

Herbst, Winfrid, 1891-  
Those terrible temptations  
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# Those TERRIBLE TEMPTATIONS

by Winfrid Herbst, S.D.S.

A QUEEN'S WORK  
PAMPHLET



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*by*

**Winfrid Herbst, S.D.S.**



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# “Those Terrible Temptations”

By Winfrid Herbst, S.D.S.

My friend said that the sixth commandment of God, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” pertains to married people only, that is, it has reference only to committing unchaste acts with other married men or women. I think he is a little twisted on what’s right and wrong as regards the sixth commandment. Could you give me some information?

It seems that both of you and all Catholics should get and carefully read over and over again the following most precious compendium of theology: *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine*, Revised Edition of the Baltimore Catechism, A Text for Secondary Schools and Colleges, No. 3, Edition of 1949, published by St. Anthony Guild Press, Paterson, New Jersey.

In this catechism we read as follows:

“What does the sixth commandment forbid?

“The six commandment forbids all impurity and immodesty in words, looks, and actions, whether alone or with others.

“(a) Impurity is any deliberate thought, word, look, or deed with oneself or another by which the sexual appetite is aroused outside of marriage, and even in marriage when contrary to the purpose for which God instituted the married state.

“(b) Some of the chief sins against purity are:

“*first*, adultery, by which one violates the sexual rights of the married state. This sin is also committed by one who lives as the legal husband or wife of another after one or both parties have secured a civil divorce;

“*second*, fornication, by which an unmarried person usurps the marriage right by sexual intercourse with another unmarried person;

“*third*, deliberate actions with oneself or others performed to arouse the sexual appetite.

“(c) Immodesty is any deliberate thought, word, or action that tends toward impurity.

“(d) When there is full deliberation in any sin of impurity it is a mortal sin. Immodesty may be either a mortal or venial sin depending on the greater or less danger of impurity to which it tends, the degree of scandal, and the intention of the sinner.

“(e) Sins of impurity and immodesty are extremely dangerous because human nature is strongly inclined toward them, and because they quickly develop into habits which are most difficult to eradicate.

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“The ninth commandment of God is: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife.

“What is forbidden by the ninth commandment?

“The ninth commandment forbids all thoughts and desires contrary to chastity.

“(a) We should form the habit of praying immediately when we are beset by impure thoughts, desires, or imaginations. It is well to know by heart many ejaculations addressed to Our Lord and His Blessed Mother which we should repeat in time of such temptations.

“(b) In confessing deliberate impure desires, one must tell the confessor their object, for example, a married or single person, of the same or the opposite sex, because circumstances change the nature of the sin.”

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**I heard a priest say that every sin of voluntary and deliberate impurity is a mortal sin. Is it so bad? And how about those thoughts that come so often?**

Yes; that is true. Remember well, however, that the priest said *voluntary* and *deliberate*. In these sins there is no smallness of matter, but every act of wrongful indulgence in venereal pleasure, if directly sought or consented to, is grievously sinful. (We are not speaking of the lawful use of matrimony.) No sin against chastity is venial except that which remains internally incomplete, not on account of outward circumstances, but because the will resists.

Therefore, it is also evident that not all sins against the sixth and ninth commandments are mortal. If an impure thought, word, or act is freely willed or if it is deliberately excited, it is a mortal sin. *Not so* if it arises in the mind against one's will or without one's deliberate consent. External acts, such as immodest

touches, looks, etc., are mortally sinful if due to lust; they are venially sinful if due to curiosity or inadvertence, and are transient in character; and they are not sinful at all if performed for some reasonable cause, even though accompanied by venereal pleasure, provided, of course, no consent is given to such pleasure.

As regards those thoughts, normal people, and youth in particular, cannot help it if they are more or less attacked by foul thoughts, unseemly imaginations, immoral feelings, salacious impulses, and obscene desires. But they can always refuse them admittance or endorsement. They can resolutely refuse consent, ignore them, turn the mind away in disgust, direct the thoughts to honorable and interesting subjects, which need not necessarily be holy subjects, or call quietly upon God and His Blessed Mother.

Impure thoughts and imaginations are in themselves indifferent, but they can be very dangerous; for they tend to excite lustful feelings that can lead to complete sin, and they tend to allure the mind to consent so that it takes pleasure in that which is immodest and freely desires its perpetration. Hence it is of such importance to regulate one's thought-life.

So we may briefly say that, as pointed out above, to admit impure thoughts out of lust, or for the purpose of enjoying the venereal pleasure they excite, is a mortal sin. So, too, it is a mortal sin to let the mind rest with complacency on the pleasure caused by such thoughts when they come involuntarily.



But to admit to the mind and dwell upon immodest thoughts out of levity or idle curiosity (not out of lust), provided they do not excite one much, is a venial sin, because they do not place one in grave danger of consent in venereal pleasure or of committing the complete sin. But if they excite one much, to admit them is usually mortal because of such danger, provided there be advertence to the grave danger of sinning.

Finally to admit into the mind or to foster immodest thoughts for a good and honorable reason (study, nursing, etc.), is allowed, even if venereal pleasure arises, provided no consent is given to such pleasure. Watchfulness, prayerfulness, and the remembrance of the presence of God are then recommended.

As a little caution we would append the remark that herein also, though most sensitive and watchful and quick to resist, we should likewise be sensible. We will accordingly remember that things necessary, things that just happen, things for which we are not responsible, things not voluntary and deliberate are not grievous sins.

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**Here I read once more that any immodest thought or desire or action deliberately consented to is a mortal sin. I don't want those things; I go to Communion every Sunday — sometimes daily; but I have so many temptations against chastity. Am I really committing mortal sins?**

True enough: any unnecessary, deliberate, and voluntary indulgence in sexual activity outside the conjugal relationship, whether it be an immodest thought or desire or action or pleasure is a mortal sin if done with sufficient reflection and full consent of the will. If sufficient deliberation and full consent of the will are not both present also at the same time, there is no mortal sin, despite the grievousness of the matter in itself.

We do not think there is any cause for worry in your case. Remember that no matter how serious the temptations may be, no matter how frequently they may come, without consent of the will there can be no sin; as long as you withhold your consent, you are blameless. Bad thoughts may crowd upon you; your passions may be aroused; but if the will refuses consent, as it can do by the grace of God, there is and can be no sin. Sin is in the will.

But people do worry. Did I experience pleasure from that temptation? Did I really resist honestly and sincerely? Father John A. O'Brien, in the excellent booklet, *A White Courtship* (Our Sunday Visitor Press, Huntington, Indiana, 1947), answers: "In answer to the first, we point out that some pleasure of the lower part of our nature *necessarily* arises from even the involuntary arousal of the generative faculty. It is no more possible to prevent this than it is to prevent the sensation of a sweet taste when candy is placed in the mouth — even placed there against the person's will. It is this spontaneous generation of

pleasure in our sexual faculty which constitutes the core of the temptation. At first this pleasure is involuntary. This pleasure of our lower nature, of the senses or of the imagination, then solicits the acquiescence and approval of the will. For the human personality is a unity and rebels at being cut in twain. It is not, however, until the mind perceives the nature of the evil thought or imagination which has given rise to the pleasurable allure-ment, *and* the will knowingly and deliberately approves, that our guilt arises.

“It is this latter link in the chain of the processes which is all-important. If the will refuses its consent, all the preceding processes have no moral anchor to tie to, and hence they have no moral significance. In other words, there is no sin at all.

“Now for the other question: Did I really resist honestly and sincerely? Such a question is pointless and such a fear is groundless for all persons who are sincerely and habitually trying to serve God, and to avoid mortal sin. Let such souls remember that God loves them, that he dwells within them, that He will not forsake them unless they first forsake Him.

“For a person who is sincerely seeking to advance in the service and in the love of God, and is determined to avoid mortal sin as the greatest of evils, suddenly to turn against God and commit a mortal sin would entail such a revolution of mind and heart that if this mortal sin in thought had been truly committed the individual would know it beyond any

shadow of doubt. Hence such a person should dismiss as unfounded any scruples or fears which may arise.

“The general rule in this matter is this: Any person who has the *habitual* will and determination to resist evil thoughts may conclude, when any doubt or fears arise, that deliberate consent was lacking. This general principle is reflected in the counsel given by all spiritual authorities: Allow no scruple or doubt to keep you from receiving Holy Communion. Abstain only when you can put your hand on the Bible and swear that you are absolutely certain you are guilty of deliberate, mortal sin.

“It is obvious that what has been said does not apply to those who knowingly and deliberately seek out occasions of sin, who deliberately read a bad book, who purposely seek out pictures which will inflame their imaginations, who purposely start an immodest conversation. They have already *willed* to sin. Our advice to such is to turn to God in true repentance and to avoid such proximate occasions of sin.

“But for all those who are sincerely seeking to remain in the friendship and the love of God — surely, the overwhelming majority of true Christians — it is a comfort to know that no temptation can harm them, that no thought, word, or deed, can be a sin unless the will gives its consent. By turning their will resolutely to God and prudently avoiding the occasions of sin, they can enjoy a good conscience and peace of mind even when assailed

by temptations. Like the three youths in the fiery furnace, they emerge unscathed."

There is, we may add, no such thing as falling into mortal sin accidentally.

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**I am puzzled by what is meant by immodest thoughts and when they are sinful. Can you give me some helpful information?**

The control of one's thoughts is very important, even a fundamental necessity, if one would live as a Catholic should. It is not beyond us to control our thoughts; and it is just by such self-mastery that we can control our ordinary natural instincts to do certain things. "Keep your mind in order" is the key for all the riches of happiness, holiness, beauty, and health. If there is anything wrong with one's thoughts, conscience will point that out quickly enough.

How about immodest thoughts, thoughts against purity? Well, you probably cannot help having a certain number of thoughts about sexual things. But do not go and say at once that they are bad thoughts. Thinking about the subject of sex can be quite legitimate. You are doing so now. It depends on what you do with your thoughts and why. Now, as we have said, you practically cannot help having such thoughts, even when you do not want to. Your mind is a fluid and floating thing, like the sea. Left to itself, the sea remains calm. But if a wind blows upon it, it ripples; and if an earthquake occurs at the bottom of it, again the surface heaves. Sim-

ilarly, unless you keep your eyes and ears tightly shut, which you cannot do, sights and sounds of all sorts will strike them, including those that suggest to your mind sensual subjects. You see pictures, posters, people. That is like the wind plunging on the sea. And the thoughts thus arising may, through the reflex action of the nerves of the body, give rise to definite pleasurable sensations.

What ought you to do when such things occur? You have always been taught that you must not accept such a thought even for a moment, so as to draw pleasure from it. Sometimes, of course, one knows that one has deliberately allowed such thoughts to enter. But often, especially when one is trying to live as one should, one's fluid, tremulous mind responds to the suggested thought so quickly that one is not really sure whether one "yielded" to it, that is, dwelt unnecessarily on it because one was drawing pleasure from it or in order to draw pleasure. In such a case, when you next go to confession do not spend any time wondering whether you did linger over this thought or not. That simply revives the thought and excites the imagination all over again. Better dismiss the whole matter at once and for good. Or simply say that you were troubled with bad thoughts and accuse yourself of any guilt that there may have been in God's eyes. If you think that you deliberately took pleasure in them, say so; but do not spend time over the actual thoughts, either when you are preparing for confession or at any other time.

But perhaps you will say: "What am I to do when such thoughts simply haunt me?" The very best way to act against them is simply not to think about your "bad thoughts" at all. When you perceive their presence in your mind, say quickly "Jesus, save me — Mary, help me," and then think of something else. Think about your work, your activities, your duties, your recreations, sports, anything innocent or indifferent. Concentrate on such things. In this way you can go out into life very much the master of your thoughts, not intending to be affected by what you see or hear and not expecting that it will affect you, and then it just will not. (Cf. *Into Their Company*, Kenedy.)

We now give another and more profound and precise answer to your question.

Immodest thoughts are not in themselves sinful, but they are capable of arousing venereal pleasure. The purely intellectual consideration of unchaste actions, such as the speculative consideration as to what constitutes adultery, fornication, or incest, is not sinful. These are purely mental processes. But when this process is joined, as ordinarily it must be joined, with imaginative phantasms of the several sins in their physical aspects, it is possible that the thoughts may arouse sexual pleasure. The morality of entertaining such phantasms is here considered.

"1. Immodest thoughts are phantasms entertained with lustful intent, that is, with the motive of deriving pleasure in the venereal delectation which they do or may arouse, is a

grievous sin. Their sinfulness consists both in the intention and in the actual fact of consenting to the pleasure.

"2. To neglect to dispel immodest thoughts that arouse only slight sexual feelings, if the thoughts are entertained from levity, curiosity or sloth in putting them away, is a venial sin, provided there is no evil desire and provided no consent is given to the pleasure.

"3. Immodest phantasms should indeed be dispelled at once. If however, they persist, and cannot be dispelled without considerable trouble and anxiety, there is no sin committed so long as no consent is given. Those persons who are unwilling victims of persistent impure phantasms may be reassured that they do not commit sin. They should cease to be over-anxious, since anxiety keeps the mind on the strain. They should quietly and firmly turn to other thoughts, especially to prayer. In circumstances where these evil phantasms are inevitable, the victim of them should proceed with his work as if the thoughts did not exist. Candid manifestation to a confessor will be a great help. At all costs, the victim should never become dejected, for dejection is a snare of the devil.

"4. To excite immodest phantasms from desire of lust is grievously sinful, as also if, from the nature of the phantasms, a person knowingly exposes himself to the proximate danger of consent to venereal pleasure; otherwise a venial sin will be committed if there is not a sufficient reason for evoking the phantasm. No sin will be committed if there is a



sufficient reason for doing so. Therefore, the positive obligation of rejecting impure and useless phantasms is not a grave one except in so far as the proximate danger of consent to insurgent venereal pleasure is to be removed. The danger will normally be removed by an interior act of dissent once or twice in the same temptation.

“5. To entertain such thoughts for a good moral reason is not sinful, even though they may produce venereal pleasure, consent to which is withheld.” (Davis, *Precepts*, Sheed and Ward.)

The confession of bad thoughts includes, as may be supposed, the confession of intention of deriving pleasure from them, or the actual pleasure taken.

Now that you have been reading this, it may be well to recall that the great model for all in the acquisition of necessary sexual knowledge is our Blessed Mother Mary. She was about fifteen or sixteen years old, as is commonly held, when the angel Gabriel appeared to her to announce that she was to be the Mother of God. “But Mary said to the angel, ‘How shall this happen, since I do not know man?’” (Luke 1:34). By this answer Mary indicated that she had been carefully yet thoroughly instructed in the mysteries of generation by her virtuous mother, St. Anne. Far from harming or endangering Mary’s matchless purity, this information tended rather to safeguard and increase it. Such will be, we hope, the effect of such instruction as the above upon you, and all similar instruction,

provided you will imbibe it in the spirit of holy modesty and sacred reverence for the human body after the manner of Mary, the Immaculate, the Queen of Virgins, and the Paragon of Purity. (*Helps to Purity*, St. Francis Book Shop.)

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**How can a person who is continually troubled with impure thoughts and desires actually know whether he has consented to them or not?**

First of all, as a matter of common sense, we must remark that it is entirely natural for a normal person with greater or lesser frequency to experience carnal imaginations, thoughts, feelings and desires. It would be a sign of abnormality or constitutional disorder if one did not experience them. But those experiences are not yet a temptation by any means. They become a temptation only when there is added to them the approach of lust, or the lure to indulge them unlawfully. This lust constitutes the temptation. As long as it is not responded to or dallied with there can be no question of sin, however strong the natural phenomena may be.

Secondly, we make the following observations as to how to behave when assailed by temptations against chastity:

1. It is certainly not sinful to *have* bad thoughts, or to *suffer* inordinate movements of the flesh. We must only not yield our consent to them, or take wilful pleasure in them, or cause them either directly or indirectly. Hence, do not in any way give occasion to the

temptation. Remove even all perverse, frivolous, and idle thoughts and keep in your mind only holy and useful thoughts. Guard the eyes especially. Everyone knows how dangerous, for instance, suggestive pictures can be.

2. As soon as you notice an impure thought, or impure movement of the flesh, turn away your mind from the object that excites you; shake off the impure thought as you would a fiery coal falling upon your garment. Turn your mind upon something that is apt to distract you from the bad thought. Remember that a good way of stifling evil thoughts is to fill our minds with good ones. Think of death, judgment, hell, eternity, the Passion of Christ.

3. Should the temptation still continue, have recourse to prayer, and make a most positive act of resistance. "Watch and pray," the Savior admonishes us. Have some ejaculatory prayer ready and whisper it devoutly as soon as you notice that the thought grows vivid, for instance, "My Jesus, mercy!" "Mary, help me; I am in temptation!" Or invoke the holy name over and over again — "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" This is a very consoling practice; for it is afterward proof positive that you did not want the thought, since you thus prayed. Do not manifest your interior struggle by outward signs, shaking of the head, etc.

4. Should the temptation become more violent, pray more fervently still. Invoke Jesus, the Blessed Virgin, the saints. Especially, if circumstances permit, take your rosary and recite it, endeavoring to force yourself to medi-

tation on the mysteries. And then be not over-anxious. The more fierce the battle, the more glorious the victory. Only one thing is necessary: If you can say with your whole heart, "I would rather die than be defiled by sin," all hell becomes powerless. "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able."

Thirdly (and now we are drawing nearer to a direct answer to your question), in case a person who is habitually conscientious in the practice of virtue doubts if he committed a mortal sin of impurity in a given instance, whether in thought, desire, or deed — if he is not at once sure, or fully conscious and convinced that he sinned grievously — he can assume, without any fear or remorse, that he did not sin mortally; he can take as addressed to himself the words said to have been spoken by the Savior to St. Teresa, "No one loses me by mortal sin, without knowing it for certain"; and he can and should dismiss the matter categorically from his mind, without ever recalling it again for special examination or adjudication, either in his daily exams of conscience or in his preparation for confession. He will do the best, the wisest, and the most virtuous thing by ignoring it completely once for all.

The unpleasant incident will stimulate him, however, to keep up his habit of frequently renewing the acts of perfect love and contrition. In case he had any guilt at all in the matter — even though it was in reality a grievous guilt — it will all be attended to sufficiently,

and wiped out entirely, by his aspirations of perfect love and sorrow.

This practice is universally followed by all pious and saintly persons, lay people, religious, and ecclesiastics, with much spiritual comfort and success. It is the *only method* to follow for such conscientious persons who are afflicted or threatened with the bane of scrupulosity: it is best for them to make no mention whatsoever of doubtful sins in confession. Persons who are conscientious and not scrupulous *may* confess their doubtful sins with no little profit; whereas lax and habitually unscrupulous persons *ought* to confess doubtful sins, as the evidence is all in their disfavor.

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### **What should I do in sex temptations?**

Such temptations almost always begin in thought and such thoughts may simply haunt you. Therefore, control your thoughts. Do not think about your "bad thoughts." Say quickly "Jesus, save me! Mary, help me!" and then think of something else. You can ordinarily think of only one thing at a time; and a good thought will automatically crowd out a bad one. Try to solve some problem or outline some work in your mind and before you have finished, the bad thought will have flown miles away.

Prayer, of course, is always most powerful, and natural helps may be futile without it. And you should pray always. But pray quietly in temptations, not furiously, lest concentration on the temptation serve only to increase it. Saying the rosary in protracted temptation

with meditation on the mysteries is an excellent way of thinking of something else and praying at the same time.

“Resist those temptations, fight against them,” does not mean that you should keep on telling yourself not to think about them; for the more you tell yourself that, the more you keep your mind upon them. Rather, it means flight, not fight, or resistance by flight. Check the first impulses, keep yourself from getting passionate. Pray briefly and from the heart and then calmly think about something else — and quietly continue to pray. That is the correct scientific and psychological way. Be quietly alert to the first beginnings of temptations and calmly take flight.

You ought, then, to forestall such temptations. Be on your guard, armed with distrust of self and trust in God. Do not thrust yourself into the midst of dangers, thinking proudly and presumptuously that you are strong enough to triumph over them. Be watchful. Shun all dangerous occasions. And to your watchfulness join prayer, which, placing God on your side, renders you invincible. In resisting these temptations it is best to treat them with scorn, if they are less serious and recur frequently. Pay no more attention to them than you would to flies that buzz and hover here and there around you.

Resist them promptly, perseveringly, and humbly. Resist them energetically, but avoid those vain terrors which only increase the danger. As mentioned above, when sex temptations assail you, turn away from them and

take flight by concentrating your attention on any other matter that is apt to engage your mind. Direct resistance in such cases generally increases the danger.

Lest it should seem that we have not stressed prayer enough in the above reply, we hasten to remark that if you begin at once to pray and concentrate your attention on your prayers, you are really turning your mind to something else, to God and the things of God. You are taking flight in the best way.

In his book *The True Spouse of Christ*, St. Alphonsus says: "Now, were you to ask what are the means of overcoming temptations, I would answer: the first means is prayer; the second is prayer; the third is prayer; and should you ask me a thousand times I would always repeat the same. This means is particularly necessary for conquering temptations against purity; these, as the wise man says, are overcome only by recommending ourselves to God. 'And as I knew that I could not otherwise be continent except God gave it . . . I went to the Lord and besought him' (Wis. 8:21)."

The same St. Alphonsus says further on in the same chapter, "On Patience in Temptations": "Unchaste temptations must be instantly shaken off, as we shake from the hand the sparks that fly from the fire. The best means of conquering them is, as I have said, to turn away from them without listening to them. Were a queen tempted by a slave, what would she do? Would she not indignantly turn away without giving him an answer? Be

careful to act in this manner if the devil should molest you; turn away without answering him, and invoke the name of Jesus and Mary; and if you do this, you shall be always certain of not falling into sin. St. Francis de Sales says: 'The instant you feel any temptation, imitate children, who, when they see a wolf, run into the arms of their father or mother, or at least cry out to them for assistance.' Do you, in like manner, run with filial confidence to Jesus and Mary."

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### **Why are temptations necessary?**

"It is necessary," says our holy father, St. Bernard, "that temptations come, for we cannot lawfully claim the crown unless we have been exposed to the combat." In peacetimes we are disposed to relax our efforts, but on the field of battle we must either conquer or die. To escape utter ruin, we have to apply ourselves to vigilance, to prayer, to obedience and mortification, and to do a hundred times more than when out of danger. The demon attacks us from hatred, but he really helps us by stimulating our zeal and obliging us to hasten our steps. So, despite his malice, he becomes a very important contributor to our spiritual advancement." This explains, says St. Alphonsus, why God often permits the souls most dear to Him to be tried by temptation: because thus they would acquire more merits on earth and a greater degree of glory in heaven. Seeing themselves assaulted by so many enemies, they become detached from the present life, and sigh eagerly for death in



order to fly to God and to be no longer exposed to the danger of losing Him. When, therefore, we have to support temptation, provided we do our duty, instead of fearing that we are in disfavor with God, we ought rather to believe ourselves specially beloved by Him.

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**But suppose the temptation is frequent and violent?**

Nor should we be troubled or unduly fearful because the temptation is frequent and violent. "If the Lord is almighty, and if the demons are but His slaves: why should I fear to combat, with the assistance of His grace, all the powers of hell? Taking the crucifix in my hand, I should feel that with it as my only weapon I could conquer singlehanded and easily the whole army of demons. Sometimes they have appeared to me, and I have been hardly in any degree afraid of them. They, on the contrary, seemed to be struck with terror at the sight of me. In fact, I have found them to be great cowards. When they see themselves despised, all their courage evaporates. But if we voluntarily give them a hold on us by attachment to honours, to riches, or to pleasures, they conspire with us against ourselves, and we put arms into their hands to be employed for our destruction. Such blindness cannot be sufficiently deplored. One venial sin can do us more harm than all the powers of hell combined." So speaks St. Teresa the Elder.

**But nevertheless, temptation is a horrible thing; it makes an impression on me; I actually feel an inclination for the evil suggested. What do you say to that?**

No matter. The impression is only a sentiment. It humbles you, but it does not make you guilty. To be sensible of evil is not to consent to it. All that happens in the inferior part of the soul — imaginations, memories, feelings, irregular motions, etc. — all that is in us, but not from us. Of itself it is indeliberate and involuntary. It can only become sin by our free consent. As for the inclination we feel towards evil, that is but an infirmity of our fallen nature, not a disorder of the will. Vicious pleasure solicits to evil and constitutes a danger. But it is not imputable to us unless the will freely entertains or accepts it. However strong may be the suggestions of the demon, in whatever form appear the phantoms that flit through the imagination, so long as your will rejects them, instead of soiling your soul, they rather make it more pure and more pleasing to God. You experience a profound interior affliction in the temptations to impurity, hatred, aversion, and such-like. The fear of having succumbed to them disturbs and distresses you. That is an evident sign that you have a great fear of God, a horror of sin, and the will to resist. Now, it is morally impossible for a soul in such dispositions to change suddenly so far as to give a full and entire consent to mortal sin without being clearly aware of it. At most, it may happen that, considering the force and frequency of the temptation, there has been some little neg-

ligence, a moment of surprise, for instance, a half-formed desire of vengeance, semi-voluntary feelings of complacency. But as for full, entire, and deliberate consent, that is impossible with such a disposition of soul. Or at least the passage from a sovereign hatred of mortal sin to a full and free acceptance of it would be easily observed.

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**But what if I am not sure that I gained the victory?**

A great incertitude in the spiritual life concerns our victory over temptation. This is more trying than the combat itself, even though the latter has been as violent and persistent as an obsession. But let souls of good-will take courage. In the senses and the imagination many things can happen which are not voluntary acts, and consequently not sins. We have really resisted as we should, but the enveloping darkness prevents us from seeing distinctly what has taken place. The will, however, has undergone no change. Experience will soon show that. Let us meet an occasion of offending God by a simple deliberate venial sin, and we shall scrupulously abstain from it: we should prefer to die a thousand times. It ought to be enough for us to know that we have watched and prayed and generously struggled. There is no necessity that we should have a clear consciousness of victory won. It is even sometimes better for us to be without such knowledge, as the incertitude can be very profitable to our humility. God wills to make us realize by painful experiences, frequently

repeated, the fund of corruption we bear within ourselves, and which, without the assistance of His grace, would lead us infallibly into the worst disorders. The evidence of victory would diminish the humiliation, might even expose our humility to danger. He therefore leaves us in doubt, in order to deepen the humiliation and so safeguard our humility. It is a bitter trial, but it renders us the magnificent service of solidly establishing our souls in a virtue which is the groundwork of perfection. Under such circumstances, we may even feel doubtful as to the state of our souls. Have we succumbed to the force of the temptation? Are we still in the grace of God? We must not be over-anxious to reassure ourselves on this point.

“You desire to know for certain that God loves you?” asks St. Alphonsus. “But at the moment He does not will to impart to you this knowledge. He wills that you should just humble yourself, trust in His goodness, and resign yourselves wholly to His good-pleasure. Besides, it is a maxim, received as incontestable by all the masters of the spiritual life, that when a person of timorous conscience is in doubt as to whether he has lost the grace of God, it is certain that he has not lost it. For no one can lose God without being fully aware of the fact. Moreover, according to St. Francis de Sales, the resolution you have, at least in the depths of your heart, to love God and not to cause Him the slightest displeasure by deliberate purpose, is a manifest sign that you are still in His grace. Abandon yourself, therefore, into the arms of divine mercy, protest

that you desire nothing but God alone and His good-pleasure, and banish every fear. Oh, how agreeable to the Lord are the acts of confidence and resignation we make in the midst of this terrifying darkness.”

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### **Just what should I do in temptations against chastity?**

Regarding interior temptations against chastity which come in the guise of impure thoughts, imaginings, or feelings, do these three things:

First of all, as soon as you become conscious of evil or seductive thoughts, recall God's presence and in His sight protest briefly and resolutely against any pleasure in the temptation, somewhat along the following lines: “O God, you are looking into the depths of my soul. You know that I wish to have nothing to do with evil pleasure and that, even though sinful imaginations fill my mind, even though they are strong and alluring, I reject them with all my heart as you would reject them.”

But such a definite, energetic protest, however, will not banish the temptation at once; in many instances the same temptation will continue with unabated vigor for some time, but you have been up in arms against it. You have made it clear to God, to the devil and before the forum of your own conscience upon which side you stand. The decisive act of the will on your part will alleviate the struggle, give proof to God of your good will and show

the devil your utter contempt for him. This procedure will put an end to all lukewarmness and dallying with temptation; you have sided with God and the battle is as good as won. Those who speak with authority in moral matters assure us that sin is eliminated from a temptation as soon as such a protest is made. Unless one retract it later by a formal declaration to the contrary, or by some equivalent external deed, there will be no guilt upon the soul.

Secondly, we must unite with this protest some short prayer or ejaculation to bring us help from heaven. The prayer to Our Lady, "O my Queen . . .," has a special efficacy when said during moments of temptation and has often brought wondrous help to many. The invocation to the Sacred Heart, "O Heart of Jesus, fount of all purity, have mercy on us!" is also most efficacious. Or the appeal to the indwelling Holy Spirit, "Holy Spirit, sweet Guest of my soul, abide with me and grant that I may always abide with thee!" Should the temptation return, banish it again as you would a fly that is trying to alight on your face. Remember, quietly and bravely, that you are a soldier of Christ.

It is a pity that so many aggravate the struggle unnecessarily by dwelling too much upon the idea of temptations and sins against purity. Such a frame of mind will keep the soul in constant disquiet, driving out the spirit of joy and allowing apprehension to fasten itself like a leaden weight upon the spiritual life. Timid souls are constantly telling them-

selves that they have to suffer continuously from severe temptations and that they are always in fear lest they may not be sufficiently resolute to withstand them.

Again and again we must reply that grievous and enduring temptations are not a bad sign. Those who suffer them are in good company. The saints have been in the same position and the plan of God is clear. The heavy struggle for chastity is of inestimable value in the building of character, as we have indicated above. The wilder the storms, the stronger grow the roots of the tree that withstands them.

Furthermore, temptations against purity keep us humble. The human being becomes more and more aware of the dust of which it is made and that of itself it can do absolutely nothing. That which humbles is always curative, achieves for us ever increasing gifts of grace and a more exalted place in the choir of martyrs.

Some of the many graces brought through temptation are evident. We are thereby repeatedly renewing our loyalty to God, turning from the devil, offering prayers and ejaculations, performing penitential exercises — all things that would never have been accomplished but for temptation. Rightly viewed, therefore, temptations are the hand of God stretched out to us that we may grow in strength and in goodness. For men and women who are reasonable, the days of greater temptations are the days of proportionately greater spiritual growth; they are days of great op-

portunities to grow in the love of God. The faults of neglect in the course of the struggle disappear in the face of the advantages that follow endurance in the conflict.

A third point to remember, when considering the question of temptation, is the fact that those who live habitually in the fear of God and preserve themselves from fully voluntary sins cannot fall into a grievous sin without a knowledge of it. To believe that one has yielded to temptation because of not having done anything directly against it, is a deception on the part of a delicate conscience. It is only when the individual has taken positive pleasure in outspoken evil, that he has fallen into sin. To act directly against suggestions to impurity is often as bad as yielding to them. In this way one strengthens them, causes them to continue longer and to make a deeper impression. Our warfare against them must be an indirect one; this means to turn the attention elsewhere, for instance, to immerse oneself in work, to seek distraction through pleasant reflections, to plan for the future, to read a good book, to recite aloud what one has studied, to take part in diverting conversation. There are countless ways of escape. Sometimes the study of a foreign language is helpful. It is told of St. Jerome that he sought this panacea in the study of Hebrew. The saints counsel flight as the only means of conquest and the old admonition not to touch pitch lest you become defiled applies especially to this situation. We may not touch dirt even to become free of it.



If one has been in flight from the temptation and it has passed, it is important not to brood over it and not to analyze its source. If you are not sure, with an immediate certainty, that you have sinned grievously, do not be disturbed. Think no more about it, go your way and leave the rest to the mercy of God. Further reflection is utterly useless as well as dangerous, and often it is the will of God that we should arrive at no complete comprehension of such matters so that we may remain humble and trust in Him.

(The replies given to the questions on pages 22-26 are taken verbatim from *Holy Abandonment* by Abbot Lehodey, O.C.R. The reply given to the last question above consists of an extract taken verbatim from an article on chastity by Bruno M. Hagspiel, S.V.D.)

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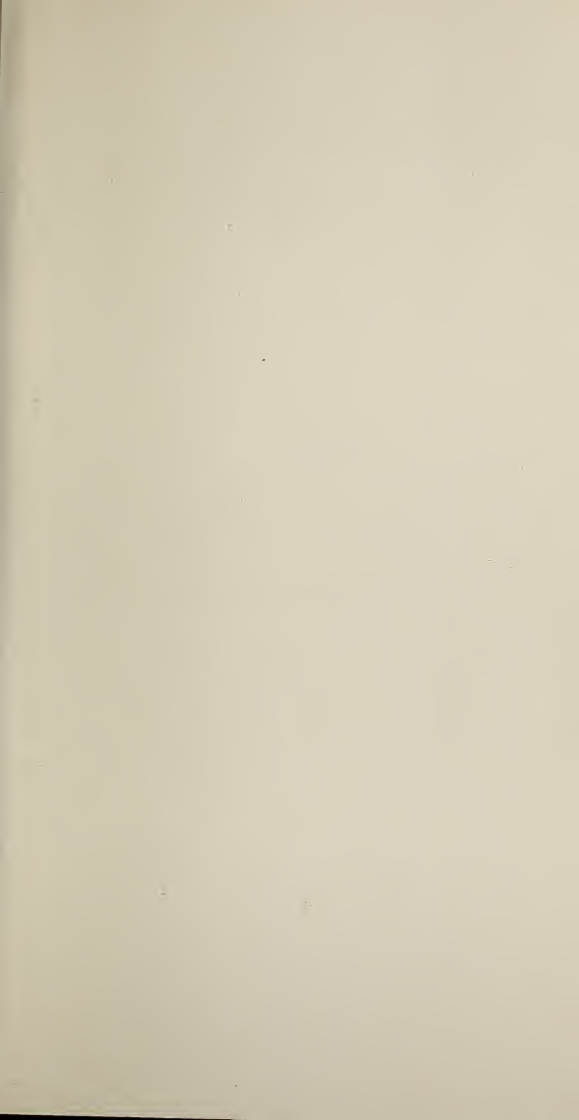
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