one; as such it is limited by one's reasonable ability to fulfill it. Thus, a penitent is held only to examine his or her conscience with due care and to confess truthfully according to his or her personal ability. In exceptional circumstances, where a penitent cannot confess with precision because of a handicap, a language barrier, unavoidable lack of privacy, or simple lack of time (for example, in a disaster situation), then the requirement for specific confession does not hold; sacramental confession can be completed without it, although a person absolved under exceptional circumstances must make good the confession of sins if an opportunity presents itself at a subsequent confession.

Sins differ in species not by the difference in external behavior but by the difference in the intelligible aspects of the human act which are defective and so render the act evil. It follows that details of a sin which involve proper names, places, and times do not alter its species.

Generally, penitents will have been instructed to consider certain kinds of acts mortally sinful by being taught a set of specific moral norms. For example, a penitent will have learned that adultery and theft are mortal sins, and will confess in these terms. What is morally relevant about sins is the precise goods which are violated and the modes of responsibility by which they are violated. However, penitents do not think in these categories and cannot be expected to do so.

Penitents might need help in reaching a reasonably adequate specification of their confession. Confessors should provide such help, not only to fulfill the requirement for integral confession, but also to provide a reasonable basis for instructing and counseling the penitent. For example, sins of adultery differ specifically when both parties to the adultery are married and when only one is married. The appropriate advice to be given also might be somewhat different. Similarly, sins of theft differ in species according to the likely injury which will accrue to the person whose property is stolen; the confessor's guidance about the duty of restitution also requires more information than the generic indication that theft was committed.

In some cases, penitents avoid specificity due to embarrassment, evasiveness, inadequate instruction, or a combination of these. For example, an adolescent might confess a sin of impurity by saying he or she had "done something dirty." An unnecessarily detailed description of the physical act and its irrelevant concrete circumstances might be elicited by a question: Exactly what did you do? More to the point would be the question: Did you think it was seriously wrong? And if the answer is affirmative: What was it about what you did that you thought to be seriously wrong? If some specification is given, but it is suspected that additional factors (so-called "circumstances") might alter the moral evil of the sin, the penitent's awareness of such factors can be explored by asking: Can you think of any other reason why you should not have done what you did--why a good person would not have done what you did?

In many cases, help of this sort supplied with appropriate patience and gentleness can be very valuable. Perhaps the penitent has an erroneously strict conscience which needs to be corrected; such correction will not be given if the confession is permitted to stand at a level of vague generalities. Generally, no helpful guidance can be given about avoiding occasions of sin without an adequately specific confession. In any case, while the sincere contrition of the penitent and genuine purpose of amendment are far more important than the details of sins, the Church's clear and definitive teaching about the requirement for specific confession must not be ignored.

60 I. How are mortal sins distinguished in number?

From a theoretical point of view, moral acts are individuated by actuations of the will--by choices and by acts of willing implementing a prior choice. Thus, the act of machine-gunning fifty persons is one homicide if it carries out a single choice; the complex act of kidnapping might involve dozens of distinct morally evil acts if it requires dozens of distinct choices and acts of executive willing.

In practice, penitents generally count sins by counting external performances, whose individuation is by standards used by common sense. Such an estimation ordinarily can be taken as adequate to fulfill the requirement of integral confession. Moreover, in many cases a penitent can only guess at the frequency with which a certain sin was committed; an estimate of the instances per unit of time over a certain period is sufficient--for example, "about three times a year for the last ten years."

If a penitent seems to need help to make a judgment concerning the number of sins, the point which should be borne in mind is that quantity or extent is what is at stake here. Thus, a person involved in a prolonged adulterous relationship should confess the duration of the relationship as well as the approximate frequency of specific acts; a person involved in drug traffic should estimate the volume of business and the number of persons likely harmed; a person who neglected to help support aged parents should indicate the duration of the neglect and the portion of support which was omitted.

In the case of purely internal sins, penitents are likely to count the episodes or discontinuous periods of sin; strictly speaking, the number of sins is determined by the number of immoral choices and subsequent implementing will actuations. Generally, many such sins are committed in the course of any complex act, but if the complex proceeds to an external performance, the penitent ordinarily does not distinguish the numerous sins

involved. Nor need such distinctions be pressed; an honest estimate of the extent of sin according to common criteria is sufficient.

J. How important are sins of thought for Christian morality?

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The Ten Commandments forbid not only evil deeds but also evil desires (cf. Ex 20.17; Dt 5.21). St. Paul continues to list the commandment forbidding coveting when he states that love fulfills the entire law (cf. Rom 13.9). Although not outwardly harmful, evil desire offends the law of love of God and neighbor. In deepening the commandments in

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His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus emphasizes especially that sins of murder and adultery already are committed when one nurses anger and lustful thoughts (cf. Mt 5.22, 28). One might suppose that evil thoughts are to be avoided because they are the beginning of evil deeds; if the latter must be avoided, the former must be nipped in the bud. This insight is sound as far as it goes. But there is a more profound reason for emphasizing the morality of thoughts, namely, that morality essentially pertains to thought. Evil is much more in the heart than it is in any outward performance. Thus Jesus emphasizes that the distinction between good and evil cannot be drawn by legal categories of clean and unclean objects; rather, impurity emerges from the heart (cf. Mk 7.20-23; Mt 15.18-20).

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In commenting upon the Sermon on the Mount, St. Augustine clearly describes the psychology of sin which begins in the heart:

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For there are three stages in the commission of sin: suggestion, pleasure, consent. Suggestion comes about either through memory or a sense perception as when we see, hear, smell, taste, or touch anything. If to enjoy any of these sensations brings pleasure, the pleasure, if forbidden, must be checked. For example, when we see food at a time when we are fasting, an appetite rises in the palate: that comes about only through pleasure; but on this occasion we do not fall in with the pleasure; we check it under the sway of reason. Were we to yield consent to it, we would commit sin surely, a sin in the heart known to God, though actually it may remain unknown to man.[4]

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Augustine goes on to explain that if a habit has not been formed, the pleasure is less intense and more easily resisted. If one carries through and puts the consent in the heart into action, desire at first seems satisfied, but a habit is formed, and pleasure becomes more intense and harder to resist.[5] Thus, from Augustine's point of view, the sinful deed must be avoided more for the sake of preventing sins of thought than sins of thought must be avoided for the sake of preventing sinful deeds.

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In its definitive teaching concerning the Sacrament of Penance, the Council of Trent explicitly teaches that even completely hidden sins, which violate only the last two of the Ten Commandments, can be mortal and must be confessed; indeed, the Council teaches that these sins "sometimes wound the soul more grievously and are more dangerous than those sins which are committed openly" (DS 1680/899).

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The greatest moral significance of evil acts is not in the harm which is done outwardly in fact--although this is not without its significance--but in the privation which is introduced in the existential domain. This privation can be less obvious to experience but is just as real in sins of thought which issue in no wrongful deed as it is in gross, outward acts of immorality. The morally evil choice mutilates the sinner, and this mutilation of the self at once and of itself brings disharmony into the relationship of the sinner with other human persons and with God. For example, as soon as a man commits adultery in his heart, his relationship with his wife is damaged, and so is his relationship to Christ, in which the sacramental marital relationship participates.

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If someone attempts to avoid sinful deeds while freely committing sins of thought, he or she will inevitably take a wholly false, legalistic attitude toward morality. If one's heart is not pure, an attempt to avoid impure behavior will be pharisaic pretense. The outward conformity to moral standards can only be a consequence of a nonmoral motive, such as fear of punishment or shame; the moral standards certainly will seem to be arbitrary and irrational impositions. Inward love of goods, the attitude of consistent openness to integral fulfillment in Christ, will be lacking. Only this attitude can sweeten the yoke and lighten the burden of Christian life. Because the new law of Christ is the law of the Spirit, the morality of the heart is absolutely central.

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False and inaccurate teaching concerning sins of thought can lead to morbid self-consciousness, inappropriate anxiety and feelings of guilt, and an inversion of the priority from doing good to avoiding evil. However, to ignore or to condone sins of thought is to undermine the inwardness of Christian morality, to encourage pharisaism, and ultimately to pave the way for a total abandonment of Christian moral standards in the interest of "honesty"--that is, the reintegration of peoples' hearts and their outward behavior. The only solution is timely, careful, and true teaching about sins of thought. In this area there is much work to be done, because even prior to Vatican II instruction about sins of thought often was vague and confused, and in recent years it often has been omitted or has been erroneously lax.

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K. At what point does mortal sin begin in sins of thought?

In the mere occurrence and experience of emotional reactions as such there is no personal sin. For example, a person who is in some way injured feels angry; the feeling of anger which spontaneously arises as such involves no sin. A person who works in the prolife movement feels deep hatred toward abortionists; this feeling as such involves no sin. Similarly, a person notices an attractive individual of the opposite sex and feels sexual desire; the feeling of desire as such involves no sin.

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Spontaneous emotional reactions are a determined aspect of sentient nature; one cannot prevent them, and in themselves they no more have the character of human acts than do reflexes, such as being startled by a loud noise. Nor is the essential character of such spontaneous emotional reactions altered by their duration, intensity, and recurrence.

Psychological health and honesty also require that a person admit to himself or

herself the experience of such emotional actuations and know precisely who or what arouses them.

The psychologically normal play of emotion is not beyond criticism from the moral point of view to the extent that it not only lacks but even resists reasonable integration into the pattern of a good life. To the extent that this disorderliness is part of the psychologically normal human makeup, it is called "concupiscence," which is not in any true sense sin, but is a consequence of original sin (cf. DS 1515/792). To the extent that this disorderliness is consequent upon inappropriate experience and habituation in childhood and one's own personal sins, it has the character of a privation of moral integrity within the personality, and so it is sin, but not mortal sin unless there is sufficient reflection and actual, personal choice against conscience in a grave matter, or has been such a choice which has not yet been repented.

Possible courses of action--various proposals for possible choice--spontaneously and constantly come to mind. In the coming to mind as such of various proposals, no matter what they are, there can be no sin. Furthermore, without any will actuation, by the spontaneous work of the mind itself, one naturally begins to consider the good and bad aspects of any proposal which comes to mind. This spontaneous beginning of deliberation as such cannot involve sin. If one begins deliberating about a proposal which one morally ought not to adopt, one is in a condition of temptation.

Temptation as such is not sin; one can be drawn spontaneously into this condition and be compelled to make a choice between doing what is right and doing what is wrong to terminate it without committing sin. The proof of this thesis is that our Lord Himself "was tempted in every way that we are, yet never sinned" (Heb 4.15). One can be tempted without the slightest evil will, since temptations arise because of the natural and good functioning of practical reason itself, and because of the natural suitability and even intelligible goodness (or apparent goodness) which always are present in the possibilities which reason must exclude as inconsistent with integral human fulfillment.

One might suppose that there necessarily is something wrong if one thinks of a possibility, considers it morally wrong to adopt, yet proceeds to begin deliberating about adopting or not adopting it. However, while this sequence can involve sin, it need not presuppose or involve any sin whatsoever, since practical reason naturally and necessarily considers the case both for and against any possibility which comes to mind.

In many cases, incipient deliberation about a possibility which has come to mind and which initially is thought to be morally wrong to adopt leads to--and is absolutely necessary to achieve--insight into the morally right thing to do. For incipient deliberation can lead to conscientious reflection which will make clear that in reality the adoption of the possibility which at first seemed wrong is not so. For instance, the possibility of not keeping a promise, which initially seems wrong, can be found to be obligatory. Again, incipient deliberation often leads to the replacement of the possibility one should not adopt by a different possibility which is upright. For example, an unmarried young couple who begin to deliberate about fornicating can replace the unacceptable possibility with the upright plan to get married.

Deliberation can occur, desires and wishes can come to mind, and one can experience satisfaction in thinking about acts which it would be sinful to choose without any choice and so without the commission of a mortal sin. If one ought not to have such thoughts, desires, wishes, and experiences of satisfaction, but has them due to some prior sin, they are sinful, but in themselves only venially so, unless they are consequent upon some prior, unrepented mortal sin. If one could and ought to turn one's attention to other matters to suppress deliberation, desires, wishes, and experiences of satisfaction, one sins if one fails to do so, but only venially until there is a wrong choice.

For one who is not already in mortal sin which is developing into a sequence of further, specific sins, mortal sin of thought begins only when one is aware of a grave moral obligation not to do something (for example, not to continue a deliberation) or to do something (for example, to focus one's attention upon some other, innocent matter of interest) and one chooses to do what one ought not to do or not to do what one ought to do.[6]

To make a choice is a conscious act; one cannot make a choice without knowing one is making it. Moreover, one cannot make a choice and forget an instant later having made it. Whenever one is uncertain whether one has made a choice a moment before, one can be confident one has not made the choice.[7]

It is possible to make a choice and to forget having made it after some time--for instance, after several days. However, people who are constantly striving to avoid at least mortal sins and who regularly examine their consciences need not feel anxiety or guilt, nor need they carry on minute introspection about possible sins of thought, if they are not clearly aware when they next examine their consciences after an episode of temptation of having committed such a sin.

One must bear in mind that in many cases temptations and sins of thought occur after one has freely chosen to adopt and carry out a mortally sinful proposal. For example, a person who chooses without any good reason to go to a beach where there is nude swimming or a person who has decided to take revenge on someone might experience various subsequent temptations and sins of thought. Even if these do not proceed from additional, distinct choices, they can share in the character of mortal sin to the extent that they unfold in subsequent actuations of the will the mortally sinful choice consequent upon which they occur.

L. What are the most common kinds of sins of thought?

The primary case of a sin of thought is a sinful choice. Even if the choice is to say or do something, the sin already is present in the choice itself. Hence, if one is prevented from carrying out the deed or changes one's mind before doing so, one has committed a sin of thought. A sinful choice not carried out is less evil than one carried out, since there are fewer moral and/or nonmoral evil consequences.

Sometimes a sinful choice is made subject to a contingent condition: I will do x

if I have the chance, if it does not seem too risky, and so on. Under any such condition, the sin is committed whether the condition is fulfilled and the choice carried out or not.

5 The wish to do something or to have done something evil is itself evil; hence, the deliberate desire to commit a mortal sin which one cannot commit or the wish one had committed a mortal sin which one no longer can commit is grave matter. One who experiences such wishes ought to choose to set them aside. If one reflects sufficiently and chooses not to set aside such wishes, one's persistence in them is a mortal sin.

10 However, if one experiences desires contrary to one's firm choice to set them aside, such experiences are emotion, not evil will. Moreover, to know as a matter of fact that one would like to commit certain sins or that one feels sadness about having foregone the pleasure of certain sins is not to desire deliberately to commit sin. Ordinarily, a person who thinks, "If x were not a sin, then I would do x," does not will to commit sin, but rather is unwilling to do so.

15 To consider with satisfaction and approval the doing of something evil, whether by oneself or by someone else, is itself evil; hence, deliberate consideration with satisfaction or approval of an actual or possible doing of a mortal sin is itself grave matter. One who is aware of taking satisfaction in or approving of sin ought to choose not to do so and to set aside this sinful consideration. If one reflects sufficiently and chooses not to set aside such a consideration, one's continuing satisfaction or approval is a mortal sin.

20 However, one can enjoy knowing evil without taking satisfaction in the evil; one also can take satisfaction in the skill with which evil is done without approving the evil. For example, one can enjoy a story about the commission of a robbery and be delighted with the skill of the robber without taking satisfaction in or approving the sin. One also can be glad about and approve of the residual good aspects of an evil act without approving of the evil. For instance, one can be pleased by the vigor of a woman who murders her brutal and unfaithful husband, and can be happy about the deterrent effect of this act on similar men, without taking satisfaction in homicide. One also can legitimately consider with satisfaction and approval an act good at the time to which it is referred in consideration, although it would be wrong to do at the time considered. For example, an engaged person can blamelessly look forward with approval to engaging in sexual intercourse in marriage, and a widow can blamelessly look back with satisfaction upon the love-making in which she engaged with her husband.

35 It does not follow that people can rightly choose to take emotional satisfaction in thinking about doing things under conditions in which they would be right, when these things may not now be done without sin, and when there is no real necessity to think about them. One usually should judge that to engage in such thinking is gravely wrong, because it will lead to temptations to do something wrong; to choose to engage in it despite such a judgment is a mortal sin.

40 Similarly, if one considers acts which one would not oneself be tempted to choose, the satisfaction in the knowledge or in good aspects of the subject matter can be distinguished readily enough from satisfaction in or approval of the evil as such. Thus, most people can read stories of robbery written from the point of view of the criminal without adopting a frame of mind which is wrong.

45 However, if one considers immoral acts which one would oneself be tempted to choose, if ever they seemed to be real possibilities, then satisfaction in the knowledge or in good aspects of the subject matter cannot easily be distinguished from satisfaction in or approval of the evil as such. One who thinks that a state of mind could be wrong yet chooses to enter or persist in it is willing to do what is wrong. Thus, most people cannot read stories of illicit sexual activities without adopting a frame of mind which is wrong. In general, one must seek other subject matters for entertainment and amusement.

55 Notes to chapter twenty-six

1. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae, 1-2, qu. 89, art. 2; St. Augustine, Expositions on the Psalms, 81 (80), 19-20. The fire by which the wood, hay, and straw are consumed is identified by the tradition with the fire of purgatory (cf. JBC 51.23).
- 60 2. St. Thomas Aquinas, op. cit., qu. 71, art. 5, teaches that there can be sinful omissions without any positive act essentially involved, even a merely interior act, but he also teaches that there must be some act as cause or occasion. I take this position to mean that the omission which occurs without an essentially related choice cannot be a mortal sin if the choice which is its cause or occasion is not a mortal sin. This view could be challenged; the matter deserves further research. However, it seems to me that the consensus of the approved authors in modern times which requires full consent for mortal sin cannot be reconciled with a position that there can be mortal sin in modes of voluntariness which involve no choice if this voluntariness is not somehow conditioned upon a mortally sinful choice. One might propose a counterexample: Suppose a person in authority realized that he or she had a grave obligation to act at once to inhibit the wrongdoing of a subordinate, but the authority failed to act, not by choice, but simply by continuing to deliberate until the time for action passed in the vain and unreasonable hope of finding some way of escaping the unpleasant duty. Would not such a person be guilty of grave sin even though he or she never made a choice in grave matter in violation of clear conscience? (Perhaps many serious, deliberate venial sins paved the way to the present dereliction of duty.) It seems to me that in such an instance one of three things will be the case: 1) perhaps the capacity to choose is abnormally inhibited--for example, by depression or exhaustion or fear; 2) perhaps the gravity and urgency of the matter is not fully grasped, or 3) perhaps the authority's disposition is conditioned by previous immoral and unrepented acts, such as irresponsible commitments to other interests. In any of these cases, the defect can be consequent upon a condition incurred by grave sin; if and insofar as it is, the inability to choose, the lack of clear judgment, or the distraction of other matters will not excuse from grave responsibility for the present omission. However, if there is no prior, mortally sinful

choice persisting in a present state of guilt, I do not see how a present omission without choice can initiate mortal sin. One might wonder, as an incidental question, how someone who is uprightly disposed to a good and committed to fulfilling the duties of a responsible office could possibly have sufficient reflection about a grave duty requiring a possible action right now, yet fail to make any choice whatever in the matter, not even a choice to continue to deliberate when it is clear that one ought instead to proceed at once to the required act. Personally, I doubt this possibility, unless some non-voluntary factor (such as depression) which inhibits choice is assumed; if such a factor is assumed, then the full capacity of choice required for grave moral responsibility also will be lacking.

3. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I summarize relevant aspects of the common teaching of the classical theologians. If some of these points are not evident upon reflection or established from other sources, they nevertheless have what weight the consensus of theological opinion had in these matters to the extent that it was authorized by the bishops for the formation of confessors, with the expectation that it would be used in the exercise of the power of the keys.

4. St. Augustine, The Lord's Sermon on the Mount, trans. John J. Jepson, S.S. (New York, Ramsey: Newman Press, 1948), p. 43.

5. Ibid., p. 44.

6. St. Thomas Aquinas, op. cit., qu. 74, art. 8, expressly holds with respect to consent to lingering delight (delectatio morosa) that the mortal sin is in a choice: "When one thinks about fornication and delights in the activity, this occurs because his affections are bent to the act of fornication itself. When one consents to this type of delight it is equivalent to consent to affection for fornication. Nobody delights in a thing unless it suits his desire. If one deliberately chooses (ex deliberatione eligat) to fix his desire on something that is gravely sinful, it is a mortal sin."

7. Of course, unsophisticated persons and unreflective ones often have no clear understanding of what choices are, and cannot recognize their own choices in reflex awareness when and after they make them. Therefore, care is needed not to provide such persons with false reassurance. It would mislead such persons to tell them: Unless you know you have made a choice, you have not sinned. They can sin by making immoral choices without having reflex awareness that these sinful acts are centered in entities called "choices."