

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: FULL CONSENT AND SIN OF WEAKNESS

A. Introductory considerations

5 Having explored some of the subtleties of grave matter in chapter twenty-seven and
of sufficient reflection in chapter twenty-eight, I now take up the third condition for
mortal sin: full consent. The problem which is most interesting in relation to this con-
dition is sin of weakness. For Catholics who are trying to live up to their faith, prob-
ably most temptations to commit serious sin are of this sort. Therefore, the topic is
10 of great pastoral importance. Moreover, as I will explain toward the end of the chapter,
if sin of this sort is not overcome, Christian life will become bogged down. Hence, an
effective strategy for dealing with this sort of sin is most important.

Because "full consent" refers to a definite choice, one cannot think clearly about
problems of sin of weakness, which are related to full consent, without keeping in mind
15 exactly what a choice is. Thus a review of chapter eight, sections G through I, will be
helpful as a basis for understanding the present chapter.

There are two problems somewhat similar to sin of weakness which, nevertheless,
are essentially different from it. They are the problems of diminished guilt based on
circumstances and of nonvoluntariness due to coercion. These can be understood by the
20 following brief explanation.

First, some kinds of acts are much less serious than others, even though still
grave matter, as I explained in chapter twenty-six, section B. For example, one woman
becomes a prostitute to satisfy her expensive tastes; she uses her income for self-
indulgence. Another woman becomes a prostitute to provide better opportunities for her
25 aged parents and illegitimate child; she works only two nights a week, to spend most of
her time and energy caring for her family. The second woman's sin is not a sin of weak-
ness; strong emotion does not qualify the choice by which she commits herself to this way
of life. Classical moral theology would say that in the second case circumstances dimin-
ish guilt. Since on my account of human action, the action includes all of the intelli-
30 gible factors which condition choice, I would simply hold that the two sins are different
in kind. In any case, the life of the second woman (other things being equal) is far less
sinful than that of the first.

Second, sometimes behavior is nonvoluntary due to coercion. For example, Titus is
physically dragged to an altar of pagan sacrifice, his fist held closed by a stronger
35 person, then forced open to drop a bit of incense on the votive fire. Or Maximus is
given a hypnotic drug, told to do the same thing, and does it without any choice at all.
Or Paulus is brought to the temple by force; he has every intention to resist, but when
his throat is pricked with a knife, he winces and opens his hand--in this case knowing
40 what he is doing, acting by spontaneous will, yet still without any choice at all. If
there is no choice, then there is no morally significant human act (except insofar as
the behavior or omission might be consequent upon some prior choice), and so there is no
sin. Hence in all these cases of coercion--and one can think of many other examples,
perhaps including some instances of brain washing--one is not dealing with sin, and so
there is no question of sin of weakness.

45 Cases of the two preceding types border on and are easily confused with sins of
weakness. Someone might adopt a contraceptive way of life within a context which makes
the act morally different in kind and less grave than someone else's adoption of that
same pattern of activity; here is a case of two kinds of acts, one less serious than the
other. But again, someone who in general does not accept the practice of contraception
50 might on occasion, moved by strong desire and strong fear, choose to engage in coitus
interruptus; here is a case of sin of weakness. Similarly, in respect to coercion,
Paulus acts by spontaneous willing without any choice at all. Someone else might give
in, make a choice to offer worship to the idol, but only because of great fear. Paulus
commits no sin; the one who chooses out of terror commits a sin of weakness.

55 Thus, in the remainder of this chapter I am concerned with cases in which there
are acts done through definite choices. In such cases there is full consent. But how
full is it, if the sinner chooses to sin only after emotions become abnormally aroused?
If weakness mitigates guilt, can it mitigate guilt to the point that a sin which other-
wise would be mortal no longer is such?

60 B. How do the will and emotions affect one another?

The relationship between the will and emotion does not appear to be a direct one.
One can feel all sorts of emotion, yet will contrary to it, provided that one wills at
65 all. The experience of resistance to temptation, on the one hand, and the experience of
free choice when one gives in to temptation, on the other, show that emotion does not
directly affect the will. Similarly, one can wish to feel certain emotions and not wish
to feel others, yet one cannot alter one's feelings by choice. Emotional love cannot be
elicited on order, nor can sadness be banished by choice.

70 Will can shape emotions indirectly. One can choose what to think, what to imagine,
and what to do. By such choices, one can alter one's emotional actuations. Thus, one
who wishes to love God with one's whole heart, including one's emotions, can meditate up-
on His goodness, and especially upon those evidences of it which one finds sensibly mov-
ing. One who wishes to banish sadness can think of happy things and, especially, can
75 engage in some activity which is not too difficult and is genuinely fulfilling to the
whole person--in other words, can do the most enjoyable thing one can think of which also
is genuinely worthwhile and in all respects good to do.

Emotions also can affect will by an indirect route. If a present experience, a
memory, or a phantasy arouses emotion, one's attention tends to be drawn to it. If the
80 emotion is strong, one's attention tends to be focused or fixed; the normal wandering of
attention stops. Once attention is fixed, one thinks about what one is attending to.
If emotion leads one to think about and find some intelligible good in a possible course
of action in which the emotion would be satisfied, one will spontaneously will and carry
out that course of action unless some reason occurs to one for not doing so. Thus,

emotion initiates the process which leads to action by way of spontaneous willing. The case of Paulus who acts in terror without choice is an example. Emotion so focuses attention that he can think only of the good to be gained and evil to be avoided by acting; he no longer can consider any alternative, and so choice does not occur.

5 In many cases, with acts which are naturally suitable, emotion need not be strong to focus attention and lead to intelligent, appropriate acts done by spontaneous willing. For instance, one is thirsty, passes a drinking fountain, and stops to drink; the act is done by spontaneous willing, initiated by a minimal level of desire, because nothing at any point arises to stop the smooth flow of actuations. In many cases, however, the incipient emotion cannot so easily gain attention and generate action because other factors set up opposition and stop the flow of action. The hesitation which leads to deliberation and is terminated in choice always involves some blockage to spontaneity.

However, even in cases in which one acts by choice, emotion influences the will in two ways, both by its affect upon one's attention.

15 First, emotion causes one to attend to certain possible courses of action and to ignore others. One chooses only among possibilities which seem interesting and really possible for oneself; to gain the status of such a possibility, there must be some emotional basis, immediate or more remote. Someone who had no sympathy for certain others would not directly think of helping them; someone who did not think that helping others is intelligibly related to some other good with emotional resonances (for example, saving one's own soul) would not find a rational basis on which indirectly to think of doing works of mercy.

20 Second, the force of a strong emotion can continue to compel one to attend to a certain possible course of action even when one has chosen not to adopt it. One chooses to skip lunch, but one's desire to eat continues to recall to one's mind the possibility of breaking off work and setting aside one's resolution to fast. This power of emotion to influence will by compelling it to reconsider and reject more than once an unacceptable possibility explains the temptation to commit a sin of weakness.

25 Notice that strong emotions not only can recall one's attention to a possibility but also can distract one from certain intelligible aspects of it and its alternative which were previously considered. Thus, someone who decided to skip lunch for several different reasons--to complete more work by saving time, to cut down on calories, and as an act of penance--might be distracted by hunger and images of a pleasant lunch to the point that only the intention to do penance remains in view, while the other considerations drop from reflection. If one consents to the temptation, then, one is not making the same choice one would have made at first; one is not precisely setting aside one's original resolution, since the choice eventually made only considers part of it. Still, one's choice to go to lunch is incompatible with one's original resolution.

40 C. Some further clarifications of emotion and morality

In the light of the preceding, one can see that underlying every choice is some emotion. Very often one is not especially conscious of emotions; one becomes aware of them only when they are unusual enough in strength or some other respect to call attention to themselves by their physiological consequences. The ordinary desire to eat or drink is not noticed as an emotion; the yearning of a person dying of hunger and thirst is noticed. The emotional satisfaction of walking across campus is not usually noticed; the joy with which one walks on a beautiful day in spring is noticed.

45 Similarly, every sinful choice involves emotion. One would not choose to determine oneself otherwise than in a fully reasonable way were it not that emotions dispose one to act otherwise. Each mode of responsibility excludes certain emotions from being accepted as nonrational principles of self-determination. It does not follow that every sin is a sin of weakness. If one considers possibilities with an upright conscience and decides to do what is right, one normally has little or no difficulty directing one's attention to carrying out one's good decision and to other acts which are appropriate. Sin of weakness becomes possible only when the strength of emotion is such that one's normal will to act reasonably is rebelliously resisted by emotion.

50 The situation is analogous to that in a deliberative assembly. Members are entitled to propose anything they please, within the rules of procedure. Many of these proposals are voted down, because they would not be in the common interest. Usually, the negative vote is accepted and the proposal disposed of. But at times the desire of some to have their own way is so great that they keep bringing up a rejected proposal, even to insist that it be accepted lest the work of the assembly be bogged down and its harmony disrupted. Under these conditions, there is a tendency to give in for the sake of peace. Similarly, the temptation to commit a sin of weakness arises when emotions are strong and unruly enough to resist a reasonable decision, to distract attention from other matters, and to keep demanding reconsideration for a rejected proposal.

65 In the fallen human condition, there is hardly any member of any assembly who is altogether impartial, who is not somewhat unreasonable and disruptive. The same thing is true of the emotions of fallen humankind. As I explained in chapter ten, section J, the whole human emotional complex is distorted by the fear of death which is consequent upon original sin. The ordinary human condition is somewhat abnormal and perverse. This state of affairs is what is called "concupiscence," which refers to a residual effect of original sin (cf. DS 1515/792). Consequently, very often emotions are not easy to integrate, and one's experiences in one's body's members a law at odds with the law of one's mind (cf. Rom 7.23). Hence, emotional resistance to reasonable decisions cannot be accepted as humanly normal and healthy, even though in our actual condition it is virtually universal and not pathological.

70 Contemporary psychologies, which for the most part are based upon a denial of free choice, tend to reduce the whole moral problem to the dimensions of emotional health and sickness, maturity and immaturity. However, sickness and immaturity can be distinguished from sinful weakness and malice. Those who are emotionally sick or immature experience emotions which are not well integrated even at the level of sentient nature. For example, the neurotic has emotions which are out of proportion to the situation which arouses

them, and the smooth flow of behavior as a whole tends to be disrupted. The adolescent likewise experiences emotional extremes which cause distress and which cannot easily be explained by the actual situation and the content of consciousness. Thus the conscious and the unconscious minds are not functioning harmoniously in cases of emotional sickness and immaturity.

In cases of sinful weakness and malice, by contrast, the emotions can be perfectly well proportioned to the situation which arouses them; they can integrate a smooth pattern of behavior, and so they can be explained by the actual situation and content of consciousness. One need not assume any hidden condition creating disharmony between the conscious and unconscious minds; the disharmony primarily is within consciousness itself, between the law of one's members and the law of one's mind--that is, between the emotionally appealing possibility which promises sentient satisfaction and the freely eligible possibility which reason proposes as intelligibly good.

Obviously, in actual cases both types of disorder and disharmony often are present in some proportion. This fact complicates matters and helps to render plausible the deterministic explaining away of human moral responsibility. However, one must reject this rationalization, for it is absolutely at odds both with reason and with faith, as I showed in chapter eight, sections A through E. Immoral acts, including sins of weakness, are not a product of emotional immaturity and/or neurosis; just to the extent that they are human acts done by free choice, immoral acts are a product of nothing other than one's self freely choosing to be less than one could and ought to be.

D. What are the main types of sin of weakness?

The strong emotions which give rise to sins of weakness can be reduced to four: desire (often also called "love" or "sympathy"), fear ("anxiety"), sadness ("depression" or "despair"), and anger. The types of sins of weakness can be reduced to the following four.

First, sometimes a person knows that a choice and action are required morally, undertakes to deliberate with the intention of reaching a decision, but is inhibited by strong emotions of sadness or fear from carrying out the resolution to decide and/or to act. In this type of case, the sin is one of omission; one is failing to make and/or to carry out a choice one knows one has a moral obligation to make and to carry out. Insofar as the weakness inhibits one from choosing, rather than leads one to make some definite choice against conscience, the conditions for mortal sin are not fulfilled. One does not consent fully in grave matter. Hence, sins of weakness of this sort are venial.

Probably for this reason, the classical treatises on moral theology generally ignored them entirely. However, they are not insignificant. If the obligation which is not being satisfied is a grave one, a person unable to act because of emotional pressures has a responsibility to try to change the situation in ways which will make it possible to reduce and/or overcome the inhibiting emotions. For example, one might have an obligation to seek additional strength by natural or supernatural means: rest, the help of friends, medical advice, prayer, the reception of the sacraments, and so forth.

Second, sometimes emotion presses one to act or refrain from acting in accord with one's prior, upright choice and eventually inhibits reflection to the point that one no longer attends to the seriousness of the matter. This type of sin of weakness is closely related to the type of case described in section A, above, in which one acts spontaneously without choice because emotion prevents one from considering any alternative to carrying out a single possible line of action. The difference is that in the present type of case, one does choose; one gives in to the emotion, but not until one's reflection has ceased to be sufficient for mortal sin--in other words, not until one has lost sight of the serious immorality of what one is about to do.

Sins of weakness of this kind can occur under the emotional pressure of fear, anger, desire, or sadness. One can understand the psychology if one considers examples in which someone chooses not to do an immoral act, with both moral motives (it is against conscience) and nonmoral motives for the choice. Perhaps the nonmoral motives have been purposely magnified in one's thinking to reinforce one's good purpose. However, as emotion mounts, attention is drawn to more of the appealing aspects of what one ought not to do and to fewer of the motives against it. At some point, the moral objection to the action can be lost sight of to such an extent that one no longer is aware of the act as seriously wrong. One then chooses to do it, setting aside nonmoral motives. Sufficient reflection and full consent are not present together; hence, sins of weakness of this sort also are venial.

For example, a fireman on duty in a dangerous situation can be tempted to abandon his responsibilities and flee for safety, and at first resist this temptation partly by the thought that it would be dereliction of duty to give in to it and partly by the thought that his comrades would look down on him if he did. As fear rises, a point can come when he forgets duty and chooses to flee, willing to accept shame rather than risk life. Again, a depressed person can resist suicide partly out of natural repugnance and partly out of moral responsibility, and only choose suicide over natural repugnance when depression blocks moral considerations from attention. Again, a person who is being enraged can resist striking back due both to fear of the consequences and to an upright refusal to act vindictively, but choose revenge when anger blinds conscience: "I do not care if it hurts me worse than it does her; I'm going to get even with her for this!" Similarly, an adolescent girl can resist a temptation to surrender her virginity, her conscience and other considerations (including superego repugnance) working together; however, her rather fragile awareness of the immorality of fornication can be entirely lost to sight at some point, and she can choose to overcome her maidenly inhibitions and throw aside other considerations, such as fear of pregnancy.

The classical treatises on moral theology did not clearly describe sins of weakness of this sort. Although they are not mortal sins in themselves, a person who foresees the likelihood of being under such emotional pressure would have a grave obligation to try to prepare in advance or to avoid the situation in which emotion might become overwhelming in this way.

Third, sometimes strong emotion presses one to act or refrain from acting contrary to one's prior, good moral disposition and resolution, one is in an unusual situation and perhaps without previous relevant experience, and one chooses freely to do what is wrong, knowing it to be so. These are cases of scattered or isolated sins of weakness which can occur in all sorts of matters and under the impact of all the forms of emotional pressure.

For example, a student who previously has been honest is panicked by the prospect of a difficult examination, has an opportunity to purchase in advance a copy someone has purloined, and decides to do it, while still considering the act gravely wrong. Again, a girl whose attitudes are in favor of life finds herself pregnant, is quite depressed, and chooses to have an abortion to solve her problem. Again, a usually mild person is aroused to anger, realizes the evil of taking revenge, but freely chooses to do it. Again, a usually faithful husband is away from home and lonely, is offered an opportunity to commit adultery easily with a very attractive woman, and chooses to do it.

I think that the discussion of sins of weakness in the classical moral theologians, including St. Thomas Aquinas, best fits this type. Strong emotion mitigates guilt but does not eliminate it. With all the conditions for mortal sin fulfilled, I see no reason to suppose that sins of weakness of this sort should not be considered mortal. The significance of such sins in the life of the person who commits them often can be considerable, for they constitute a crisis. If subsequent self-examination and choice leads to sincere repentance, such sinners through weakness can proceed with greater moral seriousness to fulfill the responsibilities of Christian life. If the sinner evades conscience, rationalizes, and chooses to delay repentance, then such sinners through weakness can proceed with moral abandon in a sinful way of life.

The fourth type of sin of weakness is like the third in that a choice is made in grave matter with sufficient reflection. However, there is a difference. The sinner is not in an unusual situation and is not inexperienced. Rather, the act is semi-compulsive. The act is part of a pattern of temptation, struggle, sin, repentance, and renewed temptation. This fourth type of sin of weakness deserves more extensive consideration.

E. What are the conditions which define the semi-compulsive sin of weakness?

First, the semi-compulsive sinner through weakness confronts the same sort of temptation repeatedly. Most of the time, he or she desires to avoid committing the sin. The reality of this will not to sin is evidenced by some real effort. For example, the sinner goes to Confession, prays, tries to avoid the occasions of sin, and in general follows advice given to prevent the temptation from arising.

This first condition is very important. The sin will not be one of weakness if the person decides, when in a normal state of mind, to abandon further efforts to resist the temptation, and henceforth to do the act whenever the inclination arises and other considerations (such as opportunity and convenience) do not exclude doing it.

Second, when the semi-compulsive sinner through weakness experiences temptation, despite the inclination to sin, opportunity, and convenience, he or she resists, realizing that the matter is grave and that consent ought not to be given. A choice is made not to commit the sin; an effort is made to distract attention by thinking about something else, engaging in a suitable activity, praying, and so on. Yet emotion is strong enough to frustrate these efforts, and attention is drawn back to the sinful possibility. This possibility becomes fascinating; the temptation becomes obsessive.

The second condition not only makes clear that the sin will be one of weakness, but that it will not be a sin of the third type described in section D, above. The sinner of the third type is not so experienced in struggling with passion and giving in to it. The semi-compulsive sinner has reached a kind of wavering equilibrium between a good will and a sinful one; most of the time good will rejects the sin; when passion becomes strong bad will surrenders to it. The transition from good will to surrender must tip from one state to the other, and since they are near equilibrium the transition is not sudden, but more or less prolonged. Even when the semi-compulsive sinner falls into a routine which has virtual clock-like regularity, which greatly discourages resistance, the surrender is unwanted and initially resisted.

Third, the semi-compulsive sinner through weakness does not lose sight of the grave immorality of the possible act, as does the second type of sinner described in section D, above. However, the possibilities proposed for choice do tend to become impoverished of much of their significance, until they might be formulated as follows: Either I can continue to struggle on (seemingly indefinitely, with no definitive victory over temptation in sight) or I can surrender to the temptation, choose to do what is evil now, but soon repent and regain my more normal state of mind. At this point, the semi-compulsive sinner gives in to the temptation. The choice to do the evil act which will satiate and still desire is made, but with a provision that the subsequent state is to be based on repentance, not on sin.

This third condition is characteristic of semi-compulsive sin. The sinner, as it were, regretfully takes a short break from virtue, from the will to resist, and from God. "I'll be back soon, Lord." When the choice to sin is made, the alternative seems very bleak--namely, even more prolonged temptation. In many cases, especially when the sin is one in the sexual domain, the sinner also is discouraged by the suspicion that a sin of thought already has been committed. Thus, although the free choice is self-determination to something understood to be morally seriously wrong, the semi-compulsive sinner also at the same time truly chooses to make a contrary choice soon afterwards, and perhaps chooses to sin now as much to escape the torment of temptation as to enjoy the satisfaction of the sinful act.

It is important to recognize that semi-compulsive sins of weakness, as defined by the preceding three conditions, still admit of considerable variety. They are mainly sins of desire, although one might think of examples of sins motivated by other emotions which fit the definition. The desires which lead to these sins are primarily sexual, but can include desires for food, for alcohol, and for other addictive drugs.

In chapter twenty-eight, section F, I discussed mitigating factors in moral

consciousness. Many such factors can be at work in the case of the semi-compulsive sinner through weakness. For example, the adolescent boy may only slightly grasp the moral foundation of his own act of faith, and may perceive the mortal sin of masturbation almost entirely in terms of a risk of punishment and an obligation to go to Confession; his conscience with respect to the guilt involved might largely consist in superego guilt and self-disgust for failure to keep the rules of the Church. Moreover, his surrender to temptation might be followed almost instantly by the execution of the choice and remorse. By contrast, a mature person striving to overcome alcoholism might understand very well the intrinsic evil of self-destructive drinking and have a good insight into its sinfulness. His or her surrender to temptation might require intermediate thought and action--for example, a trip to a liquor store--and might lead to a more or less extended period of insobriety.

Moreover, some semi-compulsive sins of weakness are graver in matter than others. The self-destructiveness (and damage likely to other people) in alcoholism or other drug addiction is usually greater and more seriousness than the harm involved in semi-compulsive overeating, even when this act is serious enough to be accepted as grave matter. The sexual sin which involves an element of adultery is more serious, other things being equal, than one that does not. Jack the Ripper perhaps was a semi-compulsive sinner; obviously, when perverted urges cannot be satisfied without violence to someone, the matter, other things equal, is more grave.

Semi-compulsive sins of weakness often are said to be "habits of sin." To the extent that this expression suggests regularity in pattern, it is correct. However, it can be misleading in two ways. First, classical theology would have considered a sin habitual only if one were resigned to it and committed it regularly without resisting the temptation. One who is an habitual sinner in this sense is in much worse moral and spiritual condition than is the semi-compulsive sinner, other things being equal. Second, the modern, psychological notion of habit primarily applies to acts done without a definite choice in each instance. The semi-compulsive sinner does make a choice. Therefore, much of the psychology of habit is irrelevant to his or her situation.

F. General considerations on the mitigation of guilt in sins of weakness

Obviously, since sins of weakness are of very diverse sorts, one cannot easily make final statements about the guilt which could be involved in all of them. In the present section, I consider the problem in general and in regard to the types of sins of weakness other than the semi-compulsive type. In the next and subsequent sections, I will consider the semi-compulsive type of sin of weakness with some care.

As I said in section D, above, the first two types of sins of weakness described there do not meet the conditions for mortal sin. Hence, the following discussion is concerned only with the third and fourth types, which do involve grave matter, sufficient reflection, and a definite choice.

Scripture indicates that passion which leads to a sin one otherwise would not or might not commit does lessen guilt. God's mercy is great because He knows human frailty (cf. Ps 78.39, 103.11-18). Peter's denial of Jesus is a sin of weakness, which Jesus readily forgives (cf. Mk 14.27-31, 66-72; Lk 22.31-32; Jn 18.15-18, 25-27; 21.15-17).

Scripture also suggests that passion does not eliminate guilt, nor even always make the guilt of what would otherwise be a mortal sin venial. David's sin clearly is one of weakness, of the third type; by his adultery and homicide, David merited death, for he had utterly spurned the Lord (cf. 2 Sm 12.13-14). St. Paul clearly regards sins of the flesh--at least, some of them--as sins of weakness of the third or fourth types (cf. Rom 7.14-25); nevertheless, those who do the works of the flesh, which lusts against the spirit, will not inherit the kingdom of God (cf. Gal 5.16-21).

The magisterium never has dealt in general with the question of the moral responsibility which remains when guilt is diminished by weakness. Condemned propositions suggest that one cannot suppose that no sin of weakness would be mortal (cf. DS 2151/1202; 2241-2253/1261-1273).

St. Thomas does treat clearly the questions whether sins of weakness, committed because of strong emotion, are diminished in guilt, and also whether they are still mortal sins. He holds that they are diminished in guilt, yet still can be mortal. In support of the view that they still can be mortal, Thomas refers to St. Paul: "When we were in the flesh, the sinful passions roused by the law worked in our members and we bore fruit for death" (Rom 7.5). Thomas also points out that crimes such as adultery and homicide often are done out of passion, and clearly are mortal sins.

Thomas considers cases in which strong emotion excludes deliberation and choice; he sets these cases aside. Where deliberation remains possible, one can set aside or block the emotional cause of temptation; what one pays attention to is within one's own power. Thus, Thomas takes for granted that while moral responsibility remains, if the matter is grave, the sin remains mortal. The only exception he allows in the case of sins of weakness is when strong emotion so controls reason that one no longer has power to resist; one is then temporarily insane.[1]

In general, the classical tradition of modern moral theology seems to have followed St. Thomas quite closely in this matter, for the standard position is that strong emotion can mitigate guilt, but as long as there is a definite choice with sufficient reflection in grave matter, the sin is assumed to remain mortal.

It seems clear that it certainly is false to say that no sin of weakness is mortal. At least many such sins of the third type surely are mortal.

G. Are all sins of weakness which meet the usual conditions mortal sins?

Here I take for granted that a person who gives up the struggle against a sin of weakness of the fourth type--for example, one who reluctantly but more or less permanently adopts an alternative style of sexual life, which is excluded by the Church's constant and very firm teaching as grave matter--is in mortal sin. Such a person is no longer a sinner through weakness; the will to do what is morally excluded now is constant.

I also take for granted that a person who does not meet minimally what is adequate for sufficient reflection, as explained in chapter twenty-eight, section E, or who does not really make a free choice in grave matter with the required reflection, does not commit a mortal sin. Perhaps a good many people who appear to be sinners through weakness of the fourth type either lack sufficient maturity of conscience to grasp in a minimally adequate way the grave evil of what they choose, or really do act compulsively without a free choice, or choose to do what they still realize to be evil in some sense but no longer clearly realize to be contrary to moral truth.

A likely example of the last situation is adolescent masturbation, particularly in the early years of adolescence, by children who otherwise strive to live a Christian life and who follow whatever advice they are given to resist this temptation, especially when there is very little or no interval for reflection between surrender to the temptation and performance of the act. When these conditions are met, one might plausibly suppose that when the choice is made to yield to the temptation, the evil is hardly understood in genuine moral terms, but only in terms of superego and social convention--that is, fear of punishment and the need to "repent" according to the Church's rules.

Whether this supposition is verified or not in particular instances is a matter of fact, which cannot be settled theoretically, which cannot be settled by anyone other than the sinner (even by the confessor, who relies entirely upon the sinner's own self-consciousness for information), and which probably cannot be settled by such sinners themselves, since the question is too subtle for their level of understanding. As I will show below, the question must be settled by a presumption.

There are five considerations which seem to me to indicate that all sins of weakness which really do meet the usual conditions for mortal sin are mortal sins.

First, St. Paul seems to me to confront the problem of weakness experienced by Christians after their baptism. He recognizes the ambivalence of the condition of the Christian who must still struggle to overcome weakness. But he makes no concession, so far as I can see, to the possible view that sins of weakness might not be mortal provided that one struggles against them. Rather, his emphasis is upon the real possibility of avoiding evil, a possibility which comes not from oneself but from the gift of the Spirit (cf. Rom 6.12-8.17).[2]

Similarly, the Epistle to the Hebrews emphasizes that our Lord is a compassionate high priest who can sympathize with our weakness. But this emphasis is to stress the sympathy He has because He Himself was tempted, and so will be prompt to help us when we are tempted. There is no suggestion at all that within Christian life a sin of weakness might be venial; rather, the point is that such sin can be avoided. The epistle is an exhortation to people who through weakness might apostasize; if they do, the sin is considered most severely (cf. Heb 2.14-18, 4.15-16, 6.4-8).

Second, sins of weakness--including ones of the fourth type, such as semi-compulsive masturbation--were condemned by the Church in the medieval period (cf. DS 687-688/-). I summarized the position of St. Thomas in section F, above. In pastoral practice, there probably was little tendency to imagine that one who committed a sin in grave matter somehow might not be guilty of mortal sin. Moreover, the pastoral practice formed by classical modern moral theology through at least two to three centuries uniformly treated sins of weakness in grave matter as mortal sins. I do not see how one can admit an implicit error in the pastoral practice of the entire Church which bound the consciences of the faithful under pain of mortal sin. In this practice, it seems to me, is an exercise of the ordinary magisterium, infallible because it meets the conditions I discussed in chapter fifteen, section I.

Third, recent documents of the magisterium have faced the question of sins of weakness, and the treatment given both implicitly presupposes that when there is liberty there is grave guilt and explicitly states that liberty ought rather to be presumed. Pius XII, in a discourse on the correct formation of the Christian conscience of young people, rejects various false principles and draws the following relevant conclusions:

Therefore, being conscious of the right and of the duty of the Apostolic See to intervene authoritatively, when necessary, on moral questions, We declare to educators and to youth: the divine commandment to be pure in soul and body applies without diminution also to today's youth. The youth of today has also the moral obligation and the possibility of keeping itself pure with the aid of grace. We reject, therefore, as erroneous the claim of those who consider inevitable the failings of the age of puberty, considered by them of no great import and almost as if they were not a grave fault, because, they add, passion cancels the liberty which is required to make a person morally responsible for an act.

On the contrary, it is required from a wise educator that, without neglecting to impress on his youthful charges the noble qualities of purity so as to induce them to love and desire it for its own sake, he should at the same time clearly inculcate the commandment as it stands, in all its gravity and earnestness as a divine order. He will thus urge them to avoid immediate occasions, he will comfort them in the struggle, of which he shall not hide the hardness, he will induce them to embrace courageously the sacrifices demanded by virtue, and he will exhort them to persevere and not to fall into the danger of surrendering from the very beginning and thus succumbing passively to perverse habits.[3]

This discourse of Pope Pius is especially important because Vatican II incorporated it by reference and so made it part of its own teaching concerning the responsibility of Catholics to form their consciences in accord with the teaching of the Church (cf. DH 14). Furthermore, the 1975 document of the Holy See on questions of sexual ethics maintains the same position.[4]

Fourth, in recent years many teachers, spiritual directors, and confessors have given lenient and reassuring advice about sins of weakness of the fourth type. Some who have received and followed such advice for some time have subsequently undergone a more profound spiritual awakening, overcome their sins of weakness, and now assess the advice they earlier received. I am informed by informed spiritual directors that the assessment of such persons often is that the reassuring advice was not wholly credible at the time it was received, that it was not helpful, and that it now seems only to have delayed the

growth of a proper attitude of humble and complete reliance upon the effective power of the grace of the Spirit. This sort of testimony by no means constitutes scientific proof, but one who receives it from people who clearly seem to be making progress toward perfection cannot easily ignore it.

5 Fifth, a mortal sin is a self-disposition incompatible with charity. As I explained in chapter twenty-seven, section M, any immoral act would be incompatible with charity were it not the case that one's fundamental option (the act of faith or an analogous commitment) maintains one's disposition toward the good. But when one is aware--
10 truly aware, at the level of moral truth--that a choice will concern grave matter, one also is implicitly aware that one cannot make the choice without being unfaithful--that is, without giving up the protection of one's fundamental option. Hence, if one nevertheless makes the choice, one does what one wills to do, and the sinful choice is a self-commitment incompatible with charity. Therefore, whenever the usual conditions truly are fulfilled, mortal sin is committed. By definition, these conditions truly are fulfilled
15 in all sins of weakness of the third and fourth types. Consequently, all of these sins of weakness, however mitigated their guilt, remain mortal sins.

It seems to me that to deny this conclusion implicitly is to deny at least something of the reality of free choice and moral responsibility. One will have to suppose that in making choices we do not do what we mean to do, but something else which we cannot know; this line of thinking leads back to the mysteries of indefensible theories of
20 fundamental option, which I criticized in chapter twenty-seven, sections C through I.

At the same time, I by no means hold that everyone who thinks and says he or she has committed a mortal sin really has done so. As I stated at the beginning of this section, there are cases--perhaps a good many of them--in which people think they have committed mortal sins but have not really met the conditions for mortal sin.
25

H. Some arguments against the preceding conclusion and answers to them

30 So far as I can see, there are only three important lines of argument against the preceding conclusion, and none of them is cogent.

First, it can be argued that when sins of weakness and the need to struggle against them are considered in Scripture, in traditional pastoral practice, and in the recent teaching of the magisterium, the main point of the consideration is to insist upon the necessity of the struggle and the inescapably grave guilt involved if one surrenders entirely--for example, refuses even during one's sober periods to seek help to overcome
35 one's alcoholism. The question of the guilt of the sinner who is fighting the good fight but not yet winning it is not directly confronted. Therefore, the argument concludes, nothing in these sources really shows that sins of weakness of the fourth type always are mortal sins. Sinners have been allowed to think of them as such, since this belief
40 has helped them in their struggle, but the theoretical question remains open.

My answer to this line of argument is that it implies that past pastoral practice was based either on a mistake or on deception. Neither is acceptable. The faithful were told that the choice to do certain things, even under the pressure of strong emotion, would be a mortal sin. The inability of the Church as a whole to mistake God's mind and
45 will, the certitude that what is bound on earth also is bound in heaven--this excludes mistake in a matter of this sort. A fortiori, deception is excluded; pastoral practice in the whole Church, which speaks for Him who is faithful and true, cannot have been conducted by a noble lie told for the spiritual welfare of the faithful.

50 In the lives of many Christians who strive consistently from childhood or their conversion to Christ to live faithfully probably no temptation to commit grave sin ever arises except in the case of sins of weakness. If surrender to such temptation in some circumstances were not mortal sin, Christian teaching could easily have made this fact clear, and Christians could have been reassured that consistent faithfulness during normal states of mind is sufficient for salvation.

55 Such reassurance would remove much of the fear and trembling, much of the subjective concern, from Christian life; but the contrary of such reassurance seems to be given (cf. Mt 7.4-5, 10.37-39; Lk 9.23, 12.4-5, 13.24; Phil 2.12; 3.12-13; 1 Cor 9.27). Anxiety concerning salvation is opposed not by any such reassurance but rather by the assurance of hope: Since God is faithful, the seemingly impossible demands of Christian
60 life can be met by human persons, weak in themselves but strong by faith and the gift of the all-powerful Spirit (cf. Jn 14.10-18; 15.1-8; Rom 8.14-17).

A second line of argument arises from reflection upon pastoral experience in the light of modern thinking about the limits of human freedom and responsibility. Many
65 semi-compulsive sinners go through the cycle of sin and repentance time and again, sometimes in a very regular pattern through many years. During the twentieth century, the pastoral treatment of such sinners in confession has become increasingly mild, and this development long antedated recent, radical dissent in moral theology. Part of the reason for this mild attitude has been a growing conviction among confessors that it is not plausible to suppose that a person so often and almost mechanically alternates between
70 grace and mortal sin. In the case of sinners through weakness of the fourth type, it is very plausible to suppose that somehow the sin is not mortal, because the individual does continue to fight the good fight, is anguished by failures, and often otherwise shows evidence of a very real and serious Christian commitment.

This sort of thinking underlies much of the argument for fundamental freedom, which
75 would set aside the conscious moral life in favor of something deeper. However, sound and pastorally experienced moral theologians who did not indulge in any such theoretical construction also held the same conclusion. Even fairly soon after considering the statement of Pius XII, which I quoted in section G, above, they tended to exclude the likelihood of grave guilt in at least some cases of semi-compulsive sin of weakness.^[5]
80

My answer to this line of argument is threefold.

First, modern thinking about the limits of freedom and responsibility helps us to see that many acts involving grave matter do not involve sufficient reflection and a definite choice, but no psychological insight in the least shows that when one really does know (at the level of moral truth, not merely superego and social convention) that

a matter is grave and when one really does choose to do it one is not really determining oneself inconsistently with charity. I think many theologians confused two very different questions: 1) whether the usual conditions for mortal sin are met; 2) whether these conditions are sufficient for mortal sin. Psychology and experience throw much light on the first of these questions and none whatever on the second.

Second, some semi-compulsive sinners through weakness might not be committing repeated mortal sins, for the conditions might well not in fact be met, even if the sinners themselves think they are committing mortal sins. Others who appear similar might not really be sinners through weakness; they perhaps have abandoned a serious struggle against sin, and carry out a pretense of struggle, putting up token resistance to temptation only to satisfy superego and social convention. Pastoral intuitions could reflect these facts without always accurately interpreting them. However, it also remains possible that pastoral intuitions to some extent are mistaken. How can anyone know that a person cannot sin mortally and repent sincerely on a regular basis for years? Analogies with other interpersonal relationships do not necessarily hold for our relationship with God, since in other relationships one can be endlessly ambivalent without being insincere, whereas our relationship with God is susceptible to only limited ambivalence, as Jesus makes abundantly clear.

Third, I believe that many whose pastoral intuitions suggest to them that semi-compulsive sinners through weakness cannot be guilty of grave sin are partly misled by a false assumption concerning the frustration experienced both by such sinners and by confessors seriously committed to helping them. The false assumption is that the frustration is a sign of impossibility, and the impossibility a sign that the sin cannot be mortal.

However, failure and frustration need not signify impossibility; they perhaps signify insufficient and inadequately directed effort. Discouragement on the part of pastors communicated itself to the faithful, even before it was articulated, and tended to become a self-fulfilling attitude, for if a confessor does not really expect his penitents to quit sinning, they probably will not. I suspect that pastoral discouragement has been growing for a long time and that the revolution in moral theology since 1960 is largely a product of this discouragement. It seems to me that a sounder response to this discouragement, one more in accord with Christian faith and hope, is to try to think creatively in order to find ways to help sinners fulfill the law of Christ (cf. Gal 6.1-2).

A third line of argument against the conclusion reached in section G is as follows. As I explained in chapter twenty-seven, section M, the gravity of an act depends upon its inconsistency with some of the specific implications of one's act of faith. However, it is not easy to see how certain semi-compulsive sins of weakness, committed as such, interfere with the life of the Church, with the carrying out of one's Christian duties, or with any specific implication of faith. A plausible argument can be made that any sexual sin, accepted as an integral part of one's lifestyle, will have some impact incompatible with implications of faith (as I argued in chapter sixteen, section K). But perhaps at least certain semi-compulsive sins of weakness, when specified to be the kinds of acts described in section E, above (especially by the third condition), should be considered light matter.

This suggestion would be attractive, but I see no way to square it with the conclusion of the second point in section G, above. Moreover, as I pointed out in chapter twenty-seven, section M, one cannot always expect to be able to articulate clearly the reasons why an act is grave matter, even though the distinction between grave and light matter is not an arbitrary one.

However, it seems to me that the nature of the distinction between grave and light matter makes it appropriate to reflect upon policy considerations analogous to those which must be taken into account in making laws, even though morality is not a code of law. One can ask: What would be the effect if the Church were to teach that the specific kind of act chosen in a semi-compulsive sin of weakness is light matter--for example, that when the act of fornication was not chosen in other circumstances, but as fornication-now-to-end-temptation-with-repentance-immediately-afterwards it would no longer be the matter of grave sin? One must suspect that this act would become very attractive, but that many who wished only to commit it would not in fact meet the conditions of the semi-compulsive sin of weakness.

Moreover, in recent years moral theologians and others have pointed out repeatedly that classical modern moral theology was too interested in isolated acts and insufficiently aware of the profound dynamisms of moral life. I think this insight has been abused, yet it is fundamentally sound; indeed, the whole approach in the present work is dictated by a conception of moral life as a personal and interpersonal dynamic whole. If acts are considered in this context, one can more easily see why acts gravely wrong in kind must remain wrong even when they are chosen as semi-compulsive sins of weakness.

The person who freely commits sexual sins in adolescence also phantasizes other sins, later continues to indulge such phantasy and begins to carry it out, approaches adulthood with adolescent attitudes toward sexuality, and never learns how to integrate sexual activity in sincere self-giving. The sexual acts of the homosexual adult, the married couple who control fertility with contraceptives and abortion, the married person who plays around on the side, the playboy and playgirl, and other less normal types cannot be isolated from the sexual struggle of the adolescent, for the more obviously evil sexual sins of adulthood are an outgrowth of an inadequate or abandoned moral effort at an earlier stage. The entire unfolding of modern and contemporary thinking concerning sexual morality makes clear that one either must maintain the entire traditional norm or accept the entire reversal of it; the dynamic unity of sexual life permits no middle position.

I. Can the semi-compulsive sinner through weakness simply stop sinning?

The answer must be affirmative. If it were negative, one would be faced with the absurdity of a mortal sin (which implies freedom and responsibility) which is simply

inevitable (which excludes freedom and responsibility). I already have treated this question in chapter twenty-four, section D. However, to understand this point more fully, two things must be kept in mind.

5 First, the semi-compulsive sinner is one who really does make a choice to do what is grasped adequately by reflection as grave matter. Someone might seem to commit such a sin and yet, as explained previously, not actually do so. And in the concrete, it often is difficult and sometimes impossible, even for the sinner, to know whether the conditions for mortal sin are met. Thus in practice one cannot suppose that those who seem to be semi-compulsive sinners and who do not simply stop sinning are not doing what they can. Especially if progress is made or effort intensified, there is some reason to suspect that the apparent semi-compulsive sinner through weakness is in fact guilty only of venial sin due to lack of full consent to do what is grasped with minimal adequacy to be gravely evil.

15 Second, no sinner can simply stop sinning through his or her own unaided power of free choice. Paradoxically, in our fallen condition, human persons without grace could not avoid making free choices which would be mortally sinful; alienated from God, creatures cannot enjoy even that fulfillment which naturally is appropriate to them. However, God's grace is sufficient that those united with Christ and enjoying the gift of His Spirit certainly can choose contrary to every temptation to commit grave sin.

20 Scripture teaches this truth: "My grace is enough for you" (2 Cor 12.9). God does not demand the impossible (cf. Mt 11.30; 1 Jn 5.3). Those who are children of God love Christ; those who love Him can keep His commandments (cf. Jn 14.23). God provides both the desire to do His will and the very free act by which one does it (cf. Phil 2.13; Eph 2.10).

25 The Fathers of the Church, especially St. Augustine, insist very clearly and firmly upon the fact that God gives sufficient grace; "a man, helped by God, can, if he will, be without sin" (FEF 1720). "God, therefore, does not command what is impossible, but in commanding He also admonishes you to do what you are able, and to ask His help for what you are unable to do" (FEF 1795). Even the most hardened sinner is offered help enough to repent if only grace were accepted (cf. FEF 1830, 2097, 2232). A fortiori, grace must be sufficient for one who sins only through weakness.

30 The Council of Trent definitively teaches that sufficient grace is given that mortal sin can be altogether avoided and the commandments of God truly fulfilled (cf. DS 1536/804, 1568/828). Thus, to assert that someone who repeatedly commits mortal sins cannot simply stop committing them--by the grace of God which is given and the will to stop--is to deny a defined truth of faith.

35 Catholic teaching concerning the sufficiency of grace becomes clearer if one recalls that the Christian lives by the Spirit, as I explained in chapter twelve, section P. To be adopted as a child of God truly transforms one inwardly; one has the power of the Spirit by which to live a life worthy of a member of God's family. This is what St. John teaches when he insists upon the sinlessness of the Christian: "No one begotten of God acts sinfully because he remains of God's stock; he cannot sin because he is begotten of God" (1 Jn 3.9).[6]

40 Behavior which would be sinful if it were freely chosen but is not sinful because it is not freely chosen with an adequate understanding of its gravity perhaps is inevitable in Christian life. Even the upright person commits at least some venial sins which are not fully deliberate. But from the very beginning of a person's life in Christ, no matter what remnants of the fallen condition of humankind or one's own past sin might remain, mortal sin is altogether avoidable.

50 J. What pastoral guidance is appropriate for apparent semi-compulsive sinners?

I say "apparent," since those who consider themselves to be committing sins of weakness of the fourth type might be doing so, but also might in fact be guilty only of venial sin. Instruction is needed especially concerning prayer, the real nature of mortal sin, the need to determine oneself with a personal vocational commitment, the proper use of the sacraments, and the avoidance of the occasions of sin. The last topic will be treated in section K, below.

60 I will treat prayer in part seven. Sinners commonly are told to pray, but they often are not instructed in the point and manner of doing so. Apparent semi-compulsive sinners through weakness need to learn that prayer of praise, thanksgiving, and petition is important to bring about in oneself a deeper conviction and realization that one both completely depends upon and can completely count upon God. Prayer of petition for strength to avoid and overcome temptations is appropriate, but it ought to be included in a richer context of praise of God's goodness, which transcends oneself, and thanks for His mercy, which is both past and continuing. It is a mistake to face exclusively toward the future in a defensive crouch. Such sinners also need to learn prayer as a practice of awareness of the presence of God and the reality of the fulfillment in Christ which already is in process. Only when these realities are more real than the world of experience and emotion will the latter fall into their rightful place.

70 Apparent semi-compulsive sinners through weakness must learn what mortal sin truly is. The mentality of one in this situation at least involves inadequately integrated elements of superego and social convention, even if there is some grasp upon moral truth. These elements of lower levels of moral consciousness are essential underlying assumptions in the proposition: I can sin now and repent shortly. This state of mind is not one of presumption contrary to the virtue of hope; as St. Thomas already pointed out, it is characteristic of sin of weakness and mitigates such sin.[7] However, to sin with an intention to repent is to gamble, and to gamble with right and wrong is to suppose that evil is a naughty deed which one can repair by accepting one's scolding or spanking, or that it is a breaking of rules which one can make good by following relevant rules. One who is helped to overcome these inadequate standpoints can come to a more accurate understanding of what mortal sin really is, and so see how inappropriate are the attitudes toward it characteristic of sinners of this sort.

This growth in insight will open the way to instruction about the larger realities

of Christian life. To overcome sin one must pursue holiness; to pursue holiness one must seek to discern one's personal vocation and commit oneself to it. I discussed this point in chapter twenty-four, sections H-J, and will discuss it more fully in part seven.

5 This growth in insight also is necessary if the sinner through weakness is to clarify his or her own mind concerning the sinful acts which are done. It is very important to understand the intrinsic point of the Christian norm, and the inherent meaning of its sinful violation. Moreover, most people have no accurate notion of what the conditions for mortal sin mean, and instruction in detail about these conditions probably will not be grasped until it becomes personally relevant. However, when a person of sufficient
10 age and intelligence realizes the need for it, he or she can come to understand what it means to reflect sufficiently and consent fully. In learning this, one learns more clearly what one's freedom and moral responsibility really are, and one is in a better position to exercise self-determination. One also receives information which is helpful to judge one's own action by reflection when one examines one's conscience.

15 The discourse of Pius XII, quoted in section G, above--and the more recent document of the Holy See on questions concerning sexual ethics also referred to there--make clear that the general presumption must be that apparent semi-compulsive sinners through weakness really do have grave moral responsibility. This presumption can be set aside in a particular case only if there is positive evidence sufficient to show that more
20 probably or certainly the conditions for mortal sin were not met--that the individual did not make a choice at all or acted in a state of mind so completely clouded by emotion that there was not minimally adequate sufficient reflection. It is difficult to see how one could confidently judge that the required evidence of nonresponsibility is given as long as the individual thinks he or she in fact chose to do an act and seems to
25 have a minimally sufficient understanding of the mortally sinful character of that kind of act.

Thus, ordinarily both the confessor and the sinner should suppose that apparent semi-compulsive sins of weakness really are mortal sins. Therefore, they ought to be
30 confessed. If one is truly in doubt about whether one made a sinful choice, one is not obliged to confess the sin, but usually apparent semi-compulsive sinners through weakness do not doubt having made the choice: They know that at a certain point they gave in to the temptation and proceeded to carry out the sinful choice. Even if one is in doubt about whether one has committed a mortal sin, one does well to confess anything one suspects could be a mortal sin. For an apparent semi-compulsive sinner through weakness to
35 decide that the seeming mortal sins might not be such and so need not be confessed is very likely for him or her to cease fighting the good fight, with the result that the sins no longer will be sins of weakness and become certainly mortal.[8]

A good confession of course demands sincere contrition and a real purpose of amendment. Contrition ought not to be considered insincere merely because the person in
40 choosing to sin also consciously intended to repent. The question of sincerity is whether the sinner really wants to reject and avoid the sin, to live in friendship with God. The reality of this will is demonstrated by willingness to make a real effort--to fight the good fight.

Similarly, purpose of amendment is not a matter of speculation. One must decide
45 simply to quit sinning; to decide this one must believe it possible. One must not accept as likely a future sin; to accept this would be to suppose that grace is insufficient or the sin not a matter of free choice. But one who feels emotionally discouraged and cannot help feeling that sin is likely can have a genuine purpose of amendment. The reality of this will is shown, once more, by one's real effort to avoid sin. This effort is
50 in significant part a matter of dealing with occasions of sin.

The sinner also must seek grace and strength in the Eucharist, but should be helped to realize that a minimally worthy reception of the Holy Sacrament is not enough
to fight inclinations to sin. One needs to cultivate a more and more devout and prayerful participation in the Eucharist, so that one will be strengthened not only by union
55 in the Spirit and bodily communion with Jesus, but also by conscious human cooperation with Him in His redemptive act, for the sinner's first responsibility is to take part in his or her own redemption.

60 K. How must one deal with occasions of sin?

Most people are familiar with the concept of occasions of sin, defined as any person, place, or thing likely to lead one into sin. This definition is not false, but it is not as helpful as it might be. One must realize, in the first place, that occasions
65 of sin usually only become interesting when one is dealing with grave matter and the problem is how to avoid or resist temptation to commit a mortal sin. I will consider only this kind of case, but what is said can be adapted to a situation in which one wishes to avoid temptations to commit venial sins, such as spontaneous cursing, hollering at the children, and so on. One must realize also that it is not so much persons, places, and things which are occasions of sin as it is the way we are related to persons,
70 places, and things and what we do in respect to them.

Hence, I define "occasion of sin" as follows: It is a situation or action, which in any way conduces to sin and which one can avoid or modify, so that one will be less likely to be tempted to commit a mortal sin, or will be more able to easily overcome the temptation if it should arise.

75 Some occasions of sin are situations. For example, living in a neighborhood where there are many homosexuals is an occasion of sin for someone with a homosexual disposition. Having a job in which one must read pornographic material is an occasion of sin for most people. Owning the means to commit mortal sin is often an occasion of sin. Having great wealth provides one with many opportunities to sin which poor people do not
80 have, and so wealthy people live in an occasion of sin by the very fact of their wealth.

Other occasions of sin are actions. For example, hearing confessions is an occasion of sin for a priest, since, for example, he is likely to be tempted by sympathy to compromise the teaching of Christ. Glancing at the "adult entertainment" section of a newspaper can be an occasion of sin for someone who is addicted to pornography. Talking

about one's sexual attraction toward a person with that person often is an occasion of sin, since such talk demands some sort of response, which is likely to lead to the need to make a choice to sin or not.

5 Some occasions of sin can be avoided. For example, someone who is working at a job which provides easy opportunities to steal and who is tempted to do so might be able to find a different job. One can avoid talking about one's feelings toward other people when such talk might create the need to make a choice to sin or not. A person who has a contraceptive device can get rid of it. The rich young man could have sold his goods, given the proceeds to the poor, and followed Jesus.

10 Other occasions of sin cannot be avoided, but they can be modified. The modification can be made in two different ways. One way is a modification in the situation or action as it objectively exists or is done. The other way is a modification of the context or meaning of the situation or action, largely through taking a different stance toward it and/or thinking differently about it.

15 For example, an alcoholic finds being in a place where drinks are served an occasion of sin and perhaps cannot always avoid being in such a place. ("Cannot" here might be taken in a weak sense; the avoidance of company where drinks are served often is not possible in the sense that it is incompatible with some other responsibility.) However, the alcoholic can modify this situation objectively, by ordering a nonalcoholic beverage which looks like a drink. He or she also can provide a modified context for the situation--for example, by discussing it beforehand with a friendly member of one's Alcoholics Anonymous chapter.

25 In many cases of semi-compulsive sins of weakness, the problem is to discover and avoid situations and actions which are avoidable and are associated with the beginning of temptation, and to modify various unavoidable situations and actions.

If a person simply is told to avoid occasions of sin, he or she likely will notice many unavoidable actions which are somehow conditions conducive to sin, but often will overlook certain avoidable actions which regularly precede and initiate temptation. This "overlooking" probably has a subconscious cause: If the sinner attended to these actions and avoided them as occasions of sin, then temptation would not occur and the satisfaction of the sin could not be obtained. Subconsciously, this satisfaction is desired even by a person whose purpose of amendment is firm. Consequently, the sinner has a presentiment of rising emotion and could still resist by evasion, but does not; instead, the action which is the immediate occasion of the temptation is done instead of avoided, emotion mounts, and the sin of weakness is committed again.

35 For example, a person who regularly commits the same semi-compulsive sin of weakness might regularly lead into the temptation with seemingly quite innocent thoughts about his or her last confession. These thoughts lead to thought about the sin committed and confessed, and this thought to the temptation. If such is the case, the thought about the previous confession is an occasion of sin; the sinner must become conscious of this fact, and when the thought arises must immediately think instead about some other interesting and previously prepared subject.

45 Every sinner probably does regularly many actions which precede and lead into temptation, some internal (such as thoughts) and others bits of outward behavior. The pattern of acts preceding temptation has to be analyzed with close attention and the continuity of behavior modified. Work in experimental psychology on conditioning and behavior modification could be studied with profit by someone interested in the pastoral problem of helping people find and avoid such occasions of their sins of weakness. (This task does not pertain to Principles of Christian morality!)

50 Situations and actions which are not avoidable must be modified. A person who commits a sin with any other willing person of suitable sex cannot avoid meeting potential partners in sin, but perhaps can avoid meeting them in circumstances in which temptation is likely. Actions which are occasions of sin can be modified by special care to control one's attention while doing them. For example, a physician who finds examining certain patients a source of temptation to sins of thought can make the atmosphere as business-like as possible and can focus all of his or her attention on the medical problem which requires the examination. A boy who finds bathing an occasion of sin can plan something interesting and innocent to think about while bathing.

60 Work on occasions of sin is a strict and grave moral obligation. This work cannot be precisely defined and limited; one must begin where one can and constantly expand the field of battle. Creative ingenuity is required for this process, and confessors must try to acquire this virtue.

65 As I already stated, prayer has an indispensable role in overcoming sin. However, for many people, prayer once temptation begins is not good strategy. The activity is not absorbing enough to hold attention for long. One does better, in many cases, to pray when one is in a more secure frame of mind, and to use other interesting, pleasant, and perhaps amusing topics to hold one's attention when in flight from temptation.

70 L. What is the place of sin--especially sin of weakness--in Christian life?

Any sort of mystique of sin must be avoided. Sin has no place in Christian life as if mortal sin were in any way a necessary or appropriate experience or phase of development. There is never a time when it is suitable at all or good in any way for one who has been adopted as a child of God to be alienated from Him and deprived of his or her share in divinity.

75 Moreover, when one deals with semi-compulsive sin of weakness, the intense sense of guilt and experience of forgiveness in repentance is not in itself conducive to the development of a genuine spiritual life, since the intensity of these experiences is connected far more with the guilt of superego and social conformity than it is with an awareness (which is much more conceptual than emotional) of the real guilt which consists in the state of sin itself.

80 However, God permits evil only because He can bring good out of it. Hence, even serious sin in Christian life is an occasion of some great good, often including a good to be realized in the sinner's own life. A true understanding of the guilt of sin easily

serves as a point of departure for a more grateful and deeper love of God, just as the love of lovers reconciled after a quarrel often is deeper than before. A correct understanding of the reality of semi-compulsive sin of weakness leads directly to genuine humility; one knows that one cannot by oneself but certainly can with God's grace stop sinning, and one therefore seeks and accepts this grace. The first principle of Alcoholics Anonymous is precisely this: I realize my life is out of control and that I need the help of a Higher Power. The conscious sinners' predisposition to humility is the reason why Jesus came to save sinners, not the self-righteous (cf. Mt 18.12-14; Lk 15).

If there were no temptation to sins of weakness, many people would lack the occasion to develop beyond the levels of superego and social convention, to think seriously about what it means to live a Christian life, and to undertake to organize life in the form of personal vocational commitment. The occurrence of the temptation, even though it sometimes is consented to, thus provides an important opportunity for growth in the Christian life. Certainly, no apparent semi-compulsive sinner through weakness is likely to achieve a real and lasting victory over such sin without also being helped to develop a more mature conscience and to undertake the responsibilities of Christian life at a more mature level. If such sinners are not helped to develop a more mature conscience, they will remain permanently bogged down in their routine of ambivalence.

An incidental point is well worth noticing here. Those who are trying to improve the living of the Christian life by denying the grave sinfulness of many sexual sins are making a serious mistake. The person committing sexual sins freely (even without subjective guilt) is left at a rather infantile level of Christian existence; such a person never will grow up spiritually as must one who faces these sins for what they are and wins the victory over them.[9]

Moreover, the sinfulness of these acts is not eliminated by its denial; even people who are in good faith in following such opinions experience many of the ill effects for their spiritual lives partly because of which these acts probably are considered serious sins. For instance, sexual sins committed mainly for pleasure and relief of tension involve introducing and constantly reinforcing a split between one's conscious self (which feels tension and pleasure) and one's body (which is an object used for self-gratification). This dualism of self and body is false and it leads to false beliefs and attitudes with respect to spiritual reality. For the dualist, spiritual reality either is reduced to unreality, as objects and experience divide the real, or spiritual reality is separated entirely from the bodily and regarded as a higher and purer realm. This latter view is incompatible with the Incarnation, and so is radically anti-Christian.

God could have redeemed us without human cooperation; He also could have done so by the life, death, and glorification of Jesus without our cooperation. He chose not to redeem us without us, evidently in order to allow us to share in the nobility of His redemptive work. This work is no less noble when we begin where we must begin, with ourselves (cf. Rom 8.11; Gal 2.19-20). As Vatican II teaches:

Christ obeyed even at the cost of death, and was therefore raised up by the Father (cf. Phil 2.8-9). Thus He entered into the glory of His kingdom. To Him all things are made subject until He subjects Himself and all created things to the Father, that God may be all in all (cf. 1 Cor 15.27-28). Now, Christ has communicated this power of subjection to His disciples that they might be established in royal freedom and that by self-denial and a holy life they might conquer the reign of sin in themselves (cf. Rom 6.12). Further, He shared this power so that by serving Him in their fellow men they might through humility and patience lead their brother men to that King whom to serve is to reign (cf. LG 36)

The Catholic priest especially needs to conquer the reign of sin in himself so that with conviction borne of personal experience he can guide and encourage others to win the same victory. The wounds of sin healed by contrition and reparation can be important powers of love and service, powers one would not wish to be without, however strongly one hates the sins whose commission occasioned the acquisition of these precious powers.

United with our sinless Lord Jesus and with the sinners He calls us to help Him to save, we hope one day to stand in the Father's presence and say: Thank You, Father, for allowing us to share in Your work of redemption. And to Jesus each of us should hope to say: Thank You, Lord, for allowing me to share in Your work of my redemption.

60 Notes for chapter twenty-nine

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae, 1-2, qu. 77, art. 7 and 8; De malo, qu. 3, art. 10.

2. See F. Prat, La Théologie de Saint Paul, 43 ed. (Paris: Beauchesne et Ses Fils, 1961), vol. 1, pp. 268-284; vol. 2, pp. 81-90; Lucien Cerfaux, The Christian in the Theology of St. Paul (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), pp. 446-466.

3. Pius XII, "De Conscientia Christiana in Iuvenibus Recte Efformanda," AAS 44 (23 March 1952), pp. 275-276; The Pope Speaks: The Teaching of Pope Pius XII, ed. Michael Chinigo (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), p. 97. The translation (which I use) omits certain paragraphs (not within the quotation) which only add greater force to the message.

4. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration on Certain Questions concerning Sexual Ethics (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1976), p. 10, #9.

5. See John C. Ford, S.J., and Gerald Kelly, S.J., Contemporary Moral Theology vol. 1, Questions in Fundamental Moral Theology (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1964), pp. 201-247.

6. See Ignace de la Potterie, S.J., and Stanislaus Lyonnet, S.J., The Christian Lives by the Spirit (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1971), pp. 181-182.

7. St. Thomas, Summa theologiae, 2-2, qu. 21, art. 2, ad 3.

8. If a particular penitent sincerely considers likely a milder theological opinion concerning the presumption of grave guilt in cases of apparent semi-compulsive sin of weakness (see Ford and Kelly, op. cit., pp. 240-242), and if the penitent also accepts probabilism, then such a penitent need not be considered in bad faith and must not be refused absolution if he or she continues in other respects to resist the temptation

and avoid serious sin. However, anyone who understands what is explained in the text, who is wholly faithful to the Church's teaching, and who understands what I explained concerning probabilism in chapter twenty-eight, sections L and M, will realize (if I am not mistaken) that with very few exceptions apparent semi-compulsive sins of weakness must be presumed to be mortal sins and should be confessed as such.

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9. One often hears the claim that the position that there is no parity of matter in the area of sexual sins is a modern development. In the sense in which it is meant, this claim certainly is false. St. Thomas Aquinas (De malo, qu. 15, art. 2) already clearly made the point that the only possible kinds of venially sinful acts in the domain
10 of sex are legitimate, noncontraceptive marital acts which are engaged in with unreasonable desire--for example, intercourse chosen more for self-gratification than for the shared experience of marital unity. Any kind of sexual act other than legitimate, non-contraceptive, marital intercourse always is grave matter.