

CHAPTER THIRTY: THE WAY OF SIN: FROM IMPERFECTION TO HELL

A. Introductory remarks

5 The previous chapters of this part have been mainly analytic. I have defined and distinguished: to make clear what sin is, what are its kinds, and what are the conditions for mortal sin. The present chapter will be synthetic. I will show how various conditions and actions of persons are related one to another, to form the unified whole of a sinful life. The previous chapters, being analytic, considered sin mainly statically,
10 as an act done or as an existing condition--the state of sin. The present chapter, being synthetic, considers sin dynamically, as a process. The sinful life is a continuous movement, which proceeds from the moral indeterminacy of imperfection, through various stages of moral degeneration, to the ultimate disaster of eternal alienation from God in hell.

15 In following (in thought) the way of sin, we can come to understand something of the power of evil, the momentum by which one stage of regress leads to another. However, two mistakes must be carefully avoided.

First, one must not suppose that at any stage of this process it becomes automatic. If the downward road into the pit of hell is broad and smooth, still sinners do not follow
20 this road as if it were a railroad and the cars without brakes. Rather, one reaches the end of this road only by freely staying on it, normally by making repeated wrong choices. At each point of choice, with the grace of God a right choice could have been made, and the right choice would have amounted to an application of the brakes to halt the dynamics of sin. Regress stopped, the sinner in cooperation with God's grace could
25 have turned about and journeyed upward toward perfection.

Second, the metaphor of the road must not be taken in an overly literal and simple-minded way. The dynamics of sin not only depends upon free choices, but also admits of short-cuts on the downward route and (because of grace) dramatic translocations from a point near the gates of hell to the very gates of heaven without passing through any of
30 the intermediate stages. One might imagine the stage at which the moral consciousness of the child begins to dawn as a plain, the way of sin as an interstate route proceeding with many curves and switchbacks downward into the valley of death, and the way of Jesus as a hiking path with many curves and switchbacks proceeding upward to the golden ridge of eternal life.

35 Sometimes people stay on the route; sometimes they do not. In the latter case, the departure from the route could be a deliberate turning off to go down the steep slope in an unbroken plunge to disaster, or it could be an airlift by helicopter from some point of danger to the very summit.

In short, I describe in this chapter how one thing leads to another in the sinful
40 life. But the leading is not necessity, both in the sense that the sinful life is a life of free choices having moral significance and in the sense that the "stages" do not always follow one after the other in precise sequence.

The whole of part seven will be similar to the present chapter in being dynamic and synthetic. Here I consider the way of sin which leads to everlasting death; there
45 I will reflect upon the way of Jesus which leads to everlasting life.

B. What is imperfection?

50 Jesus requires holiness of every one of His followers. They are to be perfect as the Father is perfect (cf. Mt 5.48), to love God with their whole mind and heart and soul and strength (cf. Mk 12.30), and to love one another as Jesus loves them (cf. Jn 13.34, 15.12). Charity is the center of holiness; the movement of Christian life toward perfection consists in perfecting charity, so that one's entire being expresses and serves it (cf. LG 40 and 42).

55 Modern theology developed the concept of imperfection, but did not give the concept much precision. The general idea is that apart from sin (even venial sin) there can be various dispositions and actions in a Christian which lack what is required for perfection. The lack is not the privation which would constitute evil and sin, since there is nothing specifically immoral in the imperfect; the imperfect simply is not what
60 it would be if the holiness to which we are called already were most fully realized.[1]

Two types of imperfection can be distinguished. One is the imperfection which is inevitable inasmuch as human persons constitute themselves existentially only gradually, by a series of choices. This type of imperfection can be called "moral immaturity." The other is the imperfection which is inevitable in fallen humankind (thus, in everyone
65 but Jesus and Mary) inasmuch as fallen human persons have predispositions which create obstacles for complete integration in charity. This type of imperfection can be called "moral disintegrity."

Being truly human and like us in everything but sin, Jesus Himself was subject to the imperfection of moral immaturity. Hence, He "progressed steadily in wisdom and age
70 and grace before God and men" (Lk 2.52). As I explained in chapter eleven, section J, Jesus made and fulfilled His redemptive commitment in the face of temptation; in doing so, He progressed from the indeterminacy of a morally immature man to the definiteness of absolute and total self-oblation: "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who
75 obey him" (Heb 5.8-9). Having loved His own in the world, Jesus showed His love to the end (cf. Jn 13.1), the end at which alone he was able to announce: "'Now it is finished'" (Jn 19.30), and deliver Himself to glory, for then nothing remained in Him to be perfected--nothing remained which did not wholly express and serve His perfect love of the Father and His fellow men and women.

80 Like that of any child, the humanity of Jesus had its specific limitations and its initial moral indeterminacy. His emotions naturally drew Him to sensible goods appropriate to His determinate sentient nature; His understanding of intelligible goods initially led Him spontaneously to will and act for a variety of specific objectives without any overall organization of His life. Doubtless, His early, childish choices, although

uniformly morally good, involved no all-embracing self-commitment. Indeed, the story of Jesus at twelve suggests as much; of the choices which occurred to Him, He made the right ones, but it seems that He had not yet integrated His role as a child of Mary and Joseph with His central and consciously emerging relationship with the Father (cf. Lk 2.41-52).

There is nothing sinful in this lack of integration; it is immaturity, not disintegrity. Jesus could live His perfectly good human life only as He lived it; He could not exist in the mature perfection of integral love until He had made all the choices He had to make, and so disposed Himself as a whole and every aspect of Himself which was at His self-disposition in the form of finished holiness.

Everyone is subject to the imperfection of moral immaturity. But we, unlike Jesus and Mary, also are subject to another sort of imperfection--that of moral disintegrity. The consequences of sin (both original sin and the sins of those around us) affect our natural disposition by heredity and environment, nature and nurture, so that even before we make any choices of our own, we are disposed by concupiscence to choose in ways which will create obstacles to perfect holiness.

In chapter twenty-four, sections G and H, I described how Christian children and young people organize their lives--or, better, do not organize them. Living faith is present from baptism (assuming it is not excluded at some point by mortal sin). But most choices are made to satisfy desires, to attain objectives, and to fulfill commitments which exist quite apart from faith, and which are in no way formed or influenced by it. To the extent that desires and objectives simply are not integrated, they constitute the principles of the imperfection of immaturity. But to the extent that they are affected by sin, these desires and objectives constitute the principles of the imperfection of disintegrity.

The choices which are not formed or influenced by living faith are imperfect if they are not venially sinful. In many cases they will be venially sinful, although usually not consciously regarded as such. They will be made according to nonrational principles of determination against a possibility indicated by rational consideration of intelligible goods. One will not consider them sins because they will not have been identified as such.

When not venially sinful, still such choices often will be marked by the imperfection of disintegrity--they will not be what one would have chosen were one's understanding of possibilities not limited by the affects of sin. And even when not defective in this way, choices and actions which are merely unrelated to one's living faith are not perfect; they are marked by the imperfection of immaturity, since they do not meet the requirement of perfection: "Whatever you do, whether in speech or in action, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col 3.17).

In sum, Christian holiness in this life is that ideal condition in which one's entire self which is at one's self-disposal expresses and serves charity, by being positively formed by living faith. Imperfection is the characteristic of actions which are morally good in themselves but which are not conditioned by one's act of living faith. Imperfect actions are merely immature if they are in no way a consequence of sin affecting one by heredity and environment. Imperfect actions are marked by disintegrity and will present an obstacle to holiness to the extent that they in some way are conditioned by sin. Imperfect actions of the latter sort need not in any way be considered sins in the person whose actions they are, since the conditioning by sin is a residue from original sin (concupiscence) and the sins of other persons.

50 C. Concerning the Devil

That there exist persons other than divine and human ones, who normally are not visible in bodily form but who can in some ways act in our world--namely, good and bad angels--is not only taken for granted throughout the Bible but also definitively taught by the Catholic Church (cf. DS 800/428, 3002/1783).

An important part of this definitive teaching is that these persons are created and wholly dependent upon God for their being; they have no independent reality over and against Him. Nevertheless, although all are good insofar as they are creatures, some are bad insofar as they are persons; by their own free choice, they have determined themselves in a way which is disorderly and unnecessarily self-limited, and so exist in a certain disharmony with God, whose love would have shared with them His own perfect life (cf. DS 1901/1001, 1903-1905/1003-1005, 1909/1009, 2800/-; also 286/-, 325/-, 411/211, 797/427, 800/428).

It follows that the reality of the Devil (Satan) and of devils cannot be denied; they are not merely mythical beings or the personification of evil. At the same time, the Devil must not be thought of as an absolute principle of evil opposed to the all-good God; there is no such principle. The Devil is in its entire positive reality good; its being remains relative to God and its evil (privation) limited by the scope of its own created (and still in itself good) freedom.

In the light of faith, God's people have recognized that there is more systematic perversity in the world than human sin accounts for. The devils account for this excess: "Our battle is not against human forces but against the principalities and powers, the rulers of this world of darkness, the evil spirits in regions above" (Eph 6.12). Vatican II teaches that the Devil had a role in the fall of Man and that its work helps to account for the monumental struggle which makes up human history (cf. GS 13 and 37). Evil spirits still are at work in the world, seeking to damage the redemptive work (cf. 1 Pt 5.8; Rv 12.7-9). The Devil plays the role of tempter, who tries to lead Christians into sin (cf. 1 Thess 3.5; 1 Cor 7.5; 2 Cor 2.11; 1 Tm 3.7, 6.9, and so on).

The gospels present the redemptive life of Christ as an encounter and victorious struggle against the Devil; Jesus is tempted by the Devil, delivers many people from evil spirits, and ultimately overcomes the Devil by His passion and death (cf. Jn 13.2, 13.27, 14.30; Lk 4.13, 22.3, 22.31, 22.53). Hence, we are freed from the power of the Devil (cf. SC 6). No Christian can be conquered by the Devil without his or her own free choice to do what is evil (cf. Jas 4.7; Eph 4.27). The Church has firmly rejected

tendencies to exaggerate the role of diabolical activity in temptation (cf. DS 2241-2253/1261-1273).

5 One can think in accordance with an extensive theological tradition of the sin of Satan as the first evil in creation, and so regard all other evil as somehow mysteriously related to it; in this view, one thinks of the diabolical realm as if it were a kind of perverse, wretched imitation of the kingdom Jesus is bringing to fulfillment (cf. 1 Jn 3.8-10). On this view, every temptation and sin can be credited to the work of the Devil. It instigates to sin and then seeks the sinner's condemnation, so as to gain the lost soul for itself (cf. Rv 12.10).

10 However, inasmuch as the power of the evil spirits has been broken by the victory of Christ, one ought not to assume diabolical activity when other explanations are possible. In regard to temptation, those temptations which arise from one's own prior sins are fittingly ascribed to the Devil, since by one's sins one somehow surrenders oneself into the power of the Devil. Also, an awareness that there are evil spirits still at work in the world will inhibit anyone from too quickly assuming that every spiritual inspiration is a good gift of the Holy Spirit. One must put spirits to the test; those only can be trusted whose suggestions contain nothing incompatible with sound doctrine and moral truth (cf. 1 Jn 4.1-3).

20 D. What are the sources of temptations?

I have explained in chapter eleven, sections H and J, how temptation is possible, and in chapter twenty-five, section F, how we can choose when tempted to sin. The present question concerns the sources of temptations. Since even Jesus was tempted, temptation must be distinguished from sin. Yet temptations could not arise were it not for imperfection (at least, the imperfection of immaturity); in our case, temptations also presuppose disintegrity and often presuppose our own, established sinfulness.

25 Normally, when we say that someone or something "tempts," we think of the subject as an agent which inclines to sin. In this sense of tempting, we must not say that God is a source of any temptation at all: "No one who is tempted is free to say, 'I am being tempted by God.' Surely God, who is beyond the grasp of evil, tempts no one. Rather, the tug and lure of his own passion tempts every man" (Jas 1.13-14). Yet God permits those He loves to be tried, so that they might prove their love (cf. Dt 13.3; Tob 12.13). As always, in such temptations God provides sufficient grace that one can endure and win the victory (cf. 1 Cor 10.13).

30 The petition of the Lord's Prayer that we not be put to the trial (cf. Mt 6.13; Lk 11.4) perhaps should be understood as a prayer to be saved from the extraordinary test of the last days (cf. JBC 43.44). Still, it can appropriately be taken to ask that all temptations, which inevitably are painful and burdensome to those who love God, should be mitigated as much as possible in conformity with God's good will. When temptations come despite this constant prayer, one can be confident that they are permitted for one's own good: "My brothers, count it pure joy when you are involved in every sort of trial. Realize that when your faith is tested this makes for endurance" (Jas 1.2-3; cf. 1.12). One who never fights never wins (cf. 2 Tm 2.5).

35 As St. James suggests (cf. Jas 1.14), passion is a general source of temptation. One could not choose wrongly unless there were some nonrational principle of self-determination, and emotion provides this principle. St. John offers another point of view, according to which all temptation is reduced to the sinful world: "Carnal allurements, enticements for the eye, the life of empty show--all these are from the world" (1 Jn 2.16). It is plausible to think that here "carnal allurements" refers to inordinate desires for sensual satisfaction (cf. Eph 2.3; 1 Pt 2.11; 2 Pt 2.10, 18), that "enticements for the eye" refers to inordinate desires for possessions, and that "the life of empty show" refers to pride and status-seeking. Similarly, as I explained in section C, above, all temptations can be ascribed to the Devil.

40 A more systematic distinction of the sources of temptation along the following lines might be helpful. There are temptations which can arise apart from any sin of one's own; some of these are from within oneself, while others are from other people. Then there are temptations which cannot arise apart from some sin of one's own; some of these mainly concern the coherence of one's own life, while others concern one's relationship with God.

45 Temptations from within oneself even apart from any sin of one's own arise from the spontaneous demands of emotions for satisfaction, when these demands cannot be satisfied by a completely reasonable choice. To some extent, temptations of this sort arise simply because of the imperfection of immaturity; Jesus was hungry after fasting. To some extent, they arise in us because of the abnormality of the emotional make-up of fallen humankind; the ordinary child is more insecure and demanding than ought to be the case. And, of course, although temptations of this sort could arise without any personal sin, personal sins only aggravate the initial difficulty.

50 "The spirit is willing but nature is weak" (cf. Mt 26.41)--the saying applies especially to temptations of this sort: to sins of weakness, to sins of gross selfishness, to greediness, status-seeking, and the like. The desires and objectives of the child and youth, even if these are not in themselves sinful, when they are not integrated with living faith, readily promote endless temptations of this sort.

55 Temptations from other people even apart from any sin of one's own--those which are not simply a social dimension of the preceding type of temptations--arise because of the test which evil in others presents to us. There is evil both in those who are friends and in those who are enemies. The evil present in friends tempts one to do what is evil for the sake of sympathy or the relationship; the evil present in enemies tempts one to do what is evil for self-protection and to attain legitimate objectives which they threaten.

60 "The world," which includes both those dear to us (cf. 1 Cor 7.31, in the context of the whole chapter) and those who are opposed to Christ (cf. Jn 17.14-17), seems primarily to refer to this source of temptations--evil present in other individuals and in society. Even children are tempted to do what is personally otherwise repugnant, what

their own inclinations might not suggest, to please their friends ("But everybody is . . .") and to cope with their enemies ("He hit me first"). To the extent that one's relationships with other persons are not wholly and exclusively based either upon cooperation with them in redemptive work or upon an effort to communicate redemption to them, such temptations will continue to arise.

Temptations which presuppose some personal sin and which mainly concern the coherence of the sinner's own life arise because the self determined by sin is inherently unstable; the aspects of the self which are not corrupted press for repentance, and the self determined by sin presses for its own consistent expansion. To be comfortable in sin one must rationalize; one must pretend that the good one violates is not good or not possible. One in sin must seek to defend an indefensible position and to build on an insecure foundation.

"I give you my assurance, everyone who lives in sin is the slave of sin" (Jn 8.34) applies especially to this source of temptation. This slavery to sin, due to its own inner dynamism, can be appropriated in a special way to the Devil (cf. 1 Jn 3.8-10). Even the child is tempted to lie in order to conceal disobedience, and in lying commits a more serious offense than the original one. Similarly, false and self-deceptive claims that the good was impossible and that the evil was not really intentional abound in the excuses offered by children.

Finally, temptations which presuppose some personal sin and which directly concern one's relationship with God arise from the need of the sinner who wishes to remain such to distort his or her relationship with the Holy One. One can try to limit the relationship to a safe, legal minimum; this approach develops into pharisaism. One also can try to gain God's favor by the zealotry with which one combats evil--in others. Both of these approaches depend upon an effort to objectify one's sin and project it away from one's self, so that one can face God. A further temptation is to flee from the light, to refuse to believe any longer in a love which one will not accept (cf. Jn 3.19-21).

Temptations of this sort perhaps account for the stubbornness with which superego and social convention hold control of much moral thinking. To emerge with full consciousness into the light of moral truth--to understand the Gospel at this level--would mean that one would have to abandon the comfort of one's sins and begin the difficult and frightening climb up the mountain of the Lord, toward the summit of perfection in Christ.

E. How do venial sins present a serious threat to Christian life?

Christian writers always have recognized that venial sins are serious, especially because they somehow lead to mortal sin. However, from the time of St. Augustine, who suggested the metaphor that many drops make a river and many grains a lump (cf. FEF 1846), the explanation of the relationship between venial and mortal sins usually has lacked the clarity one might wish. St. Thomas Aquinas is more helpful in indicating how sins can be causally related.[2] Although he is not concerned exclusively with the relationship of venial to mortal sins, his ideas can be adapted as follows to explain this matter.

First, venial sins can enlarge one's zone of liberty, thus to provide one with possibilities (including possibilities to sin mortally) which one otherwise would not have. For example, children and young people by lying and disobedience gain for themselves the freedom to go places, to be with people, and to do things which offer occasions of sin from which their parents are trying to protect them. Similarly, venial sins of acquiring and holding unnecessary wealth give one the power to be self-indulgent; venial sins of laziness gain one time one is tempted to use badly. Venial sins of defect in diligence and piety give one the liberty to consider gravely wrong possibilities without at once clearly realizing that they offer a potentially disastrous attraction.

Second, venial sins involve a self-commitment to certain goods, in whose enjoyment one comes to grasp additional possibilities, which might otherwise have remained unknown. For example, sins of impurity which are venial because of insufficient reflection nevertheless make the choice of similar acts a live option for the future. Venially sinful acts of theft can give one a taste for easy possession. One who is used to venially sinful lying already has adopted a thoroughly immoral stance toward the relevant goods, and so is likely to be tempted to lie even when it would be a mortal sin.

Third, venial sins often create situations from which one cannot easily escape without committing a mortal sin. For example, venial sins committed in seeking popularity create relationships with people who would not respect one's Christian faith, and lead to temptations to compromise one's faith to avoid embarrassment. Again, venial sins of carelessness in driving can lead to an accident, which might create a temptation to sin mortally by an attempt to evade grave duties (such as obtaining care for someone one has injured). Venial sins of waste often put people in financial difficulty they are tempted to resolve by grave dishonesty.

Fourth, by venial sins one often has objectives which one is tempted to pursue by mortal sins. For example, venial sins of self-indulgence create expensive tastes, which one might be tempted to satisfy by theft or prostitution. Venial sins of status-seeking tempt one to do whatever is necessary to obtain the status one wants--for example, to deny one's faith, cheat, offer illicit sexual favors, lie under oath, and so forth. Venial sins of vanity can create a temptation to commit sacrilege to avoid admitting that one has made a mistake which could invalidate a sacrament.

As I explained in section B, above, not only the imperfection of immaturity but also the imperfection of disintegrity is present in the lives of all Christians. This imperfection involves a pattern of life in which many desires and objectives are pursued without reference to living faith. Such pursuit generates many temptations and inevitably leads to the commission of many venial sins--some of them recognized as sins, others done without a clear sense of their sinful character but with an awareness of their unreasonableness, and still others done more or less without moral deliberation. All of these venial sins lead in one or more of the preceding ways to temptations to commit mortal sins.

This consideration of the seriousness of venial sin and its dynamic relationship to imperfection (from which it arises) and to mortal sin (to which it tends) makes clear

the wisdom of using all available means to combat venial sin from the very beginning of moral life. One of these means is an early and regular use of the Sacrament of Penance. Those who urge the postponement of first Confession are not contributing to the sound formation of Catholic children.

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F. What are the seven capital vices?

St. Gregory the Great originated the familiar list of seven capital "sins" or sinful dispositions, which are best explained by St. Thomas Aquinas. The capital sins are not necessarily the worst sins, nor are sins of these sorts necessarily always mortal. The list of capital vices is not a format for examination of conscience; many sorts of sins are omitted from it. Rather, it is a diagnostic tool, to be used by Christians to examine their lives insofar as they are sinful. The capital vices are sins or sinful dispositions which lead to other sins. Under these heads one finds, as it were, sins which one commits for their own sake; other sins are committed because of them.[3]

Looking at a typical Christian life, such as one's own, one finds much which is not perfectly integrated with one's living faith, not only because of immaturity, but also because of disintegrity and habits of (at least venial) sin. One's life insofar as it is sinful never can have the complete unity which the life of a saint can have. Yet, it has some patterns of regularity. A consideration of the capital vices helps one to see the main areas in one's life where sin is in control.

This consideration is most likely to be helpful if one considers not only temptations to commit serious sins of weakness--which are obvious enough--but rather sets these aside temporarily and considers those sinful dispositions which are less obtrusive and which one accepts without struggle. The list of capital vices is an aid for this sort of examination; if these vices are ignored, they inevitably give rise to temptations to commit mortal sins, according to the fourth way described in the preceding section by which venial sins lead to mortal sins.

Some of the capital vices are sinful dispositions which compete with love of God and neighbor; they provide alternative sorts of fulfillment--alternatives which, of course, are spurious and far inferior to true fulfillment. Thus pride is a disposition to fulfillment in status and the respect of other people; lust and gluttony are dispositions to fulfillment in immediate, sensory gratifications; avarice is a disposition to fulfillment in possessions.

The other capital vices are sinful dispositions which are taken up as a kind of defense of one's imperfection and sinfulness; they are directed against what really is good, insofar as the true good is a threat to one's sinful self. Thus sloth is a disposition to avoid devotion and a more intense moral and spiritual life, because devotion would require that one give up sins and overcome imperfections. Envy is a disposition against the true good of others, because their goodness makes unwanted demands upon oneself. Anger is a disposition against goods experienced in oneself, which are felt to be evils, insofar as they pose a threat to one's sinful self.

G. The capital sins in contemporary terms

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One is likely to miss the full significance of this insightful analysis of sinful character if one does not use some imagination to translate it into contemporary terms. One need not be analytically precise in this sort of reflection. The following translation is offered merely by way of example.

Pride: One wishes to be somebody. One tries to get through school in order to gain a respected status--to be a doctor, a priest, or a businessman. In one's work, one tries always to move up the ladder of position and power. One's identity depends upon the relationships one has with other people. One wants to rise, not to be at the bottom of the social heap. One wants to be respected and liked, not to be looked down on, considered odd, or regarded as a nuisance by others.

Covetousness: One wishes to have things. One wants clothes and a car. One would like a nice house in a good neighborhood and good furniture. One wants to be well to do, not in need of anything. One spends a good deal of time and effort taking care of one's things. To have what one wants seems more important than being a better sort of person. The external is vital--for example, the wedding or the ordination ceremony is very significant, while careful preparation for marriage or ordination is less significant.

Lust: One wishes to have instant gratification. One wants orgasms when one feels the inclination. But lust is not limited to this pleasure. One wants food and drink which will be pleasant; one wants to be amused and entertained constantly; one wants to feel no pain; one wants everything one wants right now. Even in prayer, one wants to feel one is getting something out of one's prayer; one expects the liturgy to make one feel better.

Gluttony: One wishes always to have more in order to have a good margin for security. One wants to have a constantly rising standard of living. One wants to be well-insured and to have a large savings account, to make sure that one will be cared for in retirement. One wants to have more time for oneself, and so one carefully avoids becoming too committed. One wants to live as long as possible, and so at once sets aside any commitment or good work which threatens health.

Envy: One wishes there were not any truly better people around. They make it difficult to maintain the fiction that being better is not really possible. Sometimes they even offer criticism; one wishes people would not be so "judgmental." One prefers friends who are slightly inferior to oneself morally and spiritually; they are regular folks with whom one can feel comfortable.

Anger: One cannot stand anyone or anything which gets in the way. Thus obstacles to gaining status, to having things, to instant gratification, and to security are resented. Especially resented are spiritual threats: Do not tell me what the Church teaches about this matter; I follow my own conscience. One resents anyone in authority who tries to limit one's freedom to do as one pleases. "I" and "me" and "my" and "mine" often are closely linked to flashes of overt anger, for people prevent me from reaching

my goals, they mistreat or take my things, they interfere with my pleasures, and they threaten my security.

Sloth: One tries hard to keep one's mind and heart closed. One carefully avoids experiencing anything or doing anything which would threaten the fragile equilibrium of one's sinful life. One likes the status quo. A largely immature conscience, more concerned with superego guilt feelings and rule-keeping than with moral truth, makes only limited demands, and so one prefers to cling to this sort of conscience. One escapes into intense activity--hard work, social life, organizational matters, pastoral responsibilities--in order to avoid the recollected moment of truth.

H. How are cupidity and pride general principles of sin?

In Scripture two classes of sins are mentioned especially as the root of all sin--cupidity and pride. "The love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Tm 6.10); "For pride is the reservoir of sin, a source which runs over with vice" (Sir 10.13).

Love of money really amounts to love of liberty and the power to do as one pleases. One who has this liberty and power is easily able to do evil; one who seeks it is looking for the opportunity to do evil. Moreover, love of money leads to injustice to others. The marxist analysis of social evil is not wholly wrongheaded, although (like the text quoted which involves hyperbole) it is oversimplified. There was no money at all in the earliest human societies, but Man sinned from the beginning. Moreover, diabolical evil is not materialistic.

There is a "lust" or cupidity which St. Paul identifies with idolatry (cf. Col 3.5; Eph 5.5). Idolatry is characteristic of paganism and is the source of all pagan vices (cf. Rom 1.21-23; Wis 14.27). It is not merely an honest error in religion; rather, it is a humanly contrived religion, intended to provide gods which can be manipulated and which make few serious moral demands. "Cupidity" or "coveting" is used in an extended sense to refer to all wrongful desire (cf. Rom 7.7; 1 Cor 10.6-10). Thus cupidity and idolatry come together in the human will to have what one wants rather than what God wants. Wrongful desire and the displacement of God from His unique supremacy always go together (cf. Gn 3.5-6).

When cupidity and idolatry are regarded in this way, both of them are aspects of the same basic attitude which is involved in sinful pride. The Jewish sage who identified pride as the reservoir or root of all sin also identified the source of the pride with which he was concerned: "The beginning of pride is man's stubbornness in the withdrawing of his heart from his Maker; For pride is the reservoir of sin" (Sir 10.12-13). "Pride" here clearly means much more than status-seeking; arrogance, boasting, or a haughty attitude. Primarily it is not a defect in relationships with other people, but unwillingness to submit to God.

In chapter twenty, sections C through E, I described Christian humility and its related dispositions of thankfulness and childlikeness. It is a basic mode of Christian response and the foundation of all the other Christian virtues. As opposed to it, pride, which can be understood to include the disobedience and rebelliousness which are opposed to meekness, is the fundamental obstacle to Christian moral and spiritual growth. Pride, as opposed to humility, is an unreadiness to seek and accept everything from God; affirmatively, pride is a will to be self-reliant and self-responsible--as it were to be a divine person come of age, instead of a "mere" child of God. "Let my will be done"--such is the prayer of pride.

Although pride, thus correctly understood, is fundamental to all sin, one must be very careful not to confuse this disposition with more specific ones or to draw false conclusions about the spiritual life.

One confuses this disposition with others if one supposes that the fundamental evil of pride is especially present in interpersonal relationships with other people, and that one can avoid pride by taking a self-depreciating attitude or by being careful to remain one of the mediocre crowd. The example of Jesus clearly stands against this misunderstanding. He frankly asserts His own status for the glory of the Father (cf. Jn 8.45-57). Similarly, in Christ every Christian can boast and have great confidence (cf. Heb 3.6, 14). The Christian can stand up straight with full assurance (cf. Wis 5.1-5). The mark of the legitimate pride of the Christian is that nothing is claimed as if it were one's own; one's boast is in the Lord from whom alone one's goodness comes (cf. Rom 5.11).

Furthermore, that pride which is basically opposed to humility is not a capital sin. One does not commit this sin of asserting one's autonomy except in wrongly choosing something else. Hence, one does not commit other sins for the sake of opposing oneself to God. One does not decide to disobey God and then think of some disobedience to commit. One rather thinks of some sin to commit--not because it is a sin, but because it has the appeal of the limited good it offers--and then, ordinarily very reluctantly, one decides to disobey God.

Hence, the pride which is a capital sin is not the root of all sin. One must oppose this specific pride, but one also must oppose every other form of sinfulness. It would be a mistake to assume that if one does not seek one's fulfillment in social status and the respect of other people, then one is essentially humble and a good Christian.

I. The notion of sins which cannot be forgiven

It is a matter of Catholic teaching that using "can" in an absolute sense, every sin can be forgiven during this life; the grace of God always is available and the power of the Church is not limited, so that one who is willing to accept forgiveness always can have it (cf. DS 349/167). Nevertheless, certain texts of Scripture indicate that some sins cannot be forgiven. Obviously, "cannot" must be used in some restricted sense when these sins are said to be beyond forgiveness.

One passage is a saying attributed to Jesus, which contrasts sins committed against Himself with blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The latter sin is unforgivable (cf. Mk 3.28-29; Mt 12.31-32; Lk 12.10). A plausible interpretation of this saying is that

blasphemy against the Holy Spirit attributes His work to some other power (such as the Devil). But the present work of God can be recognized only by the work of the Spirit. Therefore, if one insists on refusing to recognize the Spirit at work, God cannot communicate; one has effectively sealed oneself off (cf. JBC 43.83). Obviously, if one gives up one's defense--as one in this sinful condition still is tempted by God's grace to do-- the sin becomes forgivable.

In a similar way, one can understand the sin which according to St. John is deadly (cf. 1 Jn 5.16). It can be taken to be a willful refusal to believe (cf. 1 Jn 5.10; Jn 3.18, 36; 8.24). Since forgiveness of sins comes through faith, one who refuses to believe cannot be forgiven; whereas those who believe are forgiven their sins and made children of God (cf. Jn 1.12-13).

Apostasy also can be regarded as a sin which cannot be forgiven (cf. Heb 6.4-6, 10.26-31). Since the Church has the power to forgive sins, one who rejects the Church likewise rejects the source of forgiveness.

In all of these cases, what is in question is a sin which is more radical than most mortal sins, for it blocks the means of forgiveness. If Christians cling to imperfection and venial sin, they are going to be tempted to commit mortal sins--for example, sins of weakness. However, normally this situation is not yet desperate, since the sinner through weakness is quickly inclined to seek forgiveness and to regain the safety of God's love. But a far more dangerous situation is constituted if one commits a mortal sin which one cannot easily repent at once. One is moving down the road to death, for sin is reaching maturity: "Once passion has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin reaches maturity it begets death."

This downward course of sin, which goes beyond ordinary mortal sins toward eternal destruction, is reflected in a traditional list of six sins against the Holy Spirit: impenitence, obduracy in sin, presumption, despair, rejection of the known truth, and envy of the grace which others enjoy.[4] In these sins, one can observe a certain order and dynamism, by which the final stages of the sinful life are lived. At each stage, the sinner becomes more and more insulated from God's love, and so the sin becomes less and less forgivable, although (absolutely speaking) forgiveness remains a possibility until death.

The traditional list of sins originated with St. Augustine, and most great theologians of the middle ages treated these sins as a special topic. I follow but freely develop the treatment of them provided by St. Thomas Aquinas.[5] I divide impenitence into an initial and a final rejection of grace.

J. How are the sins against the Holy Spirit related to one another?

Initial impenitence: One chooses to commit a mortal sin and to remain in mortal sin indefinitely. For example, a boy or girl who has committed sins of weakness in the sexual domain enters into a steady or continuing relationship with another person; the relationship involves sexual sins, and the boy or girl is prepared to remain in the relationship regardless of his or her passing emotional states. The sin is no longer one of weakness. Or a young man who is doing advanced studies in theology, philosophy, psychology, or some other field which has a bearing upon faith and morals begins to encounter serious difficulties with respect to Catholic teaching, knows he has a grave obligation to try to clear up these difficulties, but does not wish to take the time and use the energy (which might require suspending study for a while) to do so. He chooses to continue his studies without seriously trying to resolve the difficulties they are causing for his faith. Or again, a businesswoman understates her income and defrauds both a friend who has loaned her money to start the business and the government; she realizes that the fraud against her friend, at least, is a grave sin, but she chooses to commit it in order to succeed in her venture.

Obduracy: The sinner is drawn by various graces to repent but resists repentance as if it were a temptation. "Obduracy" is the hardening of the heart which often is mentioned in Scripture; it is attributed to God, since it is a consequence of His continuing effort to win the sinner back (cf. Jn 12.31-50). The sinful refusal, of course, in no way is caused by God. For example, the sinner perhaps hears a sermon, reads something, observes someone giving a better example, is moved by a thought about Jesus crucified, or in some other way is made to think about his or her condition. But the sinner refuses to think the matter through, and instead quickly turns attention to something else.

If there is a family member, a friend, a coworker, a teacher, or someone else who reminds the sinner of his or her state; the reminder is resented, and the sinner looks for a reason to find fault with and condemn this person. (This reaction is the beginning of the sin of envy of the grace which others enjoy.) Moreover, the sinner looks to a new morality, to consequentialism, to the claim that the sin really is necessary rather than free, or to some other rationalization in an effort to deny the sinful character of the sin without repenting. Perhaps he or she goes from one confessor or counselor to another, seeking one who will approve the sin. (This self-blinding by rationalization, which today often is assisted by theological dissent, is the beginning of the sin of rejection of the known truth.)

Presumption: The sinner, still somewhat aware of being in a state of grave sin, takes the position that God will overlook the sin despite persistence in it. Often the argument is: I always can count on God's grace, so I will repent in my own good time. Often the sinner will become legalistic, in an effort to live a generally spotless life, or will do various works of charity and become active with respect to social issues, or will participate enthusiastically in the liturgy--any or all of these to provide insurance and to create a spurious foundation for the thought: My generally good life outweighs the small area in which I am a sinner. Bad theories of the fundamental option are especially appealing to sinners at this stage.

Despair: The sinner abandons hope for his or her own salvation. Often despair and loss of faith occur together; the sinner simply gives up both the belief and the hope that heavenly fulfillment will be attained. But despair can come about without

loss of faith. For example, the presumptuous sinner who has counted on repenting in his or her own good time experiments with "repentance," without really wanting to repent right now. Since the experiment is insincere, it fails; the sinner concludes that grace is unavailable rather than that the defect was in his or her own insincerity. If grace is unavailable, the situation is hopeless, and thus presumption changes into despair. Again, a sinner who relies on false theories comes to realize their speciousness, loses the support they provided, and presumption changes into despair. Again, the presumptuous sinner, having taken a false view of grace and God's causality, thinks that God has caused the sin, and assumes that this fact shows that he or she is destined for hell.

Rejection of the known truth: The sinner has been evading the truth right along, and now this evasion reaches its final stage, as the darkness of sin is preferred to the light of faith (cf. Jn 3.19-21). This step can be taken at any time, even with the first choice to commit mortal sin and stay in it. However, if one despairs without losing one's faith at the same time, then one is in horrible anguish, for one believes in hell and expects to end in hell. The sinner in despair chooses to abandon faith rather than to remain in this anguish or to repent. (The latter now seems hardly possible.) A very important argument used by the sinner at this stage is drawn from evil: The evil in the world shows that God is not a good and loving Father; therefore, faith is false and must be abandoned. The argument is most plausible for one who by despair has taken a practical attitude which would make God responsible for evil.

Envy of the grace which others enjoy: The sinner at every stage has resented and found fault with others who could and would have served as media of grace and forgiveness, and now regards as dangerous enemies those who continue to believe in God, to hope in Him, and to strive to be faithful to Him. Even after the rejection of faith, a residue of the past remains in the sinner's heart; the baptismal character is not gone, and the sinner is like a prodigal son or daughter with amnesia about his or her own identity, which he or she does not want to remember. The sinner perhaps tries to lead others into sin, or becomes militantly antireligious; perhaps he or she criticizes the faith with philosophical arguments and condemns it as a mass of superstition and priestcraft, or becomes active in Planned Parenthood, or does volunteer work counseling women to have abortions, or tries to discourage young people who might have a vocation to the priesthood or religious life.

Final impenitence: The sinner resists every grace and persists in sin until death.

35 K. Some pastoral notes on the preceding dynamics

Ideally, one avoids initial impenitence, by never committing a mortal sin or, at least, by not committing any mortal sin which one cannot repent at once. To promote this situation, children before adolescence should be well instructed and led to make a general commitment of personal vocation to some form of the apostolate of the Church. I will discuss this point in part seven.

Those who have rejected their faith and are active enemies of the Church--whether they are Catholics or not--need special help. One must understand their situation, yet neither condone their sinfulness in any way nor accept their negative attitudes, words, and acts as definitive. They are lost sheep in wolves' clothing, but also, unfortunately, with wolves' fangs. The problem is to find some common ground for a good relationship without sharing in or approving anything evil. The very memory and residue of the life of faith which provide the basis for such people's opposition to the Church must be used as the point of leverage by someone who tries to reach them. The inconsistency between caring about something so much as to hate it, yet not believing in it, must be made clear.

Those who are in despair or tempted to it must be reassured that forgiveness is possible whenever one is wholeheartedly ready to accept God's mercy. Those who think they know by experience that repentance is impossible for them can be helped to see the source of this mistake. False conceptions about divine causality and grace need to be cleared up; these remain remarkably prevalent even though they have been submerged by widespread silence about predestination.[6] A pastor whose hope is genuine, joyful, and wholly free of anxiety can greatly help people with intact faith who are tempted to despair.

The genuineness of hope is shown by its distinction from any sort of illusory optimism about salvation. Optimism comports well with presumption, since optimism fails to face the full reality of evil and assumes the possibility of overcoming it by one's own power. Hope recognizes the human extremity of sin, has no illusions about its full meaning and implications, does not suppose that a little mortal sin can be diluted by a great deal of human goodness, and calls upon God for the power to repent wholeheartedly. Hence, those who are in a state of presumption or tempted by it must be disillusioned. For this reason, one-sided preaching and catechesis, which stresses only God's kindness and mercy, must be avoided; the whole of Christian truth must be presented in a balanced way. When preaching and teaching is aimed at disillusioning the presumptuous, it is vital to stress the availability of the grace of repentance.

The obduracy which is basic to the sins against hope and faith is not easy to challenge directly. Yet the hardened heart and darkened mind are not totally insensitive and blind. Especially at moments of crisis in life--such as a serious illness, a death in a family, a major failure in one's projects--obdurate persons are shaken and can be reached. Those who are obdurate and know it must be encouraged to continue to participate in the life of the Church in other respects, yet discouraged from receiving the sacraments, since they are unwilling to receive them with good dispositions. If obdurate persons are encouraged to receive the sacraments without repentance, they are being scandalized--that is, led into the worse state of the sin of presumption. For this reason, no priest should connive in so-called internal forum solutions to marriage cases or give sacramental absolution without individual confession except in the very extraordinary circumstances for which this practice is authorized.

"Internal forum solution" refers to a judgment of personal conscience by an individual validly married in the eyes of the Church that he or she is not really married and is free to marry. One cannot prevent some people from making such judgments on

their own, and these judgments could be sincere. But the making of such a judgment presupposes both that the bond of marriage is more a private than an ecclesial matter (which certainly is false with respect to sacramental marriage) and that individuals who appear to have met the conditions to bind themselves in valid marriage can reach moral certitude in their own minds that they did not meet them (which almost always is false). [7]

5 To encourage people to make such judgments of conscience both is to disregard the common interest of the Church in the sacrament of matrimony and is to promote the self-deception which is essential to obduracy and presumption.

10 The situation of people who are impenitent but not obdurate presents a very familiar pastoral problem. Much preaching on special occasions (such as retreats and missions) used to be directed toward such people. Probably such individuals are less likely now to be accessible except at Sunday Mass. Preaching concerning the last things, with a positive but not exclusive emphasis upon fulfillment in Christ, should be directed toward such sinners.

15 L. On the general concept of punishment

To punish someone is to impose upon him or her some sort of restriction, loss, or pain as an appropriate response by others to his or her wrongdoing. Some punishment is 20 educative and medicinal; it is an appropriate response to wrongdoing in that it tends to call the wrongdoer's attention to the wrong he or she has done, both to motivate repentance and to deter from continuing offenses. Such punishment is easily understood, and I need not explain it. The type of punishment I am going to explain here is retributive punishment, which is an appropriate response to wrongdoing in that it reestablishes a 25 balance of justice which has been upset by the wrongdoer's act.

"Retributive" must be distinguished from "vindictive." In our society, the concept of retribution as a good, which one rightly wills to wrongdoers (even to oneself if one is in the wrong), has been almost entirely lost sight of. The tendency is to think that the retribution inherent in true, nonmedicinal punishment is simply a matter of communal 30 vindictiveness, as if punishment were a rendering to criminals of evil for the evil they have done to society. However, genuine retribution is wholly distinct from revenge. It is a matter of doing good--that is, justice--to those who have done evil.

Criminals, by the very fact that they commit crimes, take unfair advantage. They 35 disturb the equilibrium of the body politic; this disturbance is a threat to the unity of society. Criminal acts also do specific damage--murder deprives someone of life, theft of possessions, and so on. But from a social point of view, the primary wrongfulness of the criminal act is the criminal's self-indulgence against the order of justice. For this reason, unsuccessful attempts to commit crimes and conspiracies to commit them can be punished as crimes, even though no harm has been done. The criminal takes unfair 40 advantage of society and of every law-abiding member of it.

Just laws direct actions toward the fulfillment of the common purposes of a society. Criminals freely choose to violate the fair system of cooperation. In doing so, they break faith with other members of society; they violate their commitments to cooperate with others in a common life. Once a crime has been committed, society as a whole 45 and every member of it has an interest in reestablishing the order of justice. The disturbed equilibrium must be restored. Because this is a common interest, it must be served by lawful procedures carried out by authority in the name of the community as a whole.

Criminals, of course, enjoy many goods for which they are at least partially dependent upon society. Without society and more or less just laws, life, liberty, and 50 the pursuit of happiness would be impossible for everyone, including criminals. Thus it is fair that criminals, who have taken advantage of others, be deprived of some of the goods they otherwise would enjoy. Criminals voluntarily alter their relationship to society; society rightly and appropriately takes this alteration into account, and alters its relationship with the criminal. 55

Criminals must be dealt with in a way which will restore the disturbed balance of fairness. They must suffer some disadvantage proportionate to the advantage they have gained. Sometimes criminals themselves see the fairness of the reaction of others. But 60 whether criminals are willing to be punished or not, they lose goods to which they otherwise would be entitled. Since everyone naturally desires his or her own good, the loss is contrary to the criminal's desires. The criminal's self-indulgence in committing the crime is balanced by a negation of self, willing or unwilling, in being punished.

Thus in being punished criminals suffer a penalty. The penalty need not be physical pain or mental anguish. It need not be a loss similar to the harm done in committing 65 the crime--for example, an eye for an eye, a life for a life. The loss the criminal must suffer in being justly punished is a loss of freedom to do as he or she pleases. Having taken too much liberty in committing a crime, one loses liberty proportionately in being punished. In this way the shares of liberty are equalized again. Law-abiding persons can consider that in being so they have not been taken unfair advantage of by criminals. 70

Even if criminals repent and are unlikely to commit further crimes, it is wholly fair that punishment be exacted. The breaking of faith and the imbalance it has introduced still must be redressed; in this is the retribution essential to punishment. It is worth noticing that many people who in general deny or do not understand this aspect 75 of punishment nevertheless intuit it very clearly in particular cases. For instance, most people felt that President Nixon should have been made to stand trial and suffer suitable punishment if found guilty. (The omission of punishment by society sometimes can be justified in the interests of other social goods; President Ford's reason for the pardon precisely was that otherwise the matter would unduly distract the nation from other matters.) 80

To treat people who are guilty of crimes as if they were only sick or immature is to deny their personal dignity. People who are guilty of crimes have freely chosen to act contrary to the common good, to break faith with other members of the society, to take more than their share of liberty. To be punished in expiation of a crime is to be treated as a free and responsible person who is capable of repentance, of rededication,

and of renewed trust. Criminals who are justly punished and who understand the justice of the punishment imposed upon them, who repent, and who rededicate themselves to the goods which ground the community have done their part to restore themselves to the status of free and trusted members of society. In doing their time, criminals pay their debt

5 to society.

But what about criminals who are not at all willing to repent? They are hardened--determined to be unfair toward others and to take constant advantage of the society. Toward such criminals, society fairly responds by treating them permanently as nonmembers. In this fairness is the principle which underlies such practices as permanent imprisonment, banishment, and capital punishment (although the last, I believe, ought to be excluded, for although it is not unfair to certain criminals, it does violate the sanctity of life, as I explained in chapter twenty-one, sections N and O.) Since human persons are free, one who freely chooses not to be and not to act like a member of society cannot be forced to be one. To hold such criminals responsible for their crimes is simply

15 to recognize a matter of fact--namely, their own choice to alienate themselves from society.

M. Does God punish?

20 God often punishes medicinally. Although not every evil from which an individual suffers is a sign of his or her own sinfulness, still God does permit humankind to experience the consequences of sin (cf. Gn 3.16-19; Hos 2.8-9; Lk 15.14-20; Rom 5.12; 1 Cor 5.5; 2 Cor 2.6; and so on). Sin is separation from God and willful opposition to His loving plan; punishment does not initiate or impose this separation, but makes clear

25 that it exists. Thus by the punishments which mortal sinners experience in this life, they have an opportunity to learn by experience what sin means for them. The terrible reality of death brings home to humankind a lesson about the meaning of sin which the angels who sinned irremediably never had an opportunity to learn.

30 God also punishes in the sense that He brings it about that the disorder inherent in sin, which disturbs the equilibrium of humankind's relationship with Him, is rectified by the proportionate work of the redemption. Jesus knew punishment, not as if He had sinned, but because He reconciled humankind to God and restored the harmony sin had disturbed (cf. Is 53.4; 1 Pt 2.24; Col 1.20, 2.14). One who accepts a share in the redemption experiences a judgment of expiation in Christ (cf. Rom 3.25-26; Gal 2.19; 2 Cor 5.14).

35 Christians who accept suffering and death in reparation for their own sins and the sins of others, who voluntarily undertake works of penance, and who are purified after death--according to the Catholic doctrine concerning purgatory, which I will discuss in part seven--cooperate with Jesus in His redemptive work. To the extent that they personally have sinned, although they have repented, this share in the redemption makes amends; it is the limited (so-called "temporal") personal punishment appropriate for their sins. One need not suppose that such punishment is in any way especially created or designed by God for the sake of punishment; one can suppose that the inherent order of God's good creation of itself redresses wrongdoing. Death, for example, flows from human nature which exists in separation from God.[8]

45 Scripture also makes clear that God punishes obdurate sinners who refuse every grace of repentance with the eternal death of hell, which is exclusion from the kingdom of heaven (cf. Mt 10.28; Lk 12.5; Rom 6.23; 1 Cor 6.10; Gal 5.19-21; Phil 3.19; 2 Thess 1.9; Heb 10.26-31). I considered hell in chapter four, section O.

50 The important point at present is that nothing requires us to suppose that hell is imposed upon sinners by God's choice, except insofar as their very continuation in existence and the various goods to which sinners are maladjusted depend upon God's choice. The separation from God and the communion of fulfillment, which is essentially what hell consists in, is nothing other than the reality of sin itself--that is, the lasting guilt which the sinner has assumed by sinning and refusing to repent (cf. DS 443/228a, 1002/531, 55 1306/693). Eternal death is a self-made judgment (cf. Jn 3.18-19; 12.47); it is the inherent outcome of sin (cf. Rom 6.21).

Even the positive suffering which Catholic teaching insists must be admitted as part of hell (cf. DS 780/410) need not be thought of as if it were an imposed penalty, as are human penalties for crimes.[9]

60 The sinner who has no part in the heavenly communion nevertheless has some sort of life and consciousness. Let us imagine that one is permitted to live forever precisely in the sinful manner in which one lived upon earth. An evening or a few days of sinful self-indulgence can be tremendously appealing in the midst of this present life. Would anyone wish to continue in such limited and inherently unfulfilling activities day after

65 day, age after age, for ever and ever? Would one wish to live forever in a society composed exclusively of obdurate sinners, some of them worse than oneself? Torture by fire might seem preferable to such an existence.

N. Is it compatible with Catholic faith to think of hell as empty?

70 Recently some theologians have proposed that hell is a terrible possibility, but only a possibility. They attempt to argue that one can suppose this possibility will turn out to be one never actually realized. Part of the argument is that the Church has not definitively taught how many people will go to hell or that any particular individual (for example, Judas) is in hell. Hell, then, it is suggested, might turn out to be like a three-dollar bill--something really possible but never actually real.

This suggestion is put forward in the face of New Testament teaching, some of it in statements attributed to Jesus Himself, that sinners will be punished everlastingly (cf. Mk 9.43-48; 2 Thess 1.9; Rv 20.9-15, 21.9; and so forth). As everlasting happiness is promised to those who do works of love, so everlasting punishment is promised to those who neglect to do them (cf. Mt 25.41, 46). There is nothing in the text to justify taking one of these promises seriously and treating the other as a figure of speech. The teaching of the Church faithfully reflects the data of Scripture (cf. DS 76/40, 801/429, 1306/693). Moreover, contrary to the view that the Church has not definitively taught

that anyone is in hell, the most solemn of statements, that of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), is that the damned will suffer perpetual punishment with the Devil (cf. DS 801/429; cf. Mt 25.41). If any nonhuman person really is in hell, why should some human persons not join it?

5 To suppose that hell will turn out to be an empty category is to suppose either that everyone will repent before death, or that everyone will repent after death, or that those who have not repented will be annihilated, or that those who have not repented nevertheless will be included in heavenly communion.

10 There is no reason to think that everyone repents before death. The possibility of repentance after death is incompatible with the Church's teaching; moreover, this solution is at odds with the character of freedom of self-determination, which at present is alterable only because of the imperfect integration of human persons during this life. The possibility of annihilation also is incompatible with the Church's teaching; moreover, this solution is at odds with God's love of all that is good (cf. Wis 11.24), for the reality and freedom of the damned remain great goods, even though their freedom is sinfully abused. Finally, the possibility of the inclusion of the unrepentant in heavenly communion is excluded by God's love itself, for He would not force His life on those who do not wish to share in it--to do so would be like rape--and the unrepentant sinner is self-closed against God's offer of communion.

20 One also must ask: How real a possibility is hell if it is a possibility which never is realized? If theology can provide any reasons whatsoever for thinking the possibility is not realized in some instances, these reasons actually will be arguments for the unreality of hell. For instance, to argue from God's love to an empty hell actually is to argue that God's love is incompatible with anyone ending in hell, and this is to argue for the impossibility of hell. If hell is to remain a real possibility, there can be no theologically convincing argument against populating it, because we have no independent source of evidence on this matter. In the case of the three-dollar bill, we happen to know as a matter of fact that this is an unrealized possibility.

30 Furthermore, all Christian teaching from the New Testament until now has proposed hell realistically, as a possibility which, unfortunately, sometimes is actualized. If this teaching had been inaccurate, the faithful would have been massively misled on a matter of great interest and importance. One can imagine such a deception being practiced as a noble lie by someone not perfectly faithful and true; one cannot imagine it practiced by Jesus, teaching both in in person and through His Church.

35 Finally, even if there were some sort of theoretical case to be made for the theory that hell might be empty--which I grant for the sake of argument but in no way concede--still there is no room for any Christian to accept such a theory as a practical supposition for living his or her own life or to propose to others for living their lives. There is no room for a practical supposition of this sort because for us, here and now, salvation is a task, which must be worked out with fear and trembling (cf. Phil 2.12; 3.12). One who looks at matters practically cannot assume that a real possibility is not really possible for oneself.

40 And, of course, only a person obdurate in sin and tempted to presumption would need to think of things in a different practical perspective. For with genuine hope, one can wait joyfully and without any anxiety whatsoever, confident that God, who has brought one to repentance, will preserve one in His love until the end (cf. Rom 8.35; 2 Tm 4.8). In other words, the theological theory of the empty hell is an effort to substitute speculation for Christian faithfulness and trust in God.

50 0. The many safety nets of the new theology

In the course of this work, especially in part four and in the present part, I have criticized a great many theories which are more or less widely supported today by moral theologians. Subjectivist theories of conscience, consequentialism, the denial of the authority of Catholic moral teaching, the theory of fundamental option, the supposition that sins of weakness are not mortal sins, and the theory of an empty hell are only a half-dozen of the positions I have criticized. None of these theories is very plausible.

60 It is worth asking oneself: What is behind this multitude of theories? I think the answer clearly is that all of them are attempts to achieve a single goal: To permit wills determined to act contrary to very firm and constant Catholic moral teaching to maintain that determination without giving up hope (sometimes presumptuous) of reaching heavenly fulfillment. To put the point in a different way: All of the many major theories of the new moral theology are aimed at preventing obdurate sinners from despairing.

65 But if all these theories are aimed at a single objective, why are there so many of them? Why do they proliferate so? One might suppose that they are simply different approaches, proposed by different individuals or schools. But in fact most of these theories are promoted by the very same people.

70 The multiplicity of theories is accounted for by the fact that Catholic moral principles are like a fortress, whose walls might be breached at many different points. The many implausible theories are as many different efforts to breach the walls at different points. The success of any one attack would win the objective.

75 If this is so, why do the new moral theologians not content themselves with a single, most promising line of attack? I think the answer is that they themselves suspect that none of these theories is very plausible. Thus the same author might promote a subjectivist theory of conscience, but defend consequentialism (which is incompatible with his account of conscience) just in case the first theory does not succeed; he might claim that consequentialism really articulates the Catholic moral tradition (although it does not), yet just in case this claim is not admitted deny the authoritative weight of the tradition; he might go on to argue in favor of fundamental option, just in case his theory of norms fails to show that the sins to be permitted really are virtuous acts; he might argue that sins of weakness are not mortal sins, just in case the theory of fundamental option does not prevent them from really being self-determining acts; finally, as a last desperate effort, he might defend the theory of empty hell, just in case

everything else falls.

The new moral theologian who proceeds in this way is like a man who wishes to jump from a height in the direction of a deep pit, yet to avoid the disaster of falling into the pit. To break his fall, he obtains and deploys a safety net. It looks strong at first glance, but on examination the net appears very weak; it almost falls apart under its own weight. Frantically, the man obtains more nets and deploys them, one above another. But all the nets are like the first one. None of them could bear the man's weight even if he were not falling into it. Still, he has decided to jump, and jump he does. Who would like to be the next to try this stunt with the same equipment?

10 Notes to chapter thirty

- 15 1. See James C. Osbourn, O.P., The Morality of Imperfections (Westminster, Maryland: Carroll Press, 1950), pp. 1-35. Osbourn argues at length that St. Thomas had no place for imperfections (see the conclusions, pp. 225-231). He could be correct, but St. Thomas perhaps missed something important.
- 20 2. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae, 1-2, qu. 75, art. 4.
3. Ibid., qu. 84, art. 3 and 4. Also De malo, qu. 8, art. 1, which introduces a remarkable treatise, qu. 8 through 15.
- 20 4. See Antony Koch, ed. Arthur Preuss, A Handbook of Moral Theology, vol. 2, Sin and the Means of Grace (St. Louis and London: B. Herder Book Co., 1919), pp. 92-95, for bibliography.
- 25 5. St. Thomas, De malo, qu. 3, art. 14; Summa theologiae, 2-2, qu. 14, art. 1. The list became standardized through Peter Lombard; see St. Thomas, 2 Sent., d. 43, qu. 1, art. 2.
- 30 6. There is a Catholic doctrine of predestination, based on Scripture (cf. Rom 8.30), taught by the Church (cf. DS 621/316, 1567/827), and well explained by St. Thomas, Summa theologiae, 1, qu. 23. This doctrine neither excludes human free choice nor admits that anyone is predestined to hell; it insists on the absolutely essential point that no one is saved except by God's grace.
- 35 7. See John R. Connery, S.J., et al., "Appendix B: The Problem of Second Marriages: An Interim Pastoral Statement by the Study Committee Commissioned by the Board of Directors of the Catholic Theological Society of America: Report of August 1972," Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America. 27 (1972), pp. 233-240. This committee encourages people to form their own consciences regarding their freedom to marry, and urges that they be helped to do so with "professional assistance" from the "local Christian community"--presumably, from a parish priest. About the all-important question of criteria, the committee has (pp. 236-237) one long sentence: "While the criteria that should guide such conscience decisions can hardly be spelled out precisely or exhaustively, the following may be helpful in determining whether a true Christian marriage ever came into existence: 1) fidelity or its absence from the beginning of the union; 2) absence of every conjugal or familial characteristic; 3) brevity of common life; 4) tolerance or intolerance of common life." Obviously, the last item is the important one; the first two could easily indicate conditions which would make a legitimate case for nullity in a tribunal. But the fourth could not, since it is susceptible to degree, and in some degree will be found to be verified by every couple who are divorced and want to remarry. The list of criteria is like that for abortion: the mother's life is at stake, rape, incest, severe congenital defect, and the mother's physical or mental health. "Mental health" is elastic enough to cover any desire for abortion.
- 40 8. St. Thomas, Summa theologiae, 1-2, qu. 87, art. 1, already explains punishment as a response of order (or the one responsible for it) to the disturbance of the order by wrongdoing.
- 45 9. See Charles Journet, The Meaning of Evil (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1963), pp. 186 and 200. Also see E. J. Fortman, S.J., Everlasting Life after Death (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1976), pp. 172-174. The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Ecclesiology," L'Osservatore Romano (English edition), July 23, 1979, p. 7, restates the traditional doctrine in a way which devalues any "picture" or "imaginative representations" yet maintains the essence: The Church "believes that there will be eternal punishment for the sinner, who will be deprived of the sight of God, and that this punishment will have a repercussion on the whole being of the sinner." Thus one need not think in terms of an imposed pain of any sort; the positive suffering is a repercussion consequent upon self-determined separation instead of communion with God.
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