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*Retreat Thoughts: Series II*

# Use *and* Misuse

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## The Use of Created Things

THE first rule in the use of created things is that so far as it is permitted to us by the law of God (that is with regard to all those creatures the use of which is not necessary for fulfilling the obligations of the moral law of our state of life) we should endeavor to render ourselves indifferent. What is indifference? In general, it is a disposition of soul that renders us neutral or unconcerned with regard to persons and things. This neutral disposition of soul may arise, first from want of inclination, from a natural insensibility or obtuseness, and as such it is no more a virtue or an indication of a virtue than the indifference of a wooden Indian to heat or cold, or the insensibility of a thick-skinned donkey to pain. Some men are so constituted by nature that creatures possessing attractions for the generality of men, leave them unaffected. They are color-blind with regard to certain creatures; and this characteristic of theirs, instead of being a virtue may show an incapacity for virtue of a high kind; "virtue is perfected in weakness." It may often become a cause of vanity, self-approval, narrowness and uncharitable judgments of others and may be the result of an egotistic absorption of the pursuit of the object of one passion or of peculiar temperament. Christian virtue is not apathy nor pagan Stoicism, nor is it loss of interest; it is compatible with strong inclination. A saint is a man not of weak passions, but of strong passions conquered.

This neutral disposition of the soul toward creatures may arise, secondly, from the free self-determining will by which in spite of sensible repugnance or sensible attraction, it exercises a mastery over the lower appetites and chooses or rejects creatures in proportion as their use conduces to the acquirement of its last end or impedes it. It is will power. If I am asked the questions: Would you, if choice were left to you, rather live in this place or that? Would you rather have this occupation or that? Would you rather study or have a pleasant time? Would you rather work or have what is called a soft job? Would you rather have good health or



bad? Would you rather associate with one person than the other? Would you rather be exempt from some burdensome requirement of life or be obliged to conform to it? If, I say, I am asked these or similar questions, I may give one or two answers: I may say I should prefer one alternative and should dislike the other, because one is agreeable and gives me an opportunity of following my natural inclination while the other is disagreeable and excites a natural aversion. Or I may say: I do not know; either might be conducive or hurtful to salvation; I cannot foresee the outcome of either; I have no choice, though I may have natural inclination.

Now, if I habitually recur to the principle implied in the second answer, whenever there is question of action not prescribed by the law of God, by my lawful superiors or by the duties or proprieties of my state in life, I have acquired that disposition of soul towards creatures which is the logical attitude of one who apprehends their relations to himself and to their Creator. I have brought home to myself as a living and practical conviction the truth that they are *means*, and that all there is in them of utility or attractiveness is relative and subordinate to the supreme end of creation, the glory of the Creator. But if I habitually answer in accordance with the principle that underlies the first answer, I am a utilitarian, and I have made myself the end of creation. If I tell you what a person's dominant interest is, what he is constantly seeking for, I have told you what he considers the end of his creation, what he has chosen as his god. If we make the object of our quest throughout the day the comfort we get from creatures of whatever kind that comfort may be, whether it be comfort of the body or comfort of the soul, we have allowed the old pagan element that is in all of us to reassert itself. For paganism essentially consisted in this that the satisfaction of man's passions and desires was his highest good. It made a creature the end and naturally resulted in idolatry—the adoration of creatures. The pagan carried this principle to its logical conclusion; we attempt to serve two masters, God and self. "And Elias coming to all the people said: How long will you halt between two sides. If the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him" (3 Kings xviii, 21).

Indifference, therefore, is an habitual disposition of will which suspends the act of choice as long as the motives for choice are personal pain or pleasure, natural inclination or aversion. By it accordingly we are protected in our use of creatures and against the inordinate attraction exercised by these creatures. Indifference, therefore, is a self-poise or equilibrium of the will, by which it remains master of itself, and is enabled to elicit its deliberate acts independently of those impulses which theologians call the indeliberate movements of the will. It does not consist, therefore, in being free from the instinctive likes and dislikes of our nature. The lives of the Saints and the example of Our Lord Himself, our supreme Model, in the garden of Gethsemani teach us that heroic virtue is compatible with exquisite sensitiveness of our physical and emotional nature; that in fact heroic virtue is scarcely possible to one whose nature is loggish and leaden. But although we cannot acquire absolute indifference of sense-inclination, we can acquire habitual control over our inclinations. Furthermore, if from past yieldings, any of those inclinations have acquired an intensity and strength beyond what is normal, we can by degrees and by repeated acts of self-control moderate their vehemence, and so prevent them from hurrying us into excess in our choosing.

The necessity of doing this is first *logical*. The sanity of reason demands of us that we use things for the purpose to which they are by nature and the decree of their Creator adapted. The man, for instance, that makes use of sleep, food, drink or pleasure, for a purpose that is antagonistic to his great destiny in life, who employs his mind, his tongue or his eyes to injure or frustrate the reason of his existence, is not less ludicrously illogical than the cook who attempts to make chicken soup by throwing away the bird and boiling the feathers, or the celebrated character who borrowed a pick-axe to saw a barrel in order to make a hen-house for his dog.

The necessity of acquiring this indifference is secondly *physical*. Creatures can only give what they have. If we seek in them our complete happiness, we shall live in perpetual disappointment and unrest; we shall gain a passing pleasure followed by a profounder feeling of dissatisfaction; we shall gradually acquire a diseased dislike for the things of the spirit; we shall lose the joyousness of children of God.

The necessity is finally *moral*. This indifference is necessary for all men who wish to avoid mortal and venial sin and those faults of impulse which antecede full deliberation but are the consequence of culpable negligence. It is moreover a *conditio sine qua non* of higher sanctity.

#### RULE OF PREFERENCE

The second rule for the right use of created things is, not only to hold our wills in a negative attitude of indifference towards creatures precisely as creatures, but furthermore among creatures which may help us to attain our end, to prefer to choose those which more directly, safely and effectively promote God's glory and secure our salvation. This rule, when analyzed, seems to be nothing more than an application to our present subject-matter of the first and greatest of the commandments: "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God with thy whole heart, thy whole mind and all thy strength," for if the supreme and primary end of creation is that God should be known, loved and served, every inferior motive is to be subjected to this. But if, of two means of promoting God's glory presented to our consideration, one is more serviceable than the other, the only motive we could have in choosing the less serviceable would be the desire of seeking our own pleasure or comfort. We should, therefore, be subordinating a measure at least of God's glory to self and we should be loving God with a partial heart, a partial mind, and with some only of our strength.

Again, the salvation of our soul is not a conditional good, the predestined measure of whose blessedness is an affair of our free will. The amount of blessedness we are created to attain was decreed from eternity by our Creator. We may not attain that measure, but we shall only fail to do so by the entrance of some admixture of inordinate self-love into our service of God. What will it profit a man to gain a temporary and transient pleasure, and to lose a part of that unspeakable glory that "God has prepared for them that love Him" (1 Cor. ii, 9; Isaias lxiv, 4).

Two difficulties have been proposed against these principles. First it has been urged that this last rule is not a logical inference from the principles derived from the truth of man's destiny. Because an efficacious desire of attaining our

last end is compatible with any choice of means which are conducive thereto. Although, therefore, some means may be more conducive than others, a person would act prudently and virtuously, if he did not use these, provided that the means he did use were actually conducive to his last end, even though less so than others.

The answer to this difficulty is that no one pretends to assert that one would lose his soul, if he did not always choose those creatures which more effectively conduce to his last end. There is no question of inferring an obligation under formal sin, either mortal or venial. But the inference is absolutely logical, that in view of the supreme and unconditioned importance of our last end, right reason dictates that we should with our whole mind and all our strength and with a single eye, choose and desire always among creatures those that more efficaciously further that end; and that we cannot fail to do this, without incurring those stains of soul which though they are not mortal sins, nor formal venial sins, are nevertheless culpable imperfections which diminish our merit, make our service of our Creator defective, and, unless constantly guarded against, become an inducement to deliberate venial sins and thence to mortal sin. The Council of Trent has defined as an article of Faith that a just man cannot during his life avoid all venial sins, except by a special privilege, such as was conferred on the Blessed Virgin. The common opinion of theologians and Saints interprets this decree to refer not necessarily to those acts by which one deliberately chooses to offend God in matter that is venial, but at least to those imperfections which through want of vigilance or purity of intention sometimes accompany the acts of the most perfect. We know moreover that some holy persons have taken vows to avoid all deliberate venial sins. Such a vow would be foolhardy, if it referred to those venial sins of which the Council of Trent speaks. There are, therefore, accompanying our acts, imperfections arising from our want of singleness and thoroughness in seeking our last end. We are, therefore, absolutely logical in inferring that we should, if we want to act with the plenitude of reason in our use of creatures, seek and desire those only that more directly, safely and effectively conduces to the glory of God and secures our salvation.

A second difficulty is urged against the principle of indifference. It is said that if we are to be indifferent to every creature, we must suppress every desire. If we must suppress every desire, we may not exercise the virtue of hope nor pray for any favor short of salvation. The answer of course is that there are men whose desires have been inordinate and ill-regulated and have led them into sin, and who consequently must be thoroughly convinced that the objects of the desires are creatures whose use is good when subordinated to their last end, and evil when not so subordinated. To get such a man in the proper dispositions, creatures are proposed to his considerations precisely as they are means. When this truth is profoundly apprehended, he is in a condition to desire things in the light of his last end. This doctrine, therefore, if rightly understood, justifies us in desiring and praying for those things which are useful to ourselves or others, as often as we prudently judge that they help us or others to attain salvation or some condition of existence that is conducive to salvation. Furthermore, we may ask these favors of God, without adding the condition "if they are salutary," whenever we have prudential, though not absolute, certainty that by obtaining them we may serve our Creator more faithfully. The scope of this rule, therefore, is the reformation of inordinate desires and its application is valid so long as we are in the purgative way; so long namely, as we are in the habit of allowing ourselves to be impelled to action by unregulated love of creatures merely for the attractions they possess. It is a calm thesis of reason, not exaggerated, nor appealing to mere emotion.

No man of reason can deny assent of mind. No man of character can refuse conformity of will. Whoever acts according to it is a saint. A saint, therefore, is a man guided by reason, but by real reason, not by the sophistry of passion that masquerades as reason. Be reasonable, and you will fulfil the end of your creation and save your soul.



## Three Misuses

### WHAT IS SIN?

WE cannot easily put a definition of it in human words, but we may know it by its consequences. Even though we may not apprehend its intrinsic vileness and hideousness in itself, we may know it in the effects it produces. When we see God face to face, we shall know what it is to offend Him, to abandon Him for a creature. But we may by the light of God's grace get such an inferential knowledge of sin as is suited to our state of probation and faith. If sin expelled angels from Heaven, destroyed Paradise, made earth a valley of tears, created Hell and crucified the Son of God, it is an evil transcending our human comprehension, but not our recognition. We shall, therefore, consider the effects produced by the misuse of created objects, *i. e.*, by sin, in the Angels, in our first parents and in an individual soul.

### PRISON AND EXILE

Let me first picture my soul in my body (a) as in a prison or workhouse; (b) the whole in this valley as in exile; (c) among brute animals.

Philosophically speaking, it is, of course, untenable to consider our body as a prison or a workhouse, because our body is a part of our human nature and the dwelling of the soul in it is natural, whereas a prison is not natural to him who is detained in it, nor an essential part of him whom it confines. The soul occupies its present tenement of clay by an exigency and a necessity of its nature, because only by being first united to the body may it merit beatitude. Ascetically, however, it is true, because the concrete body to which our soul is united—not the abstract body of which philosophers speak, but this individual body of ours—has since the Fall, through its sensitive appetites, its gross cravings, its rebellions against reason, become a prison to the soul, detaining it in the lower pleasures of sense, depriving it of the liberty which it would have had in the state of Paradise, and which it shall have again in a glorified body, of seeking its highest and only true good. Hence St. Paul could cry out: "Who shall deliver me from this body of death" (Rom.

vii, 24) and David could pray, "Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Thy name" (Ps. cxli, 8).

We are in the first place exiles from the Paradise, whence our first parents were expelled on account of original sin; and though the sin is wholly washed out by Baptism, yet on account of that original fault, our present habitation here was not in the original design of God destined for us and is, in regard to our first destined place of dwelling, truly an exile. Again, when we are in the state of grace, we are *de jure* citizens of heaven and consequently *de facto* exiles therefrom; and when in sin, *de jure* and *de facto* exiles from our native land. This is true of the whole man, body and soul, for since the resurrection of Christ, both are destined for a supernatural and eternal happiness. Hence in many places of Scripture man is said to be a wayfarer. St. Paul says, "We have not here a lasting city, but we seek one that is to come" (Heb. xiii, 14). Hence we say in the Salve Regina, "To thee do we cry, exiled children of Eve."

Our stay in this vale of tears is not only an exile, but a dangerous one. These brute animals are our adversaries, the devils, who go about like roaring lions, seeking whom they may devour; men who have made themselves apostles of evil, who in various parts of Scripture are compared to wolves, leopards, asps, basilisks, bears and dogs; our own souls when under the dominion of passion, for "man when he was in honor did not understand; he is compared to senseless beasts and is become like to them" (Ps. xlvi, 13).

#### THE SIN OF THE ANGELS

It is only from Faith that we know the fearful history of the fallen angels. Christ tells us, "I saw Satan like lightning falling from Heaven" (Luke x, 18), and St. Peter (2 Pet. ii, 4) tells us that, "God spared not the angels that sinned, but delivered them, drawn down by infernal ropes to the lower hell, unto torments." From other sources, from the Fathers and theologians of the Church, we know that their Creator had bestowed on them gifts both of nature of a transcendent kind and of grace beyond our conception. (i) They were pure spirits, without any admixture of matter; (ii) they were immortal, incapable of any corruption;

(iii) they possessed intellects of the highest created power; (iv) they possessed free wills, which nothing could coerce; (v) they were wise with the plenitude of all natural knowledge; (vi) they were powerful above all inferior creatures, so that nothing created could resist or impede them; (vii) each of them possessed so fully the perfections of his nature that no two of the same kind could exist; (viii) they could pass from one point of space to the remotest distance in the twinkling of an eye without effort; (ix) they could communicate their thoughts to their fellow Angels simply by willing it; (x) in number there were myriads and myriads of them. Even after the Fall, Daniel saw thousands of thousands ministering to the Ancient of days, and ten thousand times a hundred thousand standing before Him (Dan. vii, 10; Apoc. v, 11). They were in a word fitted by nature to know, love, and serve God in the highest degree.

Added to these natural gifts, St. Thomas and other theologians hold that at the moment of their creation, they were placed in a state of natural beatitude, made citizens of a paradise of delights, and that on them were bestowed supernatural graces rendering them capable of meriting and possessing supernatural beatitude, the beatific vision of God face to face. St. Thomas holds that each of them received graces greater or less according to their natural perfections, and that those of greater natural gifts were destined to give greater glory to God and enjoy an ampler beatitude.

What was required of them? They were placed at the moment of their creation in a state of probation, in a paradise of natural delights, but without the beatific vision of God, and they were required to elicit an act of charity, to love their Creator above all things. St. Thomas tells us that immediately on eliciting the first act of charity, they were to be transferred to Heaven and supernatural beatitude, and accordingly confirmed in sanctity. We have, therefore, three instants. In the first they were created and sanctified. In the second, contemplating their own created excellence and the works of creation and grace, they by one act loved their Creator above all things, or yielding to pride and ignoring their Creator they loved themselves above Him. In the next instant, those that were found faithful were transferred to unending supernatural bliss, and the faithless

were cast out of the state of natural beatitude into an everlasting Hell. The sin of the rebel Angels, therefore, consisted in this, that dazzled by their own beauty, they yielded to an inordinate love of their own excellence, sought their own glory as the end of their creation and so attempted to make themselves gods. Of one of them, who was amongst the highest, Isaias has this passage: "And thou hast said in thy heart: I will ascend into Heaven; I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will be like the most High" (Isaias xiv, 13). And of Lucifer, the strongest spirit that fought in Heaven and the fairest that lost it, Ezechiel says:

Thou wast the seal of resemblance, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. Thou wast in the pleasures of the paradise of God, every precious stone was thy covering. . . . Thou wast a cherub stretched out and protecting, and I set thee in the holy mountain of God. Thou hast walked in the midst of the stones of fire. Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day of creation, until iniquity was found in thee. . . . Thou hast sinned, and I cast thee out from the mountain of God. . . . O covering cherub, out of the midst of the stones of fire. And thy heart was lifted up with thy beauty; thou hast lost thy wisdom in thy beauty" (Ezech. xxviii, 12-17).

Let us parallel our story with that of the fallen Angels. We were baptized into grace, receiving the seal of God's resemblance; gifted with faculties of nature and grace fitting us to give great glory to God and to enjoy as a reward a high grade of supernatural beatitude; every precious stone was our covering, every virtue was offered to us to invest our souls therewith, sanctifying grace and the virtues that should accompany it. We have been set in the holy mountain of God to be beacons and a protection to others. We have walked in the midst of the stones of fires, the home of God's burning love, having Him sacramentally dwelling on the same street in which we walk and live and work. Yet we have forsaken God and sought self and sinned not once only, but many times; and for our many sins we have not been cast out from the mountain of God, nor out of the midst of the stones of fire. Set our pride and selfishness against that of those bright, resplendent spirits who in the second moment of their existence for one sin lost everything; happiness, wisdom, beauty; lost themselves irredeemably. Oh, who could not weep for them! But let us bow our head in shame and confusion and weep for ourselves.

## THE SIN OF OUR FIRST PARENTS

Adam and Eve, our first parents, were created in Paradise, raised at the moment of their creation to the supernatural state with the consequent right to the Beatific Vision. Besides the gifts of pure nature, they were endowed with certain preternatural gifts. In the first place, the inferior appetites were subject to reason; they could not experience those rebellions of the flesh which they have left to us, their disinherited children as a fell inheritance; nor that confusion and darkness of the understanding which is the consequence of personal and ancestral passion; nor that weakness of the will that blinds deliberation in the presence of violent or alluring temptation. In the second place, their bodies were free from disease or a tendency thereto, perfect in strength, lighter and less of a burden to the soul, than the body of a sprightly child. In the third place, they were exempt from death and the pathetic decay of strength and intellectual powers that precede death, and the loathsome corruption that follows it. As soon as they had finished the conditions of their probation and were satisfied with their earthly existence, they were to be transferred body and soul, without passing through the dark and terrifying portals of death, to the supernatural beatitude of heaven.

Such was the liberality of God to our first parents. They were in the visible world to be what the Angels were in the invisible world, the lords of creation and ministers of the Creator, His priests offering the sacrifice of service, and His prophets interpreting and declaring the glory of His works. All nature was subject to them; all the fruits of nature were for their use. But their condition was a state of probation; they were to be subjected to one test. "And the Lord God took man and put him into the paradise of pleasure . . . and He commanded him, saying: Of every tree of paradise thou shalt eat: but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat" (Gen. ii, 15-17). They were to give obedience in a little thing in order to acknowledge constantly their subjection to God; they were to practice a small degree of poverty—one small thing they could not use as their own; they were to practice a modicum of continence—they might not suffer their love of pleasure to carry them

to the forbidden fruit. The obligation of submitting their wills to the will of their Superior and Creator, of restraining their desire of possession, of controlling their appetite for pleasure was imposed. They failed in their test; they knew good and evil; and as their reason rebelled against God, so their lower appetites rose in rebellion and their bodies became a source of shame to them; they fled from Paradise, expelled by the flaming sword of knowledge and shame; they lost the gifts of original justice, and they transmitted that loss to their descendants as a dowry of sin awaiting the soul at its first entrance to the body. One sin they committed and the face of nature was changed for them and for us.

The drama of Eden has been enacted in the souls of each of us, not once, but often. In youth vested with the baptismal veil of purity and possessing qualities of mind and body that were intimations of a lost paradise, we yielded to the fascination of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, became conscious for the first time of personal guilt and our eyes were open to our shame. Through a mercy of God we did not see the whole hideousness of our fall, for the sight of ourselves as we were would have been intolerable. Our guilt became more terrifying, if like Adam and Eve our sin became a source of sin to others, a prolific seed of evil reproducing itself we know not how indefinitely. But, through God's mercy, light enough was given to us to repent. Nay more, we were given the grace to "put on the new man, who according to God is created in justice." Yet how often we have been faithless again to these high and ennobling obligations! The conscience of each will tell as we unfold the dishonorable record.

#### INDIVIDUAL SIN

Go down in imagination to the gates of hell; recall that sin of your past life that looms above others in malice and haunting ugliness, and contemplate a damned soul suffering the everlasting pains of the bottomless pit for having once committed that sin. The question has arisen why we, who think so benignly of God, should hold as certain that many men have in fact been damned for one mortal sin. It is theologically certain that by one mortal sin we merit the eternal loss of our souls, that the advent of death finding

us in the state of grace is what the Council of Trent calls the *magnum donum perseverantiæ*, the great gift of final grace, a special gift distinct from and surpassing any other gifts of grace given through life. Therefore, though we know the love and mercy of God, we know also the awful character and effect of one mortal sin, and, contemplating the history of the multitudinous generations of men who have sinned, we cannot hesitate to declare what all sound theology makes antecedently probable, that among the numbers of the human race who died in sin, there were many who on the commission of one mortal sin met "the shadow feared by man," who were undeserving of the great gift of final grace, or who, if it were offered, refused it in an excess of maddening anger, an orgy of intoxicating lust or in the pride of blinding ambition or the greed of stupefying avarice. Or we may look at it in another light. We consider the case of one who committed many sins and successively received the grace of repentance and pardon, but who on the commission of one more sin, after he had for the last time been forgiven, died, having by that last sin filled the measure of his iniquity. He, who has "ordered all things in measure and number and weight" (Wis. xi, 21), has decided how often a sinner shall offend Him (Ps. vii, 12, 13).

Compare that one sin and its consequences with our many sins. Acknowledge that we have merited eternal damnation in a lower pit than that lost soul; that perfect justice would have been meted out to us, if on the commission of our first mortal sin we had passed from God's sunlight into the outer darkness of hell. If a damned soul were snatched from Hell, if, through some miracle of Divine omnipotence, it were possible to restore to it again that light of intellect which is now utterly obscured and the attractive power of its will towards good which is now wholly palsied, if God could give again to that soul the capacity of knowing the true and loving the good, and would allow it a chance for penance and repentance, what would be its gratitude for such mercy, its loving wonder at such a bounty and its love for such a God! Yet if we have ever committed a mortal sin and deserved hell and escaped through God's providence and grace, we are in the condition of such a soul.

## My Own Misuses

### MY SINS

**I** CONSIDER the sins of my life not with the arid and statistical precision as to number and species of one whose purpose is to make an exact enumeration; but with the shame and sorrow of one who seeks to produce a contrite and humbled heart. Like King Ezechias on his bed of sickness I shall say to the Lord: "I will recount to thee all my years in the bitterness of my soul" (Isaias xxxviii, 15). Divide our lives, therefore, into periods. Each of us will find that his life falls into certain chapters of large outlines and characteristic features. There are certain breaks in our lives, certain boundary lines that begin with infidelities or sin and end with special marks of God's providence over us, and some great favor of His love to us. Astronomers tell us that the sun warms us more as the earth recedes from it. In our case, God's love for us seemed to become more intense as we attempted to withdraw from Him. Dividing our lives into periods, consider first the years of childhood from the dawn of the use of reason to the day of our First Communion; secondly, the period elapsing from the first reception of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament to the day when through the loving vocation of God, we settled our state of life; lastly, our lives subsequent to that great turning point. Recall the infidelities proper to each of these periods; the sins of childhood by which the veil of baptism was stained, "So tiny a tot, so great a sinner" (St. Augustine). How the shades of the prison-house began gradually to close on us with the growing use of reason! Then recall the sins of youth after we were made soldiers of Christ through the Sacrament of Confirmation and after our union with Him through reception of His Body and Blood, our disloyalties as soldiers, our treacheries as friends of Christ; the insincerities, levities, want of seriousness, of earnestness



and of generosity of one who was preparing for maturer years, our whole perfection during that period consisting in the avoidance of the ordinary sins of young persons, but without any real apprehension of the imperious nobility of our vocation as Christians. As we recall our sins and imperfections, we cry out in the lament of David over Saul and Jonathan:

Consider, O Israel, for them that are dead, wounded on thy high places. The illustrious of Israel are slain upon thy mountains. How are the valiant fallen? Tell it not in Geth, publish it not in the streets of Ascalon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice. . . . Ye mountains of Gelboe, let neither dew nor rain come upon you, for there was cast away the shield of the valiant, the shield of Saul, as though he had not been anointed with oil (2 Kings i, 18, 19).

Make no attempt to number the sins and follies of these periods. Confess rather like David that "my iniquities are multiplied above the hairs of my head." "Evils without number have surrounded me" (Ps. xxix, 13). Say to God in his words: "My soul is filled with evils, and my life hath drawn nigh to Hell" (Ps. lxxxvii, 5). "Unless the Lord had been my helper, my soul indeed would have almost dwelt in Hell" (Ps. xciii, 17). What is my life but a record of unreason and ingratitude, like an unclean worm I have slimed my path through life. My life has been one of foolishness and waste passed for the most part between sin and repentance, yielding now to the allurements of the world, conquered by God's grace and called back like wandering sheep to His pasture, only to transgress the bounds again at the sight of some attractive poisonous weed of sin. In the plain but expressive words of Scripture: "As a dog that returneth to his vomit, as the sow that was washed to its wallowing in the mire; so is a fool that repeats his folly" (Prov. xxvi, 11).

#### INDIGNITY OF SIN

Every sin has two aspects; it is first an indignity to our rational nature, a degradation of our reason, and this character it would always have even though it were not prohibited by the law of God, even though we were morally free to commit it if we pleased; and secondly, it is a viola-

tion of the mandate of the Supreme legislator of the Universe. First, there is the inherent unreasonableness and deformity of our sins, apart from any command of God prohibiting them. An action outraging our rational nature would be repulsive to intellect and will, even though God had not by a decree of His wisdom forbidden it; and after its commission, we would still experience that sense of spiritual and intellectual disgust, that feeling of self-offence that is in every rational being, even in children, the inevitable consequence of an indignity to reason, and is sometimes so intense and painful as even to manifest itself in physical effects.

Every sin is of its nature a triumph of some lower element of our nature over that element by which we are men; some animal instinct usually has for the time claimed supremacy and usurped the place of reason. Hence various animals are by the common consent of mankind taken as types of various passions. The peacock of pride, the hog of gluttony and selfishness, the he-goat of sensuality, the tiger of cruelty and so of other passions. By sin, therefore, we become like to animals. "Man when he was in honor did not understand; he is compared to the senseless beasts, and is become like to them" (Ps. xlviii, 13). But when the passion that excited to sin is satisfied, the commission of sin is followed by a reaction of the soul. Reason naturally and instinctively reasserts itself. Probably at no time is the repulsiveness or degrading character of sin more clearly seen and felt than immediately after its commission. The reaction of the soul seems to excite reason to the fulness of its powers, and we experience a vague and painful sense of shame and humiliation. An oppression and unrest takes hold of us that is more intolerable at times than physical pain. A consciousness of discomfort and dishonor in the soul weighs us down; and often, when the habit of sin is gross and enslaving, sickens the sinner, driving him not infrequently to self-horror and suicide. When sin has been consummated, when passion has been sated, all the bewitching attraction or maddening impulse which incited to evil have passed away, and only the naked fact remains. All the glamour has been dispelled, all the reality remains, stripped of everything but its actual hideousness; and this must always be as long as man is a reasonable being.

## WHAT AM I?

But sin is more than a degradation of our rational nature; it is an action prohibited by God, the supreme Legislator. What is the meanness and insignificance of the creature that turns against its Creator by violating His laws? Consider first the vileness of the sinner's body, for the sake of which he has so often forsaken his Creator. Between the command of infinite wisdom, justice and holiness and the demands of his body, he has chosen to condemn the former and respect the latter. Now the vileness of the human body is a subject of which the decent conventions of life forbid us to speak, which natural delicacy dismisses from our thoughts; but which in the presence of sin, especially sins of sensuality, sins by which the body is pampered, should be a matter of meditation. What is our body? It is a mass of corruption, which retains a semblance of cleanliness only through the informing power of the spiritual soul. When the soul leaves it, its native foulness appears. It is preserved in health by processes that are disgusting. It requires unceasing care to prevent it from becoming an offence to ourselves and to those who dwell with us. And this revolting thing becomes our god as often as we make its pleasures the end of our actions. Of such St. Paul says: "Many walk . . . that are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is their shame" (Philip. iii, 8). "Why is earth and ashes proud?" asks the son of Sirach (Eccli. x, 9).

Consider secondly, the insignificance of the sinner's soul that rises in revolt against its Creator. "My substance is as nothing before Thee," says the Psalmist to God (Ps. xxxviii, 6), "and indeed all things are vanity, every man living." From nothing the soul came and out of nothing is it kept by the preserving hand of the God whom it offends, and while it is offending. "Without Me you can do nothing," says Our Lord (John xv, 5), not even the action that is sinful. Born in sin, by baptismal water and the merits of Christ it was raised to friendship with God, and by personal sins it reverted again to a state that was more disgraceful and worse than that of its origin. My puny intellect that cannot grasp, let alone solve, some of the commonest problems

of existence, that after years of study can only confess that beneath the surface all is darkness, dares in the pride of its impotence to exalt itself against the omniscient intellect of the Creator. My will that cannot exercise power enough to restrain passions, that is often a slave in the kingdom that it should rule, that is at times so weak, even when the reason sees the light, as to be a wonder and a cause of affright even to myself, rises in rebellion against the omnipotent will of Him, whose fiat called me, and all things that are, out of nothing, and sustains them in the hollow of His hand. A will which we know from faith and from reflection, if we have ever seriously reflected on it, is so weak, so subject to the movements of passion, that if it were not for the preventing grace of God would be capable of falling into the most heinous sins ever committed, asserts itself and its independence against the supreme Will of the Universe.

Lastly, consider myself as an individual in comparison with other men; with the great intellects that have fixed the grooves of human thought; with the powerful rulers that have controlled men as though they were pawns on a chess-board; with the men whose existence has been a benediction to countless multitudes of the weak, the suffering, the ignorant and the erring. Go through the categories of human activities in the Church, in human society, in the religious orders and ask yourselves which of them would have suffered, if you had not existed. Compare the tiny beings called men that move like ants over one of the smallest orbs that wanders through the infinite depths of stellar space, with the pure spirits that in myriads minister around the throne of God. If the earth with its great enterprises, its mighty governments; its vast accumulations of wealth and learning were suddenly to vanish like a summer cloudlet from the sky, were to fall back into primeval nothingness, would there be a noticeable void even in the material universe, and would the spiritual universe feel the shock? But in the presence of the only self-existent and necessary Being, whose infinite attributes the highest human intelligence can think of only under analogies and similitudes, all created things, from the lowest form of primal matter to the highest spiritual essence in the ranks of the Seraphim, are as shadows whose existence cannot increase the fountain of Being, and whose non-

existence or annihilation would leave the Infinite Reality in unchanged and unchangeable fulness of self-beatitude. (See Wisdom xi, 23; Isaias xl, 15). And yet, I, a speck of dust in the illimitable and glorious world of creation, rebel against this Being!

#### WHO IS GOD?

But what is the majesty of Him against whom the sinner rebels? He has infinite attributes but the three attributes of goodness, wisdom and omnipotence contrast most strongly with our malice, folly and imbecility. Consider first, the infinite goodness of God, so immeasurable, that if another infinite love were possible, it would all be due to Him, so overpowering, that it would be absolutely and metaphysically impossible to see it as it, and not be rapt by it into an uncontrollable ecstasy of adoring love—a loveableness which the seraphim and cherubim, the most perfect created intelligences, find the fulness of their being in worshipping, and praising as the “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Hosts.” “And the four living creatures had each of them six wings; and round about and within they are full of eyes. And they rest not day and night saying, Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come” (Apoc. iv, 8). And I a sinner have despised and rejected the infinite goodness for the sake of some created and remote semblance of it! Driven by a thirst for happiness I have abandoned a fountain of living water—for the sake of a mirage in a barren desert! Not only that, but I have loved sin in that thrice holy Presence, and have done evil and committed iniquity before those eyes that are too pure to behold evil and that cannot look on iniquity (See Hab. i, 13).

Consider secondly, the infinite wisdom of God, by which He knows all things created or to be created, all things that under any possible conditions could become creatures, and by which He knows Himself; incomprehensible in His judgments and unsearchable in His ways; who only has immortality, and inhabiteth light inaccessible; whom no man hath seen or can see (Rom. xi, 33; 1 Tim. vi, 16). He knows the secrets of human hearts; “the works of all flesh are before Him and there is nothing hid from His eyes. He seeth from

eternity to eternity and there is nothing wonderful before Him" (Eccli. xxxix, 24). "His eyes are upon the ways of man and He considereth all their steps. There is no darkness . . . where they may be hid who work iniquity" (Job xxxiv, 21). Contrast the ignorance of a sinner, who practically, if not in formal thought, thinks that the eyes of God are not upon him when he sins, who in effect says in his heart the words of him whom Ecclesiasticus reprehends: "I shall be hidden from God . . . in such a multitude I shall not be known; for what is my soul in such an immense creation" (Ecclus. xvi, 16, 17). "Whom do I fear? The most High will not remember my sins . . . and he [the sinner] knoweth not," says the preacher, "that the eyes of the Lord are far brighter than the sun, beholding round about all the ways of men, and the bottom of the deep, and looking into the hearts of men, into the most hidden places" (Ecclus. xxiii, 26, 27).

Lastly, consider the omnipotence of God, whose power is without limit in fact and without measure in thought. Only by the concurrence of that power is it possible to put the physical act by which I sinned. Without that power, I could not desire the object of sin, nor could that object attract my will, nor could I execute my desire through the faculties and organs that I call mine. Without the concurrence of that omnipotence, my hands or feet could not move, nor my eyes see nor my mind know. Yet in my native impotence as a sinner I oppose myself to the will of the omnipotent God, and use that omnipotence in the procuring of sin as though it were the service of the most contemptible slave or of the lowest creature not meriting attention beyond what is required for using it. Judas sold Christ for thirty pieces of silver, and I have sold God's omnipotence to appease the insistence of some passion. Esau sold his temporal birthright for a dish of savory beans, and I have sold my right to life eternal for the gratification of a desire.

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