

PART TWO

Growth in Holiness

Chapter 7

Conversion From Sin

It is a truism in psychology that no two persons are absolutely identical. The same thing is true in the spiritual life: **no two souls will follow the same path to perfection, identical in every respect. On the spiritual level the differences are rooted in the, predominant moral predispositions of individuals as well as the particular graces that God gives to each one.**

But grace does not destroy or replace nature; it works through and perfects nature.

Consequently the body-soul composite of the individual person can be a help or hindrance to the operations of the virtues infused with sanctifying grace. It is therefore necessary, especially for spiritual directors, to understand the ways in which the psychosomatic structure can affect the work of sanctification.

This need is all the more evident when we realize that in this practical, applied part of spiritual theology we are not dealing with human nature in a vague and transcendental sense we are discussing the spiritual life of individual persons who are striving to die to sin and live the fullness of charity. We must therefore consider the human person in terms of temperament and character, which are the basic elements that constitute personhood.

The Psychosomatic Structure

According to G. W. Allport, **personality can be defined as "the dynamic organization, within the individual, of those psychophysical systems that determine his characteristic behavior and thought."**⁽¹⁾

Most psychologists and social scientists maintain that the human personality is influenced primarily by two factors: heredity and environment. Heredity is the fundamental source of temperament, and environment is the basic causal factor in character. It should be noted, however, that environment is used in the widest possible sense; it includes the domestic environment of the family and school, culture, economic and social status, and religious influences.

But to avoid a blind determinism of personality we must add a third factor that is most important of all -- the free will by which we make choices. The way in which we use our capabilities, respond to our inner drives, and relate to our environment depends ultimately on our own free choice or volition.

Types of Temperament

There is a diversity of opinion among psychologists concerning the classification of temperament. **For our purposes we may define temperament as the pattern of inclinations and reactions that proceed from the physiological constitution of the individual.** It is a dynamic factor that determines to a great extent the manner in which an individual will react to stimuli of

various kinds. Rooted as it is in the physiological structure, temperament is something innate and hereditary; it is the natural inclination of the somatic structure. It is, therefore, something permanent and admits of only secondary modification; it can never be totally destroyed. The axiom "grace does not destroy nature but perfects it" has its most obvious application in the area of temperament.

The classification of the temperaments is based on the predominant characteristics of the physiological constitutions. It is by no means exclusive or definitive, nor does it signify that there are "pure" temperaments. As a matter of fact, individuals generally manifest a combination of several temperaments, but one or another will usually predominate. We shall use the emotions as the basis of our definition and classification of temperaments because the emotions are psychosomatic reactions of the individual and hence closely related to temperament. But we discuss the four temperaments according to the ancient classification of (1) sanguine, (2) melancholic, (3) choleric, and (4) phlegmatic.

Sanguine Temperament.

A person of sanguine temperament reacts quickly and strongly to almost any stimulation or impression, but the reaction is usually of short duration. The stimulation or impression is quickly forgotten, and the remembrance of past experiences does not easily arouse a new response.

Among the good qualities of the sanguine temperament, we may list the following: affability and cheerfulness; sympathy and generosity toward others; sensitivity and compassion for the sufferings of others; docility, sincerity, and spontaneity. There may at times be a vehement reaction to injuries received, but all is soon forgotten and no rancor remains. Others are attracted by the individual's goodness of heart and contagious enthusiasm.

Sanguine persons usually have a serene view of life and are optimists. They are gifted with a great deal of common sense and a practical approach to life; they tend to idealize rather than criticize. Since they possess an affectionate nature, they make friends easily and sometimes love their friends with great ardor or even passion. Their intellects are alert, and they learn quickly, although often without much depth. Their memory dwells on pleasant and optimistic things, and their imagination is active and creative. Consequently, they readily excel in art, oratory, and the related fields, though they do not often attain the stature of the learned or the scholars. Sanguine persons could be superior types of individuals if they possessed as much depth as they do facility, and if they were as tenacious in their work as they are productive of new ideas and projects.

But each temperament will also be characterized by certain defects or predispositions to evil. ***The principal defects of the sanguine temperament are superficiality, inconstancy, and sensuality.*** The first defect is due primarily to their immediate perception of ideas and situations, their retentive memory, and the creative activity of their imagination. While they appear to grasp in an instant even the most difficult problem or subject, they sometimes see it only superficially and incompletely. As a result, they run the risk of hasty judgments, of acting with insufficient

reason, and of formulating inaccurate or false conclusions. ***They are more interested in breadth of knowledge than depth.***

The inconstancy of sanguine persons is the result of the short duration of their impressions and reactions. They may pass quickly from joy to sorrow. They quickly repent of their sins but may return to them on the first occasion that presents itself. Being readily moved by the impression of the moment, they easily succumb to temptation. As a rule they abandon any effort that is of long duration. They have great difficulty in observing custody of the external senses and the imagination and are easily distracted in prayer. Their occasional periods of great fervor are often followed by discouragement or indifference.

From the foregoing it follows that sensuality finds easy access to the sanguine temperament. Such persons are often victims of gluttony and lust. They may react strongly and with great sorrow after they have fallen, but they lack the energy and perseverance to fight against the inclinations of the flesh when the passions are again aroused. The entire organism is quickly alerted when the occasion is offered for sensual pleasure, and the strong tendency of the individual to sensuality causes the imagination to produce such phantasms very easily.

Sanguine persons should utilize their good qualities, such as energy, affection, vivacity, and sensitivity, but they should take care that these qualities are directed to objects that are good and wholesome. For them more than others the advice of St. Augustine has special significance: "Choose wisely and then love with all your heart."

To overcome superficiality they will acquire the habit of reflection and of thinking a matter through before they act. Against their inconstancy they will strengthen their will to carry through resolutions that have been made and be faithful in the practice of prayer and the performance of good works, even in periods of ~ aridity or in times of hardship and difficulty. Lastly, sensuality can be combatted by constant vigilance and immediate flight from the occasions of sin, custody of the external senses and the imagination, the practice of recollection, and practices of mortification.

Melancholic Temperament.

The melancholic temperament is weak as regards reaction to stimulus, and it is difficult to arouse; however, after repeated impressions the reaction is strong and lasting, so that the melancholic temperament does not forget easily.

As regards good qualities that serve as predispositions to virtue, ***persons of melancholic temperament are inclined to reflection, piety, and the interior life.*** They are compassionate toward those who suffer, attracted to the corporal works of mercy, and able to endure suffering to the point of heroism in the performance of their duties. ***They have a sharp and profound intellect and, because of their natural bent to solitude and reflection, they generally consider matters thoroughly.*** They may become detached and dry intellectuals or contemplatives who dedicate themselves to the interior life of prayer. They usually appreciate the fine arts but are more drawn to the speculative sciences.

When they love, it is with difficulty that they detach themselves from the object of their love. They suffer greatly if others treat them with coldness or ingratitude. The power of their will is greatly affected by their physical strength and health. If their physical powers are exhausted, their will is weak, but if they are in good health and spirits they are energetic workers. Normally they do not experience the vehement passions that may torment persons of a sanguine temperament. We may say in general that this temperament is opposed to the sanguine temperament as the choleric temperament is opposed to the phlegmatic temperament.

The unfavorable traits of the melancholic temperament are an exaggerated tendency to sadness and melancholy; an inclination to magnify difficulties and thus to lose confidence in self; excessive reserve and timidity, with a propensity to scrupulosity. Persons of melancholic temperament do not show their feelings as do the sanguine; they suffer in silence because they find it difficult to reveal themselves. They tend to be pessimistic, and many enterprises are never begun because of their lack of confidence.

Those who are in charge of educating or training the melancholic temperament should keep in mind their strong tendency to concentrate excessively on themselves. It is important to inculcate in these persons a strong confidence in God and in themselves, as well as a more optimistic view of life. Since they have good intellects and tend to reflection, they should be made to realize that there is no reason for them to be timid or irresolute. At all costs the director must destroy their indecision and get them to make firm resolutions and to undertake projects with enthusiasm and optimism. Sometimes it is necessary to give them a special regimen of rest and nourishment and to forbid them to spend long hours in prayer and solitude or to observe fasts.

Choleric Temperament.

Persons of a choleric temperament are easily and strongly aroused, and the impression lasts for a long time. There is the temperament that produces great saints or great sinners, and while all the temperaments can contribute to sanctity, the choleric temperament is outstanding.

The good qualities of the temperament can be summarized as follows: great energy and activity, sharp intellect, strong and resolute will, good powers of concentration, constancy, magnanimity, and liberality. Choleric persons are practical rather than theoretical; they are more inclined to work than to think. Inactivity is repugnant to them, and they are always looking forward to the next labor or to the formulation of some great project. Once they have set upon a plan of work, they immediately set their hand to the task. Hence ***this temperament produces many leaders, superiors, apostles. It is the temperament of government and administration.***

These persons do not leave for tomorrow what they can do today, but sometimes they may try to do today what they should leave for tomorrow. If difficulties and obstacles arise, they immediately set about to overcome them and, although they often have strong movements of irascibility and impatience in the face of problems, once they have conquered these movements they acquire a tenderness and sweetness of disposition that are noteworthy.

The tenacity of the choleric temperament sometimes produces the following evil effects: hardness, obstinacy, insensibility, anger, and pride.

If choleric persons are resisted, they may easily become violent, cruel, arrogant, unless the Christian virtues moderate these inclinations. If defeated by others, they may nurture hatred in their hearts until they have obtained their vengeance. They easily become ambitious and seek their own glory. They have greater patience than do the sanguine, but they may lack delicacy of feeling, are often insensitive to the feelings of others, and therefore lack tact in human relations. Their passions, when aroused, are so strong and impetuous that they smother the tenderer emotions and the spirit of sacrifice that spring spontaneously from more sympathetic hearts. Their fever for activity and their eagerness to execute their resolutions cause them to disregard others, to thrust all impediments aside, and to give the appearance of being egoists. In their treatment of others they sometimes display coldness and indifference, not to mention impatience with persons who are less talented. It is evident from the foregoing that if the choleric person pursues the path of evil, there is no length to which he or she will not go in order to achieve a goal.

Choleric persons can be individuals of great worth if they succeed in controlling and guiding their energies. They could arrive at the height of perfection with relative facility. In their hands even the most difficult tasks seem to be brought to an easy and ready solution. Therefore, when they have themselves under control and are rightly directed, they will not cease in their efforts until they have reached the summit. Above all, they need to cultivate true humility of heart, to be compassionate to the weak and the uninstructed, not to humiliate or embarrass others, not to flaunt their superiority, and to treat all persons with tenderness and understanding. They should be taught how to be detached from themselves and to manifest a generous love toward others.

Phlegmatic Temperament.

The phlegmatic is rarely aroused emotionally and, if so, only weakly. The impressions received usually last for only a short time and leave no trace.

The good characteristics of phlegmatic persons are that they work slowly but assiduously; they are not easily irritated by insults, misfortunes, or sickness; they usually remain tranquil, discreet, and sober; they have a great deal of common sense and mental balance.

They do not possess the inflammable passions of the sanguine temperament, the deep passions of the melancholic temperament, or the ardent passions of the choleric temperament. In their speech they are orderly, clear, positive, and measured, rather than florid and picturesque. They are more suited to scientific work which involves long and patient research and minute investigation than to original productions. They have good hearts, but they seem to be cold. They would sacrifice to the point of heroism if it were necessary, but they lack enthusiasm and spontaneity because they are reserved and somewhat indolent by nature. They are prudent, sensible, reflective, and work with a measured pace. They attain their goals without fanfare or violence because they usually avoid difficulties rather than attacking them. Physically phlegmatics are usually of robust build, slow in movements, and possessing an amiable face.

The defective qualities of the phlegmatic temperament are their slowness and calmness, which cause these persons to lose many good opportunities because they delay so long in putting works into operation.

tend to live by and for themselves, almost to the point of egoism. They are not suitable for government and administration. They are not usually drawn to corporal penances and mortification, and there is no fear that they will kill themselves by penance and self-abnegation. In extreme cases they become so lethargic and insensible that they become completely deaf to the invitation or command that would raise them out of their stupor.

Phlegmatics can avoid the bad effects of their temperament if they are inculcated with deep convictions and if they demand of themselves methodical and constant efforts toward greater perfection. They will advance slowly, to be sure, but they will advance far. Above all, they must not be allowed to become indolent and apathetic but should be directed to some lofty ideal. They, too, need to gain control of themselves, not as the choleric, who must restrain and moderate themselves, but to arouse themselves and put their dormant powers to good use.

Factors Affecting Character

Character can be understood in an ethical or a psychological sense. Ethically, it comprises the pattern of habits cultivated by an individual in accordance with his or her accepted principles and values: Psychologically, it is the organized totality of the tendencies and predispositions of an individual, grouped around and directed by a predominant tendency. Our interest is in the ethical aspect of character, which is largely influenced by education, environment, and, above all, by one's personal effort. The formation of character and the development to maturity as a person will depend ultimately on the cultivation and perfection of the virtues.

Rather than physiological at basis, as is temperament, character is psychological and ethical. Consequently, temperament is immutable, but it is the material out of which character is made, much in the same way as the clay or marble or wood will be the material out of which a particular statue is fashioned. ***It is character that gives the formal distinction to the personality.***

Education.

Under education we would include all factors that, from birth to the maturation of character (usually between twenty-four and thirty), have influenced one's attitudes and habits of life.

During the early years, from infancy to the beginning of formal education and even beyond, the child will be greatly affected by such factors as nationality, religious training, parental discipline, and instruction. Once the child begins a formal education, the school assumes a major role in the formation of character, especially if it is a school in which there is insistence on moral instruction and discipline. During these years and through adolescence the educational influence can usually be broken down into several categories: family, school, church, and associates. Although the effects of these educative, factors are not always immediately evident in the young, they leave impressions that form attitudes and value judgments that come into play when the individual reaches maturity and takes a place as a responsible member of society.

Environment.

The environmental factors are almost too numerous to mention, and they exert an especially strong influence on the individual during the formative years. The influence of example on

children is too obvious to be denied.⁽²⁾ While the most forceful environmental influences are to be found in the lives of other human beings, such commonplace things as nutrition, climate, neighborhood environment, and home life also exert a subtle but definite influence. Here again, the effects are not immediately evident in a growing child, but environment during youth is responsible to a large extent, for those attitudes and evaluations that are most deeply rooted in the personality.

Personal Effort.

By personal effort as a cause of character we mean especially the free choice whereby through the repetition of acts, certain habits are formed and developed until they become a second nature.

Personal effort is by far the most important factor in the formation of character, and it is so potent an instrument that it can modify, correct, or nullify the effects of education and environment.

We are masters of ourselves by means of our free will, and we are responsible for the formation of character by reason of the fact that any acquired habit is ultimately rooted in a deliberate choice of action that was repeated until the habit was formed. In this sense we can say that, whereas temperament is to a large extent what our ancestors have made us, ***character is what we have made ourselves. In its moral aspect a character will be good or evil according to whether the habits that predominate in an individual are virtues or vices.***

Consequently, the formation of character is closely associated with the psychology of habit formation and the theology of the virtues and vices. ***We have the power within ourselves to become sinners or saints, but whatever our choice we will have to exert personal effort to achieve our goal.***

According to the ancient philosophers, a life of virtue was a guarantee of a life of happiness and perfection. The same is true in reference to the ideal character: ***in the purely natural order it requires the balance and integration that are provided by the moral and intellectual virtues. For the perfect Christian, however, there is further required, as a superstructure built upon the natural foundation, the theological and moral infused virtues, as well as the gifts of the Holy Spirit.***

From what has been said, it should be evident that it is no easy task to form a perfect character. It is for many the work of a lifetime, ***for although the majority of persons are set in their characters before they reach the age of thirty, it is most rare that any character does not suffer modification and alteration during the entire lifetime of the individual.*** In the formation of character we would stress the necessity of proper education, good will, and the assiduous cultivation of those virtues that pertain to the state and duties of life of the individual person.

The Struggle Against Sin

Once we have seen the good qualities and the defects of the various temperaments and have understood that the formation of character is primarily a personal responsibility, we are in a position to investigate the problem related to conversion from sin and growth in virtue. At the outset we cannot emphasize too strongly the powerful influence of those predispositions to good and to evil that are rooted in the very temperament of the individual, but at the same time we must stress with equal emphasis the ability of everyone, aided by God's grace, to attain the perfection and fulfillment of Christian maturity. Unfortunately, as a result of original sin we are wounded in our very nature, and the predisposition to moral evil seems to incline us to sin, as Scripture says, from our youth. Hence the tension and the struggle that ensue between the love of God that leads to perfection and sanctification, and the love of self that turns us back upon ourselves in an egoistic love that is incompatible with the generous love that is charity.

Nature of Sin

Various definitions have been given to describe sin. ***St. Augustine's description is classical: any thought, word, or deed against the law of God.*** The Old Testament refers to sin as a spiritual adultery (breaking the covenant with God), a kind of idolatry (serving the false gods of self-love), or simply not measuring up to the demands of religion and charity. ***The New Testament, however, while still retaining the notion of sin as a breach in the covenant between God and man, places more emphasis on sin as a failure in love of God and love of neighbor.*** It brings a new perspective to sin, stressing offenses against fraternal love (the social aspect of sin) and showing that some sins are sins of omission or nonaction. St. Thomas Aquinas is fully in the Gospel tradition when he states that ***every sin is a deviation from man's true ultimate end; that sin is formally in the will; and that therefore every sin, whatever its name, is fundamentally an act of self-love in opposition to the love of God.***⁽³⁾

In modern times an attempt has been made to formulate a new theology of sin that takes as its starting point not God, but man. In fact, for many persons the term *anthropology* has almost replaced the word *theology*. ***But sin, both in Scripture and in traditional theology, is primarily a defect in man's relationship with God.*** Nevertheless, to understand sin theologically, that is, from God's point of view, we have to translate it into things of our own experience. That is why we speak of sin as sickness or death.

The difficulty is that some theologians use the anthropological sciences to reject sin completely; others imply that once a man makes his fundamental option for God, he cannot sin mortally and, as a result, he cannot fail to attain his ultimate end; still others see God as all-merciful, and exclusively so, or they maintain that so long as a person loves God, he need not resort to the sacrament of reconciliation for forgiveness of serious sins.

All three opinions are erroneous, and they are destructive of any true progress in holiness, much less any authentic conversion from sin.

According to the new morality, the only absolute principle is to love. While we have no intention of discussing all the complexities posed by this position, we can note that, on the popular level,

there is a fear that there are no more objective moral standards and that no actions can be proposed as outright sinful. In the catechesis of sin, this could result in refusing to mention, for example, the Ten Commandments or to accept any objective sinful actions It has been claimed often that Christianity is not a new moral code but a new life in Christ. But this is an oversimplification that could lead to moral laxity A catechesis of sin, specifying certain actions as morally reprehensible, is a necessary aspect of the presentation of Christianity.(4)

God is love, but he is also many other things besides. For instance, reverence might justly be called the first law of creation. This reverence, or reverential fear, if you wish, is based on God's holiness and power ***If we think of God only as love, we will fall into a sentimental attitude by which God adopts our way of looking at things*** We are leading God instead of his leading us. ***We are really indulging in self-love and self-will under a spiritual disguise***. We make God an indulgent father, but God will have none of this. He loves us too much to spoil us. And then, too, he cannot renounce that part of himself which is truth. Truth is as much a part of him as love, and ***truth never changes to suit our subjective outlook and wishful thinking***.(5)

We repeat that the central element of our new life in Christ is love -- love of God, and love of self and neighbor in God. Sin is a rejection, a failure, or a distortion of that love that is charity. And ***while we distinguish between objective sin and subjective sin, the only actual sin is always a personal sin***. Moreover, personal actual sin requires sufficient knowledge (deliberation) and freedom of choice and action (voluntariness). Finally, ***sin admits of degrees of gravity***, and consequently we speak of serious sins (mortal) and light sins (venial). The details of the theology of sin, such as the various precepts that bind under sin, the various acts or non-acts that are sinful, and the degree of culpability and guilt, are matters for the moral theologian.

Mortal Sin

The expression mortal sin is still a useful one because it designates that sin that is deadly; it destroys the life of sanctifying grace in the soul or deepens the individual's alienation from God. Mortal sin is therefore the worst enemy of the Christian life and- the only thing that can separate us from God by destroying the life of grace in us. If one serious sin can cause such devastating effects, it is not difficult to imagine the deplorable state of those who live in habitual mortal sin. Eventually the habit of sin, like all habits, becomes like a second nature to the sinner, so that it is very difficult to convert to a life of virtue. Rather, the individual will be characterized by one or more of the capital sins: pride, gluttony, lust, avarice, sloth, envy, anger.

In ***general we can distinguish four classes of sinners***, and it is well for confessors and preachers to be aware of the differences so that they can use the methods best suited to lead these sinners to conversion. ***The first type sins because of ignorance***. We are not referring to a total and invincible ignorance, which would excuse entirely from sin, but to the ignorance that results from a completely indifferent education or from an environment that is devoid of religious influence. Those who live in such surroundings usually have some awareness of the malice of sin. They are conscious of the fact that certain actions are not morally right, and from time to time they even feel a certain remorse. In any case, they are capable of committing deliberate mortal sin.

At the same time the responsibility of such persons before God is greatly lessened. If they have an aversion to that which seems unjust or sinful to them; if, in spite of external influences, they have remained basically upright; and if, especially at the hour of death, they raise their heart to God, full of remorse and confident in his mercy, there is no doubt that they will be judged with mercy at the divine tribunal. If Christ advises us that much more will be asked of those to whom much has been given (Luke 12:48), it is reasonable to think that less will be asked of those who have received little.

Souls such as these often turn to God with comparative readiness if the opportunity presents itself. Since their careless life did not proceed from true malice, but from ignorance, any situation that makes a strong impression on the soul and causes it to enter in upon itself may suffice to cause them to turn to God. The death of a member of the family, a sermon heard at a mission, the introduction to a religious environment, often suffices to lead such souls to the right path. The priest charged with their care should conscientiously complete their religious formation lest they return to their former state.

The second type of sinners comprises those who are weak, lacking in will power, strongly inclined to sensual pleasure, intellectually dull, listless, or cowardly. They lament their faults, they admire good people and would like to be one of them, but they lack the courage and energy to be so in reality. These dispositions do not excuse them from sin; on the contrary, they are more culpable than those who sin through ignorance, because they sin with a greater knowledge. But ***basically they are weak rather than evil.*** The person in charge of their spiritual welfare should be especially concerned with strengthening them in their good resolutions, leading them to the frequent reception of the sacraments, to reflection, and avoidance of the occasions of sin.

The third type of sinners are those who sin with cold indifference, without remorse of conscience, silencing the faint voice of conscience in order to continue their life of sin without reproach. They do not want to give up their sin and are not concerned that their conduct offends God.

The conversion of these persons is very difficult. Their constant infidelity to the inspirations of grace, their indifference to the basic norms of morality, their systematic disdain for the advice given them by those who wish to help them—all this hardens their hearts to such an extent that it would require a veritable miracle of grace for them to return to the right path.

Perhaps the most efficacious means of leading them back to God would be to encourage them to practice certain spiritual exercises with a group of persons of the same profession or social condition as themselves; for example, to make a retreat, a parish mission, or a *cursillo*. It is not unusual for this type of person to try some spiritual exercise out of curiosity, especially if it is suggested in a friendly manner, and it frequently happens that a great grace from God awaits them there. At times astounding conversions are effected, radical changes of life, and the beginning of a life of piety and fervor in persons who formerly lived completely forgetful of God. The priest who has the good fortune to be the instrument of, such divine mercy should watch over the convert and by means of a wise and prudent direction try to assure the definitive and permanent return to God.

The fourth class of sinners is the most culpable. These people sin through a refined malice and diabolical obstinacy. They may have begun as good Christians, but little by little they degenerated, yielding more and more to evil until their souls were definitively conquered. Then came the inevitable consequence of defection and apostasy. The last barriers have been broken, and now these people are susceptible to every kind of moral disorder. They attack religion and the Church and may even join a non-Catholic sect and propagate its doctrines with zeal and ardor. One such person deliberately closed the door to any possibility of a return to God by saying to his friends and relatives: "If at the hour of death I ask for a priest to hear my confession, do not bring him, because I shall be delirious."

It is useless to try to win these people by persuasion or advice. It will make no impression on them and may even produce contrary effects. The only method to be used is strictly supernatural: prayer, fasting, constant recourse to the Blessed Virgin. Their conversion requires a special grace from God, and God does not always grant the grace, in spite of many prayers and supplications. It is as if these sinners had exhausted the patience of God and are destined to be for all eternity the living testimony of rigorous divine justice, because they have abused divine mercy.

We conclude with a statement by St. Teresa on the gravity of mortal sin:

I once heard a spiritual man say that he was not so much astonished at the things done by a soul in mortal sin as at the things not done by it. May God, in his mercy, deliver us from such great evil, for there is nothing in the whole of our lives that so thoroughly deserves to be called evil as this, since it brings endless and eternal evils in its train.⁽⁶⁾

Venial Sin

As distinct from mortal sin, venial sin consists in a simple deviation and not a total aversion from the ultimate end. It is a sickness, but not unto death. ***The sinner who commits a mortal sin is like the traveler who turns his back on the goal and begins to travel in the opposite direction. But the person who commits a venial sin merely departs from the straight path without abandoning the journey toward the goal.***

We can distinguish ***three classes of venial sins***: (1) those that *by their very nature involve a disorder or deviation*, although only a slight one, such as a small lie that does no damage to anyone; (2) those that, because of the *smallness of the matter involved*, constitute only *a light disorder*, such as stealing a small amount of money; (3) ***those that lack complete deliberation or full consent of the will*** in matters that would otherwise be serious sins, such as the taking of God's name in vain.

There is a great difference between the malice of a mortal sin and that of a venial sin, but venial sin does constitute a true offense against God. St. Teresa says in this regard:

From any sin, however small, committed with full knowledge, may God deliver us, especially since we are sinning against so great a Sovereign and realize that he is watching us. That seems to me to be a sin of malice aforethought; it is as though one were to say: "Lord, although this displeases thee, I shall do it. I know that thou seest it and I know that thou wouldst not have me

do it; but although I understand this, I would rather follow my own whim and desire than thy will." If we commit a sin in this way, however slight, it seems to me that our offense is not small but very, very great.(7)

Nevertheless, it is necessary to distinguish between venial sins committed out of weakness, surprise, or lack of advertence and deliberation, and those that are committed coldly and with the complete awareness that one thereby displeases God. We can never completely avoid the former, and God, who knows very well the clay of which we are made, readily forgives us these sins of weakness. The only thing that one can do about these faults is to try to diminish their number so far as possible and to avoid discouragement. St. Francis de Sales says in this respect: Although it is reasonable to feel discouragement and to be sorry for having committed any faults, this discouragement should not be sour, angry, acrimonious, or choleric; and this is the great defect of those who, seeing themselves angry, become impatient with their own impatience and become angry at their own anger

Just as the sweet and cordial reproaches of a father make more of an impression on a son than his rage and anger, so also, if we reproach our heart when it commits some fault with sweet and peaceful reproaches, using more compassion than anger and arousing the heart to amend, we shall succeed in arousing a repentance which is much more profound and penetrating than that which could be aroused with resentment, anger, and anxiety Nevertheless, ***detest with all your heart the offense which you have committed against God and, filled with courage and confidence in his mercy, begin again the practice of that virtue which you have abandoned.***(8)

If one acts in this way, reacting promptly against the faults of weakness with a profound repentance full of meekness, humility, and confidence in the mercy of God, these weaknesses will leave scarcely any trace in the soul, and they will not constitute a serious obstacle in the path of our sanctification. But when venial sins are committed coldly, with perfect deliberation and advertence, they constitute an obstacle to perfection. The French Jesuit Louis Lallemand says:

One is astonished to see so many religious who, after having lived forty or fifty years in the state of grace, ... and, consequently, possessing all the gifts of the Holy Spirit in a very high degree— one is astonished, I say, to see that ... their life is completely natural; that, when they are corrected or when they are discouraged, they show their resentment; that they show so much concern for the praise, the esteem, and the applause of the world; that they delight in it, and they love and seek its comfort and everything that will appeal to their self-love.

There is no reason to be astonished. ***The venial sins which they commit continuously bind the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and it is no wonder that the effects of the gifts are not evident in them.*** It is true that these gifts grow together with charity habitually and in their physical being, but they do not grow actually and in the perfection which corresponds to the fervor of charity and increases merit in us, because venial sins, being opposed to the fervor of charity, impede the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

If these religious would strive for purity of heart, the fervor of charity would increase in them more and more and the gifts of the Holy Spirit shine forth in their conduct; but this will never be very apparent in them, living as they do without recollection, without attention to their interior

life, letting themselves be led and guided by their inclinations, and avoiding only the more grave sins while being careless about little things.⁽⁹⁾

Venial sin has four effects that are especially detrimental to the spiritual life:

1. **It deprives us of many actual graces that God would otherwise have given us.** This privation sometimes results in our falling into a temptation that we could have avoided by means of that actual grace of which we were deprived. At other times it may result in the loss of a new advance in the spiritual life. Only in the light of eternity -- and then there is no remedy -- shall we realize what we have lost as a result of deliberate venial sins.
2. **It lessens the fervor of charity and one's generosity in the service of God.** This fervor and generosity presuppose a sincere desire for perfection and a constant striving for it, which are totally incompatible with voluntary venial sin because the latter implies a rejection of the lofty ideal and a deliberate halt in the struggle for greater holiness.
3. **It increases the difficulties in the exercise of virtue.** This is a result of the two previous effects. Deprived of many actual graces that are necessary to keep us on the path of the good, and weak in fervor and generosity in the service of God, **the soul gradually loses more and more of its spiritual energy.** Virtue appears to be more difficult, the effort required for growing in holiness becomes more and more demanding, and the experience of past failures disheartens the soul.
4. **It predisposes for mortal sin.** This is clearly testified in Scripture when it is stated that he who wastes the little he has is gradually stripped bare (Sir. 19:1). Experience confirms that the ultimate fall of many souls has been started in this way. **Little by little the soul has lowered its defenses** until the moment arrives in which the enemy, in one furious assault, conquers the city.

In order to avoid sin and overcome the habit of venial sin, one should be faithful to the examination of conscience, both general and particular; increase one's spirit of sacrifice; be faithful to the practice of prayer; safeguard external and internal recollection to the extent that the duties of one's state permit; cultivate a filial devotion to Mary; and remember the example of the saints. **It is not an easy task to avoid venial sin, but however difficult, it is possible to approach that ideal by means of a constant struggle and humble prayer.**

Imperfections

We have already discussed the theology of imperfections and have stated our opinion that moral imperfection is distinct from venial sin. An act that is good in itself does not cease to be good even though it could have been better. Venial sin, on the other hand, is something intrinsically evil, however light an evil it may be. Nevertheless, the imperfections are detrimental to the spiritual life and impede the flight of the soul to sanctity. St. John of the Cross treats of this matter when he distinguishes between venial sin and imperfection:

Some habits of voluntary imperfections, which are never completely conquered, prevent not only the attainment of divine union but also progress in perfection.

These habitual imperfections are, for example, a common custom of much speaking, or some slight attachment which we never quite wish to conquer A single one of these imperfections, if the soul has become attached and habituated to it, is of as great harm to growth and progress in virtue as though one were to fall daily into a great number of other imperfections and casual venial sins

For as long as it has this, there is no possibility that it will make progress in perfection, even though the imperfection be extremely slight. For it comes to the same thing whether a bird be held by a slender cord or by a stout one since, even if it be slender, the bird will be as well held as though it were stout, for so long as it breaks it not and flies not away. It is true that the slender one is the easier to break; still, easy though it be, the bird will not fly away if it be not broken.

And thus the soul that has attachment to anything, however much virtue it possesses, will not attain to the liberty of divine union."(10)

This doctrine finds confirmation in the Thomistic teaching on the increase of habits. According to St. Thomas, charity and all the other infused habits increase only by a more intense act that flows from an actual grace, itself more intense than the habit. It follows from this that prayer is of extreme importance in this regard, because the only way in which we can obtain actual grace is by petition, since it does not fall under merit in the proper sense of the word. Now imperfection is by its very nature a remiss act or the voluntary negation of a more intense act. Consequently, ***it is impossible to proceed in perfection if one does not renounce habitual voluntary imperfections.***

This is the reason why in practice so many potential saints are frustrated and why there are so few true saints. Many souls live habitually in the grace of God, never commit mortal sins, and even exert every effort to avoid venial sins. Nevertheless, they remain for many years in the same state and make no progress in holiness. How can we explain this phenomenon? The answer is that they have not endeavored to root out their voluntary imperfections; they have not tried to break that slender cord that keeps them tied to the earth and prevents them from rising in flight to the heights.

It is therefore necessary to wage an unceasing battle against our voluntary imperfections if we wish to arrive at perfect union with God. The soul must tend always toward greater perfection and try to do all things with the greatest possible intensity. Naturally, we do not mean that one should be in a state of constant tension. We are referring primarily to the perfection of one's motives that lead one to act: doing all things with the greatest possible purity of intention, with the greatest possible desire of glorifying God, with total abandonment to God so that the Holy Spirit can take complete control of our soul and do with us as he wishes. Our goal is complete transformation in Christ, which will enable us to say with St. Paul: ***"The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me"*** (Gal. 2:20).

Temptations

According to St. Thomas, the proper office of the devil is to tempt.⁽¹¹⁾ Nevertheless, he immediately adds that not all temptations that we suffer proceed from the devil. ***Some of them are the result of our own concupiscence***, as St. James says: "The tug and lure of his own passion tempt every man" (James 1:14). It is true, however, that many temptations do proceed from the devil. St. Peter compares the devil to a roaring lion who goes about, seeking someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8).

St. James teaches that God never tempts anyone by inciting him to evil (James 1:13). When Scripture speaks of temptations from God, it uses the word to designate a simple test of a person. ***God permits us to be tempted by our spiritual enemies to give us an occasion for greater merit.*** As St. Paul says: "You can trust God not to let you be tried beyond your strength, and with any trial he will give you a way out of it and the strength to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

There are countless advantages to a temptation that has been conquered with the help and grace of God. Victory over temptation humiliates Satan, makes the glory of God shine forth, purifies our soul, fills us with humility, repentance, and confidence in the divine assistance. It reminds us to be always vigilant and alert, to mistrust ourselves, to expect all things from God, to mortify our personal tastes. It arouses us to prayer, helps us grow in experience, and makes us circumspect and cautious in the struggle against our enemy. With good reason does St. James say: "Happy the man who holds out to the end through trial! Once he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life the Lord has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12). But to obtain all these advantages, it is necessary to know how ***to obtain victory with the help of God. To this end, it will be of great help to consider the threefold source of temptations: the devil, the world, and the flesh.***

The Devil

Perhaps in no other page of Scripture is the strategy of the devil as a tempter depicted so clearly as in the description of the temptation of Eve, which resulted in the ruin of all humanity. Let us examine the biblical account and draw from it some important conclusions.

Thus he said to the woman: "Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?" (Gen. 3:1). As yet he is not tempting the woman, but the conversation is already in the area of the matter he has in mind. His tactics are the same today as always. To persons particularly inclined to sensuality or to doubts against the faith, he will ask in general terms and without as yet inciting them to evil.

If the soul recognizes that the simple posing of the question represents a danger, it will refuse to converse with the tempter but will turn its thoughts and imagination to other matters. Then the temptation is thwarted, and an easy victory is won. But ***if the soul imprudently enters into conversation with the tempter, it is exposed to the great danger of succumbing.***

This was Eve's mistake; she answered the serpent: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die' " (Gen. 3:2-3).

The soul recognizes that God strictly forbids it to perform that action, to arouse that desire, or to nourish that thought. The soul does not wish to disobey God, but it is wasting time in recalling its moral obligations at all. It could destroy the temptation at the very start, without bothering to weigh the reasons why it ought to do so.

The soul has yielded ground to the enemy, and now the enemy gathers his forces to make a direct attack: "But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil' " (Gen. 3:4-5).

The devil presents an enchanting possibility. He would not suggest to our soul that it will be as God, but he tells us that the soul will be happy if once more it abandons itself to sin. "In any case," the tempter may add, "God is merciful and will readily forgive you. Enjoy the forbidden fruit once again. Do you not remember your past experiences, how great was your enjoyment then and how easy it was to depart from sin by immediate repentance?"

There is still time to withdraw because the will has not yet given its consent, but if the soul does not terminate this conversation, it is in the proximate danger of falling. Its forces are gradually being weakened, and sin is presented as more and more desirable and fascinating.

"The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom" (Gen. 3:6). ***The soul begins to vacillate and to be deeply disturbed.*** It does not wish to offend God, but the temptation is so alluring that a struggle ensues and sometimes is prolonged for a long period of time. If the soul, in its supreme effort and under the influence of an actual grace, decides to remain faithful to its duty, it will be victorious; but only too often a soul that vacillates to this extent will take the fatal step to sin.

"So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it" (Gen. 3:6). The soul has succumbed to the temptation. It has committed sin, and often, either because of scandal or complicity, it has caused others to sin.

As soon as the sin is committed, the soul realizes the great deception: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves" (Gen. 3:7). The soul is now aware of the fact that it has lost everything. It stands completely naked before God, without sanctifying grace, without the infused virtues, without the gifts of the Holy Spirit, without the indwelling of the Trinity. It has lost all the merits that it has ever acquired during its whole life. All that remains is bitter deception and the sneering laughter of the tempter.

Immediately the soul hears the terrible voice of conscience that reproaches it for the sin that has been committed. "They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'" (Gen. 3:8-

9). This question, which the sinner's conscience also formulates, has no answer. The only thing the sinner can do is fall to his knees and ask pardon of God for his infidelity, and learn from sad experience how in the future to resist the tempter from the very first moment, when victory is easy and triumph is assured under the loving gaze of God.

Let us now investigate what the soul ought to do before, during, and after temptation. The fundamental strategy for preventing temptation was suggested by our Lord when he told the disciples to watch and pray lest they enter into temptation (Matt. 26:41). ***Vigilance and prayer are necessary even before temptations arise.***

Vigilance is necessary because the devil never completely abdicates in his battle to win our soul. If sometimes he seems to leave us in peace, it is only to return to the attack when we least expect it. During periods of calm we must be convinced that the battle will be resumed and perhaps with greater intensity than before. Therefore, we must be vigilant lest we be taken by surprise. We do this by avoiding the occasions of sin, by trying to anticipate unexpected assaults, by practicing self-control, by making use of the particular examen, by frequently renewing our firm resolution never to sin again, and by avoiding sloth.

But vigilance alone is not enough. To remain in the state of grace and to be victorious against all temptations require an efficacious grace from God, obtainable only through prayer. The most careful vigilance and the most earnest efforts would be totally inefficacious without the help of God's grace. But with his grace, victory is certain. God has given us his word that he will grant us grace if we ask for it with prayer that fulfills the necessary conditions. This shows how important is ***the prayer of petition***. Christ taught us to ask the Father: "Lead us not into temptation." It is also reasonable that we should invoke the Blessed Mother, who crushed the serpent's head with her virginal heel; and our guardian angel, who has as one of his principal duties to defend us against the assaults of the devil.

During temptation the conduct of the soul can be summarized in one important word: resist. It does not suffice merely to remain passive in the face of temptation; positive resistance is necessary. This resistance can be either direct or indirect. Direct resistance is that which faces up to the temptation itself and conquers it by doing the precise opposite from that which is suggested. For example, to begin to speak well of a person when we are tempted to criticize him, to give a generous alms when our selfishness would prompt us to refuse, to prolong our prayer when the devil suggests that we shorten it or abandon it altogether. Direct resistance can be used against any kind of temptation, except those against faith or purity, as we shall see now.

Indirect resistance does not attack the temptation but withdraws from it by distracting the mind to some other object that is completely distinct. This is the type of resistance to be used in temptations against the faith or against purity, because in these cases a direct attack would very likely increase the intensity of the temptation itself. The best practice in these cases is a rapid but calm practice of a mental exercise that will absorb our internal faculties, especially the memory and imagination, and withdraw them from the object of the temptation. It is also helpful to have some hobby or pastime or activity that is interesting enough to absorb one's attention for the moment.

Sometimes the temptation does not immediately disappear, and the devil may attack again with great tenacity. One should not become discouraged at this. The insistence of the devil is one of the best proofs that the soul has not succumbed to the temptation. The soul should resist the attacks as often as necessary but always with great serenity and interior peace, being careful to avoid any kind of anxiety or disturbance. Every assault repulsed is a source of new merit before God and greater strength for the soul. Far from becoming weakened, the soul gains new energies. Seeing that he has lost, the devil will finally leave the soul in peace, especially when he sees that he has not been able to disturb the interior peace of the soul, which sometimes is the only reason he caused the temptation in the first place.

It is also helpful to manifest these things to one's spiritual director or confessor, especially if it is a question of tenacious temptations or those that occur repeatedly. The Lord usually recompenses this act of humility and simplicity with new and powerful helps. The masters of the spiritual life say: ***"A temptation that is declared is already half conquered."***

If the soul has conquered and is certain of it, it has done so only with the help of God's grace. It should therefore give thanks and ask for a continuation of divine help on other occasions. This could be said very briefly and simply, as in the following short prayer: ***"Thanks be to you, O God; continue to help me on all dangerous occasions and have mercy on me."***

If the soul has fallen and has no doubt about it, it should not become disheartened. It should remember the infinite mercy of God and the lesson of the prodigal son, and then cast itself in all humility and repentance into the arms of the heavenly Father, asking him for forgiveness and promising with his help never to sin again. If the fall has been serious, the soul should not be content with a simple act of contrition, but should approach the sacrament of reconciliation and use this sad experience of sin to redouble its vigilance and to intensify its fervor in order not to sin again.

If the soul remains in doubt as to whether or not it has given consent, it should not examine its conscience minutely and with scrupulosity, for this may provoke the temptation anew and even increase the danger of falling. Sometimes it is better to let a certain period of time pass until the soul becomes more tranquil, and then examine one's conscience carefully as to whether or not sin has been committed. In any event, ***it is well to make an act of contrition and to make known to the confessor at the proper time the temptation that has been encountered, admitting one's guilt as it appears in the sight of God.***

What should be done, however, in the case of those persons who receive Communion daily? May they continue to receive Communion until the day of their confession, even if they are in doubt as to whether they have consented to a temptation?

It is impossible to give a categorical answer that will apply to all souls and to all possible circumstances. For example, if the habitual attitude of a soul is to avoid sin, or if the soul has a tendency to scrupulosity, the person should continue to receive Communion, ignore the doubts, and make an act of contrition for any guilt that could have been incurred. If, on the other hand, it is a question of a soul that is accustomed to fall readily into mortal sin, or of a lax conscience that is in no way scrupulous, the presumption is against the soul, and it is probable that the soul

has consented to the temptation. Then one should not receive Communion without sacramental absolution.

The World

As they came from the hands of the Creator, the world and all things in it were good. At each new phase of the six stages of creation recorded in Genesis we are told that God looked upon what he had made and he saw that it was good. Therefore, the world as such is no obstacle to sanctification and salvation. It all depends on how we react to the things of the world and the manner in which we use them -- which can be for good or for evil. Many Christians who lived in the world and were very much a part of the world became great saints. ***The world becomes an enemy of the Christian only when we become so attached to the things of the world that we fail to advance in the love and service of God.*** In such cases, the world becomes a source of almost irresistible temptation and a formidable enemy of the spiritual life.

When we speak of the world as an enemy of Christians and an obstacle to sanctification, we are referring to the worldly or mundane spirit manifested by those who have an excessive attachment to created things. ***Entire cities or nations can be infected with a mundane spirit, living only for the pleasures and satisfactions that can be drawn from creature things.*** This environment presents a great obstacle to the Christian who is in earnest about making progress in holiness through detachment and the positive practice of virtue.

The worldly spirit is generally manifested in four principal ways. The first and most deceptive is that of the ***false maxims*** directly opposed to the precepts of Christ. The world exalts pleasure, comfort, riches, fame, violence, and might. ***It advises its followers to enjoy life while they can,*** to make the most of what the world has to offer, to find security and the maximum bodily comfort. So far has this perversion of values been carried that ***thieves are considered to be efficient and adept in business; agnostics or atheists are people who think for themselves; persons who reject all authority and objective morality are champions of personal freedom; and people of loose morals are considered sophisticated and mature.***

The second manifestation of the mundane spirit is found in the ridicule and persecution of those who strive to live honestly and decently. Sensate people declare themselves free of all moral restrictions and live as they please, and they make a mockery of any authority or law that would guide people along the path of self-control and obedience. Not wanting to observe the law themselves, they cultivate a special disdain for those who honestly strive to lead good lives.

The third manifestation of a worldly spirit is found in the pleasures and diversions of those who observe no control in regard to their lower appetites. Excesses in sex and in the use of drugs, alcoholic drinks, and food are accepted as being in good taste socially. The theater, magazines, and other media of entertainment know no restriction except the strong arm of the law or the startled indignation of the public. The abnormal becomes normal in the lives of these persons.

The fourth mark of a mundane spirit is the scandal and bad example that confront the earnest Christian at every turn. It is not a question merely of persons who give scandal by their evil

lives, but what is even worse, scandal is sometimes given by those who, because of their Christian belief or state in life, should be examples of virtue. With good reason could St. John complain that "the whole world is under the evil one" (1 John 5:19). And Jesus himself warned: "Woe to that man through whom scandal comes!" (Matt. 18:7).

The most efficacious remedy against the influence of the world and worldly persons is to flee, but ***since the majority of Christians must live in the world and still pursue Christian perfection, it is necessary that they strive to acquire the mind and spirit of Christ, who also lived in the world but was opposed to its spirit.***

Avoid Occasions of Sin.

"He who loves danger will perish in it." Whether it be a question of worldly possessions, mundane pleasures, or creature attachments, Christians must keep themselves from temptation. The occasions that are sinful for one may not be so for another, and for that reason it is difficult to make any universal laws in this matter.

Nevertheless, ***some occasions are so poisonous that they would be harmful to any Christian.*** As for the rest, each of us must learn by experience where our weaknesses lie and then take the necessary steps by way of ***self-denial and self-control.*** And when in doubt, honest Christians will base their practical judgment on whether or not the occasion in question would be dangerous for the average good Christian. If so, they also should avoid it. Still another rule of thumb is simply to ask oneself: "What would Jesus do?" It is likewise helpful to remember the admonition of St. Paul, to the effect that ***not all things that are lawful are prudent.***

Vivify One's Faith.

St. John says: "This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith" (1 John 5:4). ***Faith is an intellectual assent to certain dogmas and mysteries; when it is perfected it gives us an attitude of mind or a way of judging things in a divine manner.*** It enables us to see things through the eyes of God, so to speak. A strong faith will enable the Christian to see God in all things and to walk through great dangers unharmed because he is able to rise above those things that are temptations for others. ***A strong faith will enable the Christian to withstand the taunts and ridicule of worldly persons.*** In many works of art the martyred saint is surrounded by persecutors who wear a cynical smile or a leer on their faces. But the saint remains steadfast and tranquil amidst all manner of attack and suffering because the eyes of his soul, through the light of faith, can peer into eternity and be focused on the divine.

Meditate on the Vanity of the World.

The world passes quickly, and life passes even more quickly. There is nothing stable and permanent in the world's judgment and friendships; there is nothing completely satisfying in its delights. Those who are applauded today are criticized tomorrow; the evil prosper, for they have their reward in this world. But Christians, who realize that they have not here a lasting city but are travelers to the eternal fatherland, know that only God is changeless and only his justice and

truth will remain forever. For that reason, only those who do the will of God "abide forever" (1 John 2:17).

Ignore What the World Thinks. To be concerned about "what they will say" is an attitude unworthy of a Christian. Jesus said explicitly that he would deny before his heavenly Father anyone who denies him before men (Matt. 10:33). It is therefore necessary for the Christian to take a firm stand in this matter and to follow the injunction of Christ to the letter: "He who is not with me is against me" (Matt. 12:30). And St. Paul warns that he is not a disciple of Christ who would be concerned about pleasing men (Gal. 1:10).

One who desires to reach sanctity must be absolutely indifferent to what the world may think or say. One's only concern must be to do the will of God, cost what it may. And it is best to make this decision from the very first, so that all may know at the outset where one stands. We have been warned by Christ that the world will hate and persecute us (John 15:18-20), but if the world sees that we stand firm in our decision to follow Christ and his laws, it will ultimately leave us in peace and consider the battle lost. ***The best way to conquer the world is not to yield a single pace, but to take an unswerving stand in renouncing its false maxims and its vanities.***

The Flesh

The world and the devil are our principal external enemies, but ***we bear within ourselves an internal enemy that can be much more terrible.*** The world can be conquered with relative ease by disdain for its pomps and vanity; the devil cannot withstand the supernatural power of a little holy water; ***but our flesh wars against us without ceasing. It wages war against us in two distinct manners: by its instinctive horror of suffering and by its insatiable desire for pleasure. The first is an obstacle to sanctification; the second can compromise our eternal salvation.*** It is therefore essential to know how to counteract and nullify those two dangerous tendencies.

Desire for Pleasure

We shall begin with the latter, which is a characteristic tendency of our sensuality, while the horror of suffering is a logical consequence and the negative aspect of this desire. We flee from pain because we love pleasure, and ***the tendency to pleasure is what is known as concupiscence.***

Sensate bodily pleasure is not evil of itself. As the author of nature, God has placed pleasure in the exercise of certain natural operations, and especially those that pertain to the conservation of the individual and of the species. He does this in order to facilitate the use of those faculties and to stimulate us to their exercise. But ***as a result of original sin the appetite for pleasure often rises against the demands of reason and impels us to sin.*** St. Paul has described vividly the combat between the flesh and the spirit that all of us have to wage against ourselves in order to subject our bodily instincts to the control of reason illumined by faith (Rom. 7:14-25; 1 Cor. 12:1-7).

A difficulty arises in attempting to designate the boundary that separates honest pleasure from disordered and forbidden pleasure, and how to keep oneself within the boundaries of the former.

The enjoyment of lawful pleasures frequently becomes an occasion or incentive to disordered and unlawful pleasures. For that reason, Christian mortification has always advocated that one deprive oneself of many lawful things and of many honest pleasures, not to put sin where there is no sin, but as a defense of good, which is endangered if one imprudently approaches the borderline of evil.

The satisfactions granted to one sense awaken the appetite of other senses. The reason for this is that sense pleasure is diffused throughout the entire body, and when one or another of the senses is stimulated, the whole organism vibrates. This is particularly true of the sense of touch, which is present in every part of the body and tends to animal pleasure with a much greater intensity than the other senses.

The principal struggle revolves around the two tendencies that are necessary for the conservation of the individual and of the species: nutrition and generation. The other sensitive inclinations are almost always placed at the service of these two, in which concupiscence seeks pleasure without any concern for the conservation of the individual and the species. If reason does not intervene to keep these instinctive appetites within just limits, they can easily lead to the ruin of the individual and the species.

It is incredible how much harm an unmortified appetite can cause in us, not only as regards perfection, which is absolutely impossible without mortification, but even as regards our eternal salvation. ***Sensual people not only are not united with God, but they also lose the taste for divine things.*** as St. Paul teaches (1 Cor. 2:14).

Reason itself suggests certain remedies that are useful in controlling sensuality, but the most efficacious remedies proceed from faith and are strictly supernatural. ***The following are the principal remedies, both natural and supernatural:***

Custody of the Senses.

This is the most important and decisive of all the purely natural remedies. ***Even the strongest will is likely to succumb when subjected to the stimulation of the senses.*** Sincere resolutions and unswerving determination are of no avail; everything is lost in the face of the fascination of an occasion of sin. The senses are aroused, the imagination is excited, passion is strongly stirred, self-control is lost, and the fatal fall takes place. ***It is especially necessary that one exercise scrupulous vigilance over the sense of vision, according to the axiom: "What the eyes do not see, the heart does not desire."***

Self-denial.

Another precaution that must be taken in the struggle against sensuality is that of never going to the limit in regard to satisfactions that are permitted. This requires self-denial, and sometimes even in regard to lawful pleasures, especially if one is inclined to sensate satisfactions. With good reason does ***Clement of Alexandria say that those who do everything that is permitted will very readily do that which is not permitted.*** On the other hand, the mortification of one's tastes and desires will not damage one's health; rather it will usually benefit both body and soul. If we

wish to keep ourselves far from sin and walk toward perfection in giant strides, it is necessary to reject a great number of sensate satisfactions.

Beneficial Occupation.

The seed of sensuality finds fertile ground in a soul that is unoccupied and slothful. Sloth is the mother of all vices, as we read in Scripture, but in a special way it is fertile ground for sins of the flesh. ***Those who wish to preserve themselves from the demands of concupiscence must endeavor to keep themselves occupied in some useful and beneficial exercise.*** And of all occupations, those of an intellectual type are particularly apt for controlling sensuality. The reason is that the application of one faculty weakens the exercise of the other faculties, in addition to the fact that intellectual operations withdraw from the sensual passions the object on which they feed. The sins of the flesh weaken the spirit, whereas temperance and chastity admirably predispose one for intellectual work.

Sense of Christian Dignity.

Because of our rational nature we are far superior to the animal. ***It is debasing, then, to let ourselves be carried away by the sensuality that we share in common with beasts.*** And far superior to our human dignity in the natural order is our Christian dignity, which is strictly supernatural. Through grace we are elevated in a certain manner to the level of divinity. We share in the nature and life of God, and this makes us God's children by adoption. So long as we remain in this state we are heirs of heaven by proper right (Rom. 8:17).

For that reason, St. Thomas states that the supernatural good of an individual soul, proceeding as it does from sanctifying grace, is of more value than the natural good of the entire universe.⁽¹²⁾ St. Paul found no other argument of greater force than this one to lead the early Christians from the disorders of the flesh: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? ... Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:15, 19-20).

Consideration of Sin's Punishment.

If the previous remedies for sensuality make no impression on persons habituated to sin, perhaps other correctives will make an impact. The first of these is the consideration of the punishment of hell. Sacred Scripture offers abundant examples. The psalmist asks God to make the fear of his judgment penetrate into his flesh so that he will remain faithful to God's commandments (Ps. 118:120).

Against the impulse of the flesh in pursuit of pleasure, the thought of the torments of hell can serve as an effective deterrent. And ***even if a person repents of sin and obtains forgiveness, there still remains the debt of temporal punishment that must be paid either in this life with penance, or in the next life with the pain of purgatory.*** In either case, the suffering that will

have to be endured far exceeds the pleasure that the individual enjoyed in sinning. From this point of view alone it is a very poor exchange.

Remembrance of the Passion of Christ.

Motives inspired by love and gratitude are much nobler than those that originate in fear. Jesus was nailed to the Cross because of our sins. ***Basic gratitude toward the Redeemer ought to help keep us from sin.*** The consideration of the suffering Savior ought to make us ashamed of seeking our bodily delight. St. Paul insists on this argument and makes mortification of the flesh the decisive proof of truly belonging to Christ (Gal. 5:24). And St. Peter reminds us that, since Christ suffered in the flesh, it is necessary to break with sin (1 Pet. 4:1).

Humble and Persevering Prayer.

Without the grace of God it is impossible to triumph completely over our concupiscence. This grace is promised to prayer that fulfills the required conditions, as is evident from the teaching of Sacred Scripture. The author of the Book of Wisdom acknowledges that he cannot remain continent without the help of God, which he implores with humility (Wis. 8:21). Sirach begs to be preserved from concupiscence and lustful desires (Sir. 23:6).

Devotion to Mary.

The Immaculate Virgin Mary is also the Mediatrix of all graces and the refuge of sinners. ***A tender devotion to our Blessed Mother can be a constant reminder to live a life of virtue,*** and it can be a basis for hope in her maternal protection.

Reception of the Sacraments.

This is a certain and efficacious remedy against all types of sin, but especially against the attacks of concupiscence. ***The sacrament of penance not only erases our past sins but also gives us strength to protect ourselves from future sins.*** The soul that is habituated to sins of the flesh should approach this fountain of purification and should regulate the frequency of confession according to the strength it needs in order not to fall again. ***The practice of waiting until one has fallen and then to approach confession simply to rise again is a mistaken one, because in this way the individual will never completely uproot the vicious habit.*** Rather, the habit will become more deeply rooted by the repetition of acts.

It is necessary to anticipate possible falls and to approach the sacrament of penance when we note that we are weakening and are losing strength. In this way we can regain strength and thereby avoid the fall that threatened us. ***It will also prove helpful to have a definite confessor to whom we can reveal our soul completely and from whom we can receive the necessary advice.*** Giving an account of the soul to a particular confessor will bind the wings of our imagination and will act as a brake on the impetus of the passions.

Holy Communion has a supreme efficacy against the concupiscence of the flesh. Our Lord diffuses over us the graces of fortitude and resistance against the power of the passions. His most

pure flesh is placed in contact with our sinful flesh to spiritualize it. It is not in vain that the Eucharist has been called the Bread of Angels. The young especially need this divine remedy to counteract the ardor of their passions. Experience in the direction of souls shows clearly that there is nothing so powerful and efficacious for keeping a young person in temperance and chastity as daily or frequent Communion.

Horror of Suffering

While the desire for pleasure is a great obstacle to our eternal salvation, the horror of suffering is a great impediment to sanctification. Many souls who halt along the way to perfection do so because they have not dominated their dread of suffering. ***Only those who have determined to combat this tendency with an unswerving energy will arrive at the height of sanctity.*** This, says St. Teresa, is an absolutely indispensable condition for reaching perfection. ***Those who do not have the spirit for this can renounce sanctity, because they will never reach it.*** St. John of the Cross gives to the love of suffering an exceptional importance in the process of our sanctification, both to make amends for sin and for the sanctification of the soul.

As regards reparation, the balance of divine justice, which has been disturbed by original sin and was reestablished by the blood of Christ, is again disturbed by actual sins. Actual or personal sin places the weight of pleasure on the scale of justice, for every sin carries with it some pleasure or satisfaction. ***It is therefore necessary that the equilibrium of divine justice be reestablished by the weight of sorrow placed on the other scale.***

The principal reparation was effected by Christ's sorrowful passion and death, whose infinite value is applied to us by the sacraments; but we Christians, as members of Christ, cannot separate ourselves from the divine Head. Something is lacking to the passion of Christ, as St. Paul dared to say (Col. 1:24), which must be contributed by the members of Christ cooperating in their own redemption. ***Sacramental absolution does not free us from all the guilt of punishment due to our sins, except in the case of perfect sorrow, and therefore it is necessary to pay back either in this life or in the next unto the last farthing*** (Matt. 5:26).

Sanctification consists in the ever more intense incorporation with Christ. When all is said and done, the saints are faithful reproductions of Christ; they are another Christ. Now the way to unite ourselves with Christ and to be transformed in him was traced for us by Christ himself. "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself. and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). There is no other way; it is necessary to embrace suffering, to take up one's cross, and to follow Christ to the height of Calvary; not to see there how they crucified him, but to be crucified at his side. ***There is no sanctification without crucifixion with Christ.*** St. John of the Cross was so convinced of this that he wrote the following strong words: "If at any time, my brother, anyone should persuade you, be he a prelate or not, of a doctrine that is wider and more pleasant, do not believe him, and do not accept the doctrine even if he were to confirm it with miracles, but rather penance and more penance and detachment from all things. And never, if you wish to possess Christ, seek him without the cross."

The excellence of Christian suffering is evident from a consideration of the great benefits it brings to the soul. If well considered, sorrow and suffering ought to be more attractive to the

Christian than pleasure is to the pagan. The suffering passes, but that one has suffered well will never pass; it leaves its mark for all eternity.

St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "I treat my body hard and make it obey me" (1 Cor. 9:27). The flesh tends to dominate the spirit. Only by means of privations can we reverse the order and make the flesh serve the soul. The more comforts and pleasures we give to the body, the more demanding the body becomes.

There is nothing that more readily detaches us from created things than the pains of suffering. Through the crystal of our tears the atmosphere of this world appears dark and gloomy. The soul raises its eyes to heaven, it sighs for the eternal fatherland, and it learns to disdain the things of this world.

God never ignores the tears and sighs of a heart that is afflicted with sorrow and suffering. Omnipotent and infinitely happy in himself, he can be overcome by the weakness of one who suffers. He himself declares that he does not know how to refuse those who come to him with tearful eyes. Jesus worked the stupendous miracle of raising the dead to life because he was moved by the tears of a widow who mourned the death of her only son (Luke 7:11-17), of a father at the corpse of his daughter (Matt. 9:18-26), and of two sisters who were desolate at the death of their brother (John 11:1-44). And he proclaimed those blessed who weep and mourn because they shall be comforted (Matt. 5:5).

One of the most tremendous marvels of the economy of divine grace is the intimate solidarity of all people through the Mystical Body of Christ. God accepts the suffering offered to him by a soul in grace for the salvation of another soul or for sinners in general. ***It is impossible to measure the redemptive power of suffering offered to divine justice with a living faith and an ardent love through the wounds of Christ.*** When everything else fails, there is still recourse to suffering to obtain the salvation of a sinful soul. The Curé of Ars said once to a priest who lamented the coldness of his parishioners and the sterility of his zeal: "Have you preached? Have you prayed? Have you fasted? Have you taken the discipline? Have you slept on boards? Until you have done these things, you have no right to complain."

The supreme excellence of Christian suffering is that suffering souls are configured with Christ in his sufferings and in his death (Phil. 3:10). And at the side of Jesus, the Redeemer, stands Mary, the co-Redemptrix of the human race. Souls enamored of Mary feel a particular inclination to accompany her and to imitate her in her ineffable sorrow. Before the Queen of Martyrs they feel ashamed that they have ever thought of their own comfort and pleasure. They know that, if they wish to be like Mary, they must embrace the Cross.

We should note the special sanctifying efficacy of suffering from this last point of view. ***Suffering configures us with Christ in a perfect manner; and sanctity does not consist in anything else but configuration with Christ.*** There is not, nor can there be, any way to sanctify that ignores or gives little importance to the crucifixion of self. It is simply a question of repeating what St. Paul says to the Galatians: "If we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel not in accord with the one we delivered to you, let a curse be upon him" (Gal. 1:8).

This is one of the principal reasons why there are so few saints. Many souls who strive for sanctity do not wish to enter upon the way of suffering. They would like to be saints, but with a sanctity that is comfortable and easy. And when God tests them with some painful affliction of spirit or persecutions and calumny or any other cross that, if well carried, would lead them to the heights of sanctity, they draw back and abandon the way of perfection. Perhaps they have even reached the point where they asked God to send them some cross, but it is evident that ***what they wanted was a cross of their own choosing*** and, when they did not find it, they considered that they had been deceived and gave up the road to perfection.

It is therefore necessary to decide once and for all to embrace suffering as God wishes to send it to us: sickness, persecution, calumny, humiliation, disappointment-whatever he wishes and in the manner he wishes. ***The attitude of soul must be one of a personal fiat, a total abandonment to God without reserve, a complete subjection to God's loving providence*** so that he may do with the soul as he wishes, both in time and in eternity.

But it is not easy to reach these heights. Frequently, the soul has to advance gradually from one step to another until ultimately it acquires a love for the Cross. ***The following are the principal degrees manifested by a soul in its progress toward a thirst for suffering:***

Acceptance of Duties.

Never omit any of our duties because of the suffering or difficulty. This is the initial grade or degree, and it is absolutely necessary for all. One who neglects a serious obligation without any reason other than the inconvenience or slight difficulty involved commits a serious sin. But even in the matter of light obligation, it is necessary to perform our duties in spite of our natural repugnance for them. Some persons neglect the duties of their state in life and nevertheless ask permission of their confessors to practice certain penances and mortification of their own choosing. ***The exact fulfillment of all our duties and obligations according to our state in life is absolutely indispensable for the crucifixion of self.***

Resignation to Crosses.

The crosses that God sends us directly or permits to befall us have a great value for sanctification if we know how to accept them with love and resignation as coming from the hands of God. These things are utilized by divine providence as instruments of our sanctification. St. John of the Cross speaks of this to a religious in his *Cautions*:

The first caution is that you should understand that you have come to the convent only in order that others may polish and exercise you. Thus ... it is fitting that you should think that all are in the convent to test you, as they truly are; that some have to polish you by words, others by works, others by thoughts against you; and that in all these things you must be subject to them as the statue is to the artist who sculpts it, and the painting to the painter. And if you do not observe this, you will never know how to conquer your own sensuality and sentimentality, nor will you know how to conduct yourself well with the religious in the convent, nor will you ever attain holy peace, nor will you ever free yourself from your many evils and defects.

Voluntary Mortification.

More perfect yet is the soul who takes the initiative and, in spite of the repugnance that nature feels, advances in the love of suffering by voluntarily practicing Christian mortification in its various forms. It is not possible to give a universal rule for all souls in this regard. Voluntary mortification will be determined in each case by the state and condition of the soul being sanctified. In the measure that the soul corresponds more and more with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he will be more and more demanding, but at the same time he will increase the strength of the soul so that it can accept and carry out these inspirations. It is the duty of the spiritual director to watch over the soul and never impose sacrifices beyond the strength of the soul. He should also take care lest he limit the soul's desire for immolation and oblige it to be retarded, instead of letting it fly on the wings of the eagle.

Preferring Suffering to Pleasure.

However contrary this may seem to our weak nature, the saints succeeded in reaching these heights. A moment arrived in which they felt an instinctive horror for anything that would satisfy their tastes and comfort. When everything went badly with them and the whole world persecuted and calumniated them, they rejoiced and gave thanks to God. If others applauded or praised them, they trembled as if God had permitted those things as punishment for their sins. They hardly took any account of themselves at all or of the heroism that such an attitude presupposes. They were so familiar with suffering that it seemed to them the most natural thing in the world to endure pain. St. John of the Cross has given us a rule for reaching this state. His words seem severe and are a torment to sensual ears, but it is only at this price that one can attain the treasure of sanctity:

To endeavor always to incline oneself, not to that which is easier, but to that which is more difficult; not to that which is tasty, but to that which is more bitter; not to that which is more pleasing, but to that which is less pleasing; not to that which gives rest, but to that which demands effort; not to that which is a consolation, but to that which is a source of sorrow; not to that which is more, but to that which is less; not to the lofty and precious, but to the lowly and despicable; not to that which is to be something, but to that which is to be nothing; not to be seeking the best in temporal things, but the worst, and to desire to enter in all nakedness and emptiness and poverty through Christ in whatever there is in the world. [\(13\)](#)

Offering Oneself as Victim.

It would seem that it is impossible to go further in love of the Cross than to prefer sorrow to pleasure. Nevertheless, there is still another more perfect degree in the love of suffering: the act of offering oneself as a victim of expiation for the sins of the world. At the very outset, we must insist that this sublime act is completely above the ordinary way of grace. It would be a terrible presumption for a beginner or an imperfectly purified soul to place itself in this state. "To be called a victim is easy and it pleases self-love, but truly to be a victim demands a purity, a detachment from creatures, and a heroic abandonment to all kinds of suffering, to humiliation, to ineffable obscurity, that I would consider it either foolish or miraculous if one who is at the

beginning of the spiritual life should attempt to do that which the divine Master did not do except by degrees." (14)

The theological basis of offering oneself as a victim of expiation for the salvation of souls or for any other supernatural motive such as reparation for the glory of God, liberating the souls in purgatory, attracting the divine mercy to the Church, the priesthood, one's country, or a particular soul, is the supernatural solidarity established by God among the members of the Mystical Body of Christ, whether actual or potential. Presupposing the solidarity in Christ that is common to all Christians, ***God selects certain holy souls, and particularly those who have offered themselves knowingly for this work, so that by their merits and sacrifices they may contribute to the application of the merits of the redemption by Christ.*** A typical example of this can be found in St. Catherine of Siena, whose most ardent desire was to give her life for the Church. "The only cause of my death," said the saint, "is my zeal for the Church of God, which devours and consumes me. Accept, O Lord, the sacrifices of my life for the Mystical Body of thy holy Church." She was also a victim soul for particular individuals. ***Other examples of victim souls are St. Thérèse of Lisieux, St. Gemma Galgani, and Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity.***

In practice, the offering of oneself as a victim for souls should never be permitted except to souls of whom the Holy Spirit asks it with a persistent and irresistible motion of grace. It should be noted that, rather than contributing to the sanctification of the individual (although it does add something), this particular act is ordained to the spiritual benefit of others. The soul that would give itself in this way for the salvation of others must itself be intimately united with God and must have traveled a long way toward its own perfection in charity. It must be a soul well schooled in suffering and even have a thirst for suffering. Under these conditions the spiritual director could prudently permit a soul to make this oblation of self as a victim soul. Then, if God accepts the offering, the soul can become a faithful reproduction of the divine Martyr of Calvary.

CHAPTER NOTES

1. Cf. Gordon W. Allport, *Pattern and Growth in Personality* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961).
2. The psychologist Erik Erikson maintains that even in the first critical transition during infancy the religious attitude of the mother exerts a lasting influence on the infant, and especially her practice of prayer. For an excellent application of Erikson's psychology of personality development to the spiritual life, see B. McLaughlin, *Nature, Grace and Religious Development* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1965).
3. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 63, a. 1; I-II, q. 21, a. 1; q. 72, a. 5; q. 74, a. 1; q. 75, aa. 2-3; q. 77, a. 6.
4. Cf. Eugene Maly, *Sin* (Dayton: Pflaum/Standard, 1973), pp. 27-31, passim.
5. Cf. D. Hoffman, *Beginnings in Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1967). pp. 36-38. Father Hoffman has written two other works that complete his series: *Maturing the Spirit* (Boston: St. Paul, 1973) and *The Life Within* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

6. St. Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946), First Mansions, Chap. 2.
7. *The Way of Perfection*, Chap. 41.
8. St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1949), Part III, Chap. 9.
9. *The Spiritual Doctrine of Father Lallemant* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1955), Prin. 4, c. 3, a. 3.
10. St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957), Book I, Chap. 11.
11. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, 1, q. 114, a. 2.
12. *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 113, a. 9, ad 2.
13. Cf. St. John of the Cross, *op. cit.*, Book I, Chap. 13.
14. Words of Mother Marie Thérèse, foundress of the Congregation of Mary Reparatrix, quoted by R. Plus in *Christ in His Brethren*, trans. Irene Hernaman (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1925).

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