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Chapter 2

Law and Liberty

Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings. — *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1783

A human act is one that proceeds from the deliberate use of our free will. It is an act that is deliberately and knowingly performed by one having the use of reason. Therefore, both intellect and will are in use. When a person studies with a classmate, he is performing a human act. When a group of citizens prepares a petition to send to the governor, they are performing human acts. When a gang of criminals robs a bank, they are performing a human act.

Every human act derives its morality from three elements: the object of the act itself, the purpose of the act, and the circumstances surrounding the act. Let us analyze each of these elements.

In order to judge the morality of a human act, we must first consider *the object of the act itself*. This is “the primary and decisive element for moral judgment,” said Pope John Paul, because it “establishes whether it is capable of being ordered to the good and

to the ultimate end, which is God" (*Veritatis Splendor*, n. 79).

Singing in a church choir would seem, on the face of it, to be morally good. Certainly it is good as far as the act itself is concerned. An evil purpose (seeking the opportunity to steal something valuable) or some other circumstance might make the singing evil, but the act itself is a good one. The unauthorized taking of a car is in itself a bad act, although it is possible to imagine circumstances when it would be morally allowable (to rush a dying person to the hospital).

When the police arrive at the scene of an alleged crime, they are forced to make an immediate judgment based on the act itself. If a boy had been walking down the street playing a harmonica, the victim of the crime would have a hard time persuading the police to arrest the boy. On the other hand, if two men were caught setting fire to a building, the act itself would be sufficient for an arrest. The men arrested could claim a good reason for setting the fire, but they would have to explain that later to a judge. In the legal order as in the moral order, we must first consider the object of the act itself in passing judgment on the moral goodness or badness of any action.

The purpose of a human act is the reason why the act is performed. A woman lies about a neighbor for the purpose of destroying the neighbor's reputation. A husband lies to his wife about problems at his job because he fears that telling her the truth will disturb her peace of mind. In each case, a lie was told, but obviously the guilt of each party is radically different. What makes the difference? The purpose of the person who told the lie.

It should be noted that the purpose will not always change the morality of an act because some acts are intrinsically wrong (evil by their nature). Take for instance the act of rape. A rapist may argue that he had a good purpose, such as the release of his tensions, but that cannot change the evil nature of the act itself. Rape is always wrong.

The circumstances of a human act are those factors, distinct from the act itself and from its purpose, which may change the morality of the act. Consider the case of a man who strikes another man, and later strikes his own mother. We immediately perceive a great difference in these two physically identical acts. As we do in the case of one woman who stabs her husband in a fit of anger, and another woman who stabs a man who assaulted her on the street. So any careful moral judgment must weigh the circumstances surrounding the act.

How to Judge the Morality of an Act

Various fundamental principles must be applied in judging the morality of a specific act. The following is a list of some of the more important of these principles. A more extensive discussion of them can be found in paragraphs 71-83 of *Veritatis Splendor* and in articles 1749-1761 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

1. *An act is morally good if the object of the act itself, the purpose, and the circumstances are substantially good.* We say "substantially" good because an act may have minor moral shortcomings and still be a truly good act. A teenage boy who obeys the speed laws because he is afraid his father might take the car away from him is performing a good act even though his motive is more selfish than noble.

2. *If an act itself is intrinsically evil (evil by its very nature), the act is never morally allowable regardless of purpose or circumstances.* St. Paul taught the existence of intrinsically evil acts when he stated: "Do not deceive yourselves: no fornicators, idolaters, or adulterers, no sexual perverts, thieves, misers, or drunkards, no slanderers or robbers will inherit God's kingdom" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

The Second Vatican Council also listed a number of acts that are always seriously wrong by reason of their object:

"Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator" (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, n. 27).

3. *If the object of the act is itself morally good (or at least neutral), its morality will be judged by the purpose or the circumstances.*

Eating in itself is morally neutral. If a person is eating to keep herself healthy, she is doing something good. If she is eating to the point of gluttony, she is doing something morally wrong.

4. *Circumstances may create, mitigate, or aggravate sin.* They may change a neutral or indifferent act into one that is morally sinful. For instance, shooting a gun may be suicide or murder or both or nothing. To use the name of God or Jesus to express anger or surprise is sinful; to do so in front of children adds the sin of scandal. Circumstances may make a mortal (grave) sin out of a venial (slight) sin, or a venial sin out of a mortal sin. To steal a small amount of money is ordinarily a venial sin; to steal the same amount from a very poor person would be a serious sin.

5. *If all three moral elements (the object of the act itself, the purpose, and the circumstances) are good, the act is good. If any one element is evil, the act is evil.* If a reservoir is fed by three streams, and one of them is polluted, the reservoir is polluted.

Conditions That Lessen Guilt

Since free will and knowledge always play a part in moral guilt, anything that might interfere with free will and/or knowledge must be considered in making a prudent judgment concerning the morality of an action. There are a number of conditions that may lessen or even remove moral responsibility entirely: ignorance, fear, concupiscence, violence, habit, temperament, and nervous mental disorders.

Ignorance is lack of knowledge in a person capable of possessing such knowledge. In some cases we are responsible for knowledge; in other cases we are not. We must distinguish between two types of ignorance, vincible and invincible.

Vincible ignorance is that which can and should be dispelled. The person ought to know that an action is wrong, and failure to know this implies some culpability or fault on his part. Thus, if a person suspects that it may be wrong to eat meat on the Fridays of Lent, but neglects to call a priest or a friend to find out, then he commits a sin if he eats meat on those days. Or if a married couple thinks that practicing artificial contraception may be against the Church's teaching, but deliberately avoids acquiring the knowledge so that they won't have to observe the teaching, they are guilty of sin.

Invincible ignorance is that which cannot be dispelled. This situation may exist either because an individual is unable to obtain adequate information, even after a reasonable effort, or because he simply does not know that there is any problem – in other words, he is ignorant of his own ignorance. This person cannot be expected to take steps to enlighten himself because he is unaware that he is in need of any enlightenment. Thus, if a new convert to the Church was unaware of the obligation to attend Mass on holy days, as well as on Sundays, there would be no sin involved in missing Mass on a holy day.

We can sum up by saying that invincible ignorance eliminates the moral responsibility for a human act; vincible ignorance does not eliminate moral responsibility, but it may lessen it (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1790-1793).

Fear is a disturbance of mind resulting from some present or imminent danger. Fear is an emotion that can cause us such anxiety that our use of reason is affected and we may perform an immoral act that we normally would not perform. For instance, if we stole something because someone threatened to beat us severely, our moral guilt would be greatly diminished. However, even overwhelming fear would not justify performing an action that is intrinsically evil, such as abortion or rape.

Concupiscence is the rebellion of the passions against reason. Or to put it another way, it is the tendency of human nature toward evil. It is the revolt of our physical faculties against the higher faculty of reason. St. Paul spoke of this internal conflict: "I cannot understand even my own actions. I do not do what I want to do but what I hate" (Romans 7:15).

The passions may be defined as the physical appetites of human beings reaching out toward their objects. Under this heading come anger, hope, love, joy, grief, desire, aversion, courage, and fear. The passions are not in themselves evil; parents may and often should exercise a just anger in order to discipline their children. But the passions are, however, in revolt against our nobler and better selves, and that revolt is called concupiscence (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1762-1774).

Obviously, an evil action performed in the heat of passion can be quite different from an evil action that is carefully planned and calculated. This distinction is often recognized in our courts by the different penalties attached to murder in the first degree and second degree. So the recognition of concupiscence as a factor in de-

termining guilt is well founded for it does have an influence on the morality of human acts.

What happens if an individual deliberately arouses his or her passions? For instance, suppose a young man or woman deliberately reads a sexually graphic book before going on a date, or deliberately chooses such a video for both parties to view while they are alone for the specific purpose of getting the other person "turned on." Obviously, this would increase the moral guilt of the individual who planned the evening. On the other hand, culpability is lessened if the passion aroused on a date is spontaneous.

It is clear that certain emotions, such as anger, discouragement, or grief, can so influence a person's state of mind that the use of reason and free will is lessened. This in turn lessens the voluntary nature of human acts and their degree of guilt. For example, a very depressed sick person who attempts suicide is less blameworthy because of their state of mind. But a person who voluntarily fosters concupiscence, say by deliberately working oneself into a rage in order to force someone else to do something, would be morally responsible for that act.

Violence is an external force applied by one person on another in order to compel that person to perform an action against his or her will. In cases where the victim gives complete resistance, the violence is classified as perfect violence; where the victim offers insufficient resistance, the violence is classified as imperfect violence. That which is done under "perfect violence" is entirely involuntary, and there is no moral responsibility in such cases. That which is done under the influence of "imperfect violence" is less voluntary, and the moral responsibility is lessened but not taken away completely.

A habit is an inclination to perform some particular action. It is acquired by repetition and characterized by a decreased power of resistance and an increased ease of performance. Formed by frequent repetition of some action, the habits of cursing or drinking, of praying or being kind to others – all have moral implications, either good or bad. Habit does not destroy the voluntary nature of our actions, and we are at least partially responsible for evil acts done out of habit as long as the habit is allowed to continue. If we know the consequences of an act and do it repeatedly, we cannot escape moral responsibility for the act. But if we sincerely try to overcome the bad habit, for instance, by staying away from persons, places, or things which may cause us to sin, then

our moral guilt may be diminished if we fall into the habit inadvertently.

Temperament is the sum total of those emotional and mental qualities which mark an individual. Temperament may be loosely defined as disposition, and our temperament can affect our will to the extent of somewhat lessening the completely voluntary nature of our actions. Four basic temperaments are generally recognized in human beings: phlegmatic, or not easily aroused; choleric, or having a low threshold for anger; sanguine, or optimistic and free from anxiety; and melancholic, or given to introspection or pessimism about the future. Individuals may have more than one of these temperaments, and they can affect the way in which we act.

Nervous mental disorders can affect the intellect and the will and may take away completely or lessen the voluntary nature of human acts. Sin and moral responsibility depend on the use of the intellect and will and, since nervous mental disorders affect the proper operation of these two faculties, moral guilt is diminished or eliminated to the extent to which these faculties are affected. In concrete individual cases, it is most difficult to determine moral responsibility. We must leave the final judgment in these situations in the hands of God.

Caution should be exercised, however, lest we be tempted to use mental problems as an unwarranted excuse for immoral actions. How many times these days do we hear the perpetrators of heinous crimes described as "sick" or "crazy," when it is more likely that they are just plain evil? It is not up to us to judge anyone's motives – God alone knows what is in our minds and hearts – but let's not be so quick to rule out evil as the root cause of much of the criminal activity afflicting our society.

Occasions of Sin

An occasion of sin is any person, place, or thing which may lead us into sin. An outside influence or circumstance which offers an individual an enticement to commit a sin, it can be a person (a friend or acquaintance), a place (a bar, a beach, an empty house), or a thing (a car, a video, a book or magazine). Occasions of sin vary in intensity and, for that reason, they are classified as either proximate or remote. *A proximate occasion of sin* is one which

may easily lead a person into sin. If it would tempt any normal person under normal circumstances (a sexually explicit book or film), the occasion is known as an absolute proximate occasion. If on the other hand it would tempt only certain people (a bar for a drunkard), then it is called a relative proximate occasion of sin.

A *remote occasion of sin* is one which is less likely to lead a person into sin. Here again we find a division into absolute and relative. An absolutely remote occasion of sin is that in which sin for the average person is possible but not probable, as for example reading the daily newspaper. A relatively remote occasion of sin is that in which a particular individual or class of persons does not as a rule sin, although it might constitute a serious occasion for average people. Consider the effect a book on human reproduction might have on a physician, and the effect the same book might have on a young teenager.

Another category of occasions of sin is based on their necessity. It is not necessary for the average person to watch pornographic films, but it may be necessary for a law enforcement official to view them as part of an effort to prosecute those who produce and distribute them. It is not possible for the husband or wife of a nagging or difficult spouse to live with that person for years without getting angry or annoyed, but this is a necessary occasion of sin that cannot be avoided.

We are morally obliged to stay away from sin. *Therefore, we are obliged to avoid all voluntary proximate occasions of sin, unless we have a sufficient reason for not doing so.* If we find ourselves in a necessary proximate occasion, we must take steps to render that occasion remote, to minimize its effect on us. In the case of the difficult husband or wife, the other spouse must take steps to avoid getting angry, such as exercising strong will power, praying for God's help, and avoiding as much as possible those things that start the nagging and lead to loss of temper.

We have a slight obligation to avoid remote occasions of sin unless we have a sufficient reason for not doing so. Since there is only a slight danger of sinning, and the temptation can easily be resisted, one would be morally allowed to continue reading the daily newspaper, even though it carries ever more explicit stories and ever more suggestive advertising. Actually, we could not really go through life avoiding all remote occasions of sin. Any attempt to do so would throw us into a state of scrupulosity, which is an unhealthy condition.

The Natural Law

The natural law is that rule of right and wrong which our own reason can perceive. The natural law exists in us as an integral part of our nature. Just as the laws of chemical reaction are inherent in the nature of the elements, so certain moral laws are inherent in our nature. A young child who has done wrong – lied, used bad words, or disobeyed – feels uncomfortable, ashamed, or even frightened, even though he or she may never have heard of the moral law. A person in a remote corner of the world may never have heard of the Commandments, but there is a law written on our hearts that says murder, adultery, and stealing are wrong. No society where such actions are tolerated could long survive.

The Second Vatican Council spoke of the fundamental law of right and wrong imbedded in human nature in these words:

“In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to his heart more specifically: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged” (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, n. 16).

In its *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation*, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith explained the natural law this way:

“The natural moral law expresses and lays down the purposes, rights, and duties which are based upon the bodily and spiritual nature of the human person. Therefore, this law cannot be thought of as simply a set of norms on the biological level; rather it must be defined as the rational order whereby man is called by the Creator to direct and regulate his life and actions and in particular to make use of his own body” (*Donum Vitae*, n. 3).

If everyone, for example, could take the property of others at any time without fault or blame, no one would have any security in their property. All effort, all planning would be useless. Initiative would be stifled. The entire world would be in chaos. In other

words, reason indicates that stealing is wrong. Therefore, we say that stealing is against the natural law. The same can be said for murder, adultery, rape, lying, and a host of other evils.

Natural law is universal because, being based on human nature, it binds all of us. It is also unchangeable because human nature is the same at all times and in all places. Therefore, all acts contrary to the natural law, such as murder, theft, and direct abortion, will always remain immoral. No human authority, not even the Supreme Court, has the power to negate, alter, or abrogate any precept of the natural law.

The ten Commandments are basically a summary of the principles of the natural law. The only exception is the third commandment, "Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day," which is a divine positive law. Men and women, even before the ten Commandments were given to Moses on Mount Sinai, could tell right from wrong. But people drifted away from God, and he saw the need for putting the natural law before them in a striking way, making it stronger and more explicit.

Every possible infraction of the natural law is not listed in the ten Commandments. The Commandments indicate the fundamentals of the natural law. For example, "Honor your father and your mother" embraces by implication all the obligations superiors and inferiors have in their relations with each other. The Commandments are not an exhaustive list of every possible infringement of the natural law. They are a series of essential guideposts indicating the proper line of conduct in various important departments of life.

The Sermon on the Mount

The fullest and most complete formulation of the moral law is contained in the Sermon on the Mount, which Pope John Paul called "the *magna charta* of Gospel morality" (*Veritatis Splendor*, n. 15). The Holy Father said that "Jesus brings God's commandments to fulfillment, particularly the commandment of love of neighbor, by interiorizing their demands and by bringing out their fullest meaning."

He said that "Jesus shows that the commandments must not be understood as a minimum limit not to be gone beyond, but rather as a path involving a moral and spiritual journey towards perfection, at the heart of which is love (cf. Col. 3:14). Thus the commandment 'You shall not murder' becomes a call to an attentive

love which protects and promotes the life of one's neighbor. The precept prohibiting adultery becomes an invitation to a pure way of looking at others, capable of respecting the spousal meaning of the body" (n. 15).

In the course of human history, we find practically no argument over the validity of the ten Commandments. They are so obviously expressive of the law of our nature that few have been so foolish and unreasonable as to suggest that they have nothing to do with correct human behavior.

The natural law is not meant to interfere with our liberty, but to guide us in the proper use of that liberty. A traffic light is placed at a busy intersection not to hinder drivers and pedestrians but to keep them from harm. They are free to ignore the light, but in doing so they endanger themselves. Similarly, we cannot ignore the law of nature without doing harm to ourselves and others. The ten Commandments are God's directions on how human beings can avoid harm to themselves and attain true happiness both in this life and in the life to come.

Positive Law

A positive law is a precept imposed by one in authority. In some instances this authority is God, as in the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament or the necessity of Baptism stated in the New Testament. When God is the author of a positive law, it is called "divine positive law." In other instances the authority is human, as in the case of taxes and the formalities of a will in civil law, or the obligations imposed by Church authority, such as the requirement to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days, to observe the laws of fast and abstinence, or to abide by the marriage laws of the Church. This sort of law is called "human law." Having been made by human authority, positive laws can be changed or revoked by that same authority.

What Is Conscience?

Conscience is a practical judgment concerning the moral goodness or evil of some course of action. Conscience is not a separate faculty, a special little voice within us, whispering suggestions regarding our conduct. "It is a judgment which applies to

a concrete situation the rational conviction that one must love and do good and avoid evil" (*Veritatis Splendor*, n. 59). St. Bonaventure teaches that "conscience is like God's herald and messenger; it does not command things on its own authority, but commands them as coming from God's authority, like a herald when he proclaims the edict of the king. This is why conscience has binding force."

Since it is an operation of the human intellect, conscience is subject to the shortcomings of our intellect. In addition, the operation of conscience implies knowledge, reflection, and freedom. These factors can vary with each person and explain why different judgments may be made by different individuals concerning the morality of the same act. For instance, one who bases moral decisions on the advice columns in the newspaper will reach different conclusions from one who makes the teachings of the Church an essential part of the equation.

A true conscience is one which indicates correctly the goodness or badness of moral conduct. An erroneous conscience is one which falsely indicates that a good action is evil, or an evil action is good. Since conscience is nothing more than the operation of the intellect, it is apparent that conscience may be in error. This error of conscience may at times exist because of some fault on the part of the individual, say, a failure to search out the correct information; or there may be an erroneous conscience that is not the fault of the individual, say, one who honestly thought that he or she was doing the right thing, or at least something that was not seriously wrong.

If a person performs an act that is in itself a slight sin, while his judgment (conscience) tells him it is a serious sin, he has committed a serious sin. A boy who thinks it is a serious sin to steal a small amount of money, and yet deliberately does so anyway, is guilty of a serious sin. If a person commits what is objectively a serious sin, truly thinking it is not serious, that person is guilty of only a slight offense. A young girl, thinking that it was not seriously wrong to strike her mother, would be guilty of only a slight sin because her conscience was in error.

A certain conscience is one which dictates a course of action in clear terms without fear of error. A doubtful conscience is one which leaves a person undecided as to the proper course of action. Conscience may err on the side of *laxity*. Those with a lax conscience sometimes become persuaded that great sins are permissible (consider the number of people today

who favor abortion). They find excuses for grave misconduct, often beginning by rationalizing minor faults and gradually dulling their conscience until it is incapable of giving them proper moral direction. Rarer than laxity of conscience, but a problem for some people nevertheless, is *scrupulosity*. This is when a person sees evil where there is none. Scrupulosity in this sense is nothing to be admired; it is a tremendous drag on the soul and is as much to be avoided as laxity.

When our conscience is honestly and correctly formed, we are obliged to follow it in any circumstances. Once we are convinced that we have an obligation to do or to avoid a certain action, we are duty bound to act upon our convictions. In the words of the Second Vatican Council:

"In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience faithfully, in order that he may come to God, for whom he was created. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious" (*Declaration on Religious Freedom*, n. 3).

An individual must always act in accordance with a certain conscience. This is true even if the certain conscience is false. If one's conscience points out a particular action as definitely bad, even though objectively the act might be good, the act must be avoided. Conversely, if a person's conscience points out an act as good and to be done, even though objectively the act is evil, that individual must perform the act. On the other hand, *no one is allowed to act with a doubtful conscience.*

How to Form a Correct Conscience

Here are some principles for formation of a correct conscience (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1776-1802):

1. *There must be a readiness on the part of the person to seek and accept instruction and advice.* It is most important, of course, to know the teaching of the Church on the matter being considered. The Second Vatican Council put it this way:

"In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the

Church. The Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that Truth which is Christ himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origin in human nature itself" (*Declaration on Religious Freedom*, n. 14).

Pope John Paul II emphasized this same point in his "World Day of Peace Message" on December 8, 1990: "To claim that one has a right to act according to conscience, but without at the same time acknowledging the duty to conform one's conscience to the truth and to the law which God himself has written on our hearts, in the end means nothing more than imposing one's limited personal opinion."

2. *If one is in doubt whether there is a law forbidding a particular action, or whether his action would be in these particular circumstances forbidden by the law, he should obtain advice from the most authoritative source available.*

3. *If a person is in doubt concerning the lawfulness of an action, she may follow an opinion that is well-founded.* This will usually mean an opinion from another person who is truly qualified to give advice. But it could at times be the reasoned conclusion of the person herself if she is truly an authority in the field. For example, a doctor may judge it morally proper to perform a particular emergency operation on the basis of her training, even though she does not have time to consult a specialist in medical ethics.

4. *The more serious the obligation, or the more serious the basis of the law in question, the more effort must be made to resolve the doubt and the more certainty one must have.* The natural law takes precedence over the divine positive law, and the divine positive law takes precedence over a human law. The greatest certainty is demanded concerning the validity of Baptism (since it involves eternal salvation) as opposed to a doubt whether one has a sufficient reason to act contrary to the law of the Church.

5. *If some individual or group teaches something contrary to what the Church teaches, one's conscience must be formed on the basis of the official Church teaching, i.e., what is taught by the Pope and those bishops in communion with him, rather than the opinion of one or more theologians.*

Conscience is the umpire that "calls the play" in the game of morality, and the decision of conscience is final. There is no appeal to a higher authority above a conscience that is sincerely and prop-

erly formed. But beware of self-delusion, especially in these days when all kinds of evils are being justified under the banner of following your conscience. We are bound to take all reasonable steps to inform ourselves adequately in matters of morality and sin, and to listen sincerely to competent authority. Otherwise we cannot say that we have properly formed our conscience.

In their 1976 pastoral letter on the moral life (*To Live in Christ Jesus*), the U.S. Catholic Bishops offered this important statement about conscience:

"We must have a rightly informed conscience and follow it. But our judgments are human and can be mistaken; we may be blinded by the power of sin in our lives or misled by the strength of our desires. 'Beloved, do not trust every spirit, but put the spirits to a test to see if they belong to God' (1 Jn. 4:1). Clearly, then, we must do everything in our power to see to it that our judgments of conscience are informed and in accord with the moral order of which God is creator. Common sense requires that conscientious people be open and humble, ready to learn from the experience and insight of others, willing to acknowledge prejudices and even change their judgments in light of better instruction."

Sin and Its Consequences

When we deliberately violate our conscience, we commit a sin. **A sin is any willful thought, word, deed, or omission contrary to the law of God.** It is not only an offense against God, but also an offense against the Church. Recalling the words of Vatican II, Pope John Paul II said in 1992 that "sin's essential nature is that of an offense against God. This is an important fact which includes the perverse act of the creature who knowingly and freely opposes the will of his Creator and Lord, violating the law of good and freely submitting to the yoke of evil."

He said that "we must say that it is also an act which offends the divine charity in that it is an infraction against the law of friendship and covenant which God has established for his people and every person in the blood of Christ. Therefore, it is an act of infidelity and, in practice, a rejection of his love" (*Penance in the Church*).

The Holy Father went on to remind us that "sin is also a wound inflicted upon the Church. In fact, every sin harms the holiness of the ecclesial community. Since all the faithful are in solidarity in

the Christian community, there can never be a sin which does not have an effect on the whole community. If it is true that the good done by one person is a benefit and help to all the others, unfortunately it is equally true that the evil committed by one obstructs the perfection to which all are tending." He said that "reconciliation with God is also reconciliation with the Church, and in a certain sense with all of creation, whose harmony is violated by sin."

There are two kinds of actual sin – mortal sin and venial sin. **"Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent"** (*Veritatis Splendor*, n. 70). It is a sin which breaks our relationship with God, such as abortion, apostasy, blasphemy, murder, adultery, fornication, rape, sodomy, racism, or stealing a large amount of money (cf. Matthew 15:19; Romans 1:18-30; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; *Veritatis Splendor*, nn. 80, 81, 100; and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1852-1853).

In order to commit a mortal sin, three conditions are necessary: (1) Whatever is done must be of a *serious* nature. (2) We must *realize* that it is serious. (3) We must give the *full consent* of our will to the sin, i.e., deliberately commit the offense. All three conditions must be present simultaneously for a mortal sin to have been committed. If one of them is missing – the matter was trivial, there was not sufficient reflection before we did it, or we did not engage in the thought, word, deed, or act of omission on purpose – then there is no mortal sin.

There is a tendency today to play down the possibility of mortal sin, to suggest that only a fundamental and complete break with God constitutes mortal sin. This is not the official teaching of the Church. The Church teaches that "mortal sin exists also when a person knowingly and willingly, for whatever reason, chooses something gravely disordered. In fact, such a choice already includes contempt for the divine law, a rejection of God's love for humanity and the whole of creation: the person turns away from God and loses charity. Thus the fundamental orientation can be radically changed by individual acts" (Pope John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, n. 17).

While mortal sin is a grave offense that separates us from God and puts our eternal salvation in jeopardy, **venial sin is a slight offense against God**. But it still weakens our relationship with the Creator, and weakens our resistance to mortal sin. Quoting from St. Thomas Aquinas on the distinction between the two types of actual sin, Pope John Paul said that "when, 'through sin, the soul commits a disorder that reaches the point of turning away

from its ultimate end – God – to which it is bound by charity, then the sin is mortal; on the other hand, whenever the disorder does not reach the point of a turning away from God, the sin is venial.’ For this reason venial sin does not deprive the sinner of sanctifying grace, friendship with God, charity, and therefore eternal happiness, whereas just such a deprivation is precisely the consequence of mortal sin” (*Reconciliation and Penance*, n. 17).

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

Since the sacrament of Penance/Reconciliation can restore life to one who is sorry for having committed a mortal sin, the deadly sin to which John is referring in this case is probably apostasy or final impenitence, where an individual has stubbornly rejected God’s mercy and forgiveness right up to the end.

The Mercy of God

While there may be people among us who seem to live with no fear of the judgment of Almighty God, surely no one but a fool can look back on past sins and not feel the slightest anxiety as death approaches. If we honestly take stock of our sins, including those secret sins that are known to God alone, and at the same time contemplate the *justice* of God, we can be filled with anxiety. Such fear, such apprehension, is good for us, especially if it deters us from further transgressions against the love and law of God. As the Bible says, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7).

It is not well, however, to live always in fear and apprehension. God is not only infinitely just, he is also infinitely merciful. If we are to see God as he truly is, we must consider both his justice and his mercy. If we combine our fear of his justice with our confidence in his mercy, we will live a balanced spiritual life. Pope Paul VI reminded us of the charity and tolerance of Christ: “Having come not to judge the world but to save it, he was uncompromisingly stern towards sin, but patient and rich in mercy toward sinners” (*Humanae Vitae*, n. 29).

It is the teaching of the Church that a person who dies in unrepented mortal sin will go to everlasting punishment, and a

healthy fear of such a terrible outcome is a good thing. While we should avoid sin primarily out of love for God, it is true that fear of eternal separation from God in hell can also be a powerful deterrent to sin. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that between sin and its punishment comes the mercy of God.

As Jesus told us, God is like the good shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine faithful sheep to go search for the one that is lost: "And when he finds it, he puts it on his shoulders in jubilation. Once arrived home, he invites friends and neighbors in and says to them, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you, there will likewise be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent" (Luke 15:3-7).

In the Old Testament, God says, "Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow; though they be crimson red, they may become white as wool" (Isaiah 1:18). God is like a fisherman who tries every sort of device to entice fish into his net, and is more pleased to catch big fish than small ones. Let us never forget that souls are in hell not because they have committed sins, but because they have not *repented* of the sins they committed.

Another shining example of the mercy of God occurred when Jesus was dining at the house of Simon the Pharisee and a woman of low reputation entered the dining hall uninvited during the meal. This poor sinner went straight to the feet of Jesus, fell to her knees, and cried. Her tears fell on our Lord's feet, and she wiped them dry with her hair. She also kissed his feet and anointed them with a precious ointment she had brought with her.

Simon and his friends were shocked that Christ would allow such a woman to touch him. But Jesus explained that "her many sins are forgiven because of her great love. Little is forgiven the one whose love is small." He then told the woman, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has been your salvation. Now go in peace" (Luke 7:36-50).

What a beautiful thing is the mercy of God! It is tender, it is loving, it is prompt, it is generous. And that mercy is ready to be poured out at all times. How are we to open the floodgates of the mercy of God? As the repentant woman did long ago: by seeking forgiveness at the feet of Christ, by taking full advantage of the sacrament of forgiveness, which we call Penance or Reconciliation, given to us by our Lord himself on that first Easter Sunday night (John 20:22-23).