

# Mortal Sin and How To Avoid It

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Few souls are so completely debased, so sunk in sin, as not to desire something to shed their bad habits and lead better lives. God's Mercy follows ever the most errant of us, ever urging us on to better things, even working in us what is good, ever striving to save us from ourselves. We may dim the light of conscience in our souls, and become progressively unresponsive to the invitations and urges of grace, but only in Hell is there utter darkness and no grace; while we live there is always a real possibility and hope of conversion and salvation.

God does not quench the smoking flax, nor crush the bruised reed, but by the gentle breathings of His Holy Spirit continually tries to fan the embers of the sinner's will into glowing once more with the bright flame of divine Charity. It is of vital importance that these visitations of God these promptings of grace, should be used by the sinner. "God is not mocked" indefinitely and with impunity. If, when the hour of eternity strikes, the soul should be found in sin, God's Justice will exact a frightful restitution of His glory. "The Lord, Who is a strong avenger, will surely repay." (Jer. LI, 56).

"God beholds thee individually whoever thou art, He calls thee, by thy name. He sees thee and understands thee, as He made thee. He knows what is in thee, all thy own peculiar feelings and thoughts, thy dispositions and likings, thy strength and thy weakness... He sympathises in all thy hope and thy temptations. He interests himself in all thy anxieties and remembrances, all the risings and fallings of thy spirit... He compasses thee round and bears thee in His arms, He takes thee up and sets thee down. He notes thy very countenance, whether smiling or in tears, whether healthful or sickly. He looks tenderly upon thy hands and thy feet; He hears thy voice, the beating of thy heart, and thy very breathing. Thou dost not love thyself better than He loves thee." (Newman, Parochial and Plain Sermons, Vol. III, p. 125).

God has given us a striking proof of His concern about us as individuals by providing us with the confessional, where our souls are cared for and treated separately and singly, where we can get personal advice on how to order our lives, and where remedies and measures adapted to our special needs are indicated to us. The surest way, therefore, of fostering the promptings of grace is to have recourse to a confessor, and to pour out our soul to him in a humble and docile attitude of mind. His advice and guidance, being personal, will be of the highest value, and by putting it into practice we are assured of victory over sin. Pamphlets or books cannot take the place of a spiritual guide, because they cannot visualise all the variety of individual circumstances. At best they will prepare the way for the confessor or director, by treating of the more common aspects of human conduct, thus allowing him more scope for his personal and more valuable contact.

If there is one person more than another for whom the personal counsel of a confessor is necessary, it is the sinner of long standing, the man who has been perhaps years away from the saving grace of the Sacraments, sin-sodden, and temperamentally befouled by all sorts of bad habits. Nevertheless, to advise such a penitent is a most delicate problem. He may come to confession from very varying

motives and in widely different degrees of repentance. The sudden death of somebody dear to him may have recalled him to a sense of duty; the wise advice of an intimate friend may have awakened his hope and allayed his fears; the kindness of a good priest may have attracted his confidence; the moral crusade of an organisation such as the Legion of Mary may have conquered his obstinacy in evil and moved him to see what a confessor could do with so difficult a problem as he believes himself to be...

The variety is endless, and it is because the responsiveness of the penitent is so uncertain that there is a real problem for the confessor. Like Christ, His Master, the priest is desperately anxious to win back this soul, to restore this lost sheep to the True Fold, but he can do little without some modicum of co-operation on the part of the penitent; and the more good-will and desire of self-help the latter brings, the more real aid and valuable advice will he take with him from the church.

With some penitent - a confessor can work wonders, because he has their complete co-operation; I with others, who receive his advice sceptically and half-heartedly the results are discouraging both to priests and penitents. As in the struggle against bodily ill-health, so in the struggle against the ills of the soul, the Morale of the penitent is of greatest importance. "Be of good heart," is Christ's advice to the sinner who has aspirations to repentance and conversion. If the penitent has confidence and courage, if he hopes firmly in the power of God's grace, and give no place to the sinister and insidious suggestions by which Satan tempts him to despair, he will do well, just as a patient who has the "will to live" and confidence in the skill of his doctor will triumph over the sickness that would bring death to one less courageous and trustful. The confessor may have to ask for drastic sacrifices, just as the doctor may have to apply very radical measures of surgery, but in each case, if the penitent or patient corresponds with a courageous confidence, the remedies are rendered far more potent.

Nothing gives such consolation to a confessor as to meet a genuine penitent, who has a real and sincere desire to repair the ravages that sin has wrought in his soul, who will spare no pains to get rid of evil habits, who will contribute complete co-operation to his confessor's efforts to help him. The effects are in a sense - cumulative. The confessor cannot help giving of his very best when he finds a soul receptive and sincere, and the penitent can not but be spurred on to still greater efforts by the personal, eager interests of the confessor.

A penitent will help himself immensely by preparing his mind and his will for this contact with his confessor; his mind, by reading enlightening spiritual books suited to his state and his religious education, and his will, by prayer, acts of Contrition, Hope, Humility, Love of God... The present pamphlet is written to provide some such mental help for the intelligent individual who has been careless of his religious duties for a long time, but is now desirous of improving his life. He realises the folly of his ways, and wants to make every effort to free himself from the morass of moral wretchedness and sin in which he has lived. He knows that in order to foil the enemies of his soul he must encourage the movements of grace and try seriously and sincerely to change his ideas of happiness and his outlook on things: in a word, he wants to make a success of his repentance. Firstly, we shall deal more or less theoretically with three fundamental spiritual facts: Sin, Our Confidence in God, Our Debt to Christ, and from these it is hoped in the second part of the pamphlet to draw some very practical and direct conclusions.

SIN

The foulness and odiousness of sin can be realised only when one has acquired some previous knowledge of God and His loveliness. In the sense of the original Greek word, METANOIA, repentance means a change of mind, a new outlook on the world, an after thought. Having put himself and his own pleasures first for so long, the sinner is now going to change that attitude thoroughly and put God first. Failure, sin, moral death comes when the creature is put before the Creator. Every good thing, grace, new life, is given with the return to God. "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His Justice, and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matt. vi, 33). Let us try then to get some idea of what God is, so that we can truly grasp what sin means, and what sad consequences it must imply.

We do not always appreciate the difference between God and other things. In a sense, we think of Him as if He were in line with creatures the most perfect, and first of all, of course, but somehow continuous of what He has made. Now creatures, it is true, have a certain goodness and desirability, but - here is the important point - they have received it from something else; they can change and lose whatever appeal or goodness they may happen to have. But God, on the other hand, is very different: He is perfect, all perfection, and cannot receive or lose in any degree whatsoever: He is quite free from all change.

Think of the beauty of a smiling landscape, with the morning sun shining peacefully on the swaying meadow - grass, and the tall trees whispering in the wind; think of the beauty of a child's face, radiant with the flush and bloom of youthful happiness; think of the beauty of a young mother as she fondles her babe, and sees the first light of recognition awaken in its eyes; think of the beauty of a strong, vigorous man pulsing with life and energy, thrilled with the joy of power and firm purpose. All these are most beautiful things undoubtedly; yet each is beautiful in a different way; each is partly beautiful. Think now of Beauty Itself, with no shadow or limitation, no sign of change in it, sheer unqualified perfection completely self-contained: that is God, incomparable, "above all, blessed for ever." And from Him, Who is Beauty, comes all the limited beauty of creatures. "God is all in all." "What hast thou that thou hast not received?" (I Cor. IV, 7). No wonder He cannot abdicate His sovereignty and cannot allow Himself to be put after anything else. "I will not give My glory to another." (Is. xlviii, 11).

God is in Himself all that is good and beautiful; He is, moreover, the source of all our being and of the being of all things, He has given us whatever we are and continually keeps us in existence; what a frightful folly it is, therefore, to give to some creatures, or to our own base pleasures, the love, service and concern that should be His alone. We recognise to a certain extent the relative values of things about us, but we fail to see their true value. Perhaps an example might make the meaning more apparent. We find a man, for instance, who lives to prevent the wastage of water. A terrible experience in a tropical desert has unhinged his brain. All his time, all his energy, goes to the problem of saving water. The friends of such a one soon have him put away in safe custody, lest he should fall into some greater extravagance. They realise that water is only one of the things of life, and that not all of living consists in conserving or using it. Yet men can stand by calmly at the sight of far more madness, far more awful lunacy, that puts the creature above the Creator, and sets a greater value on the relative than on the absolute.

Let us try to look at the world from God's point of view. All the loveliness and order in creation come from Him, and, because He is infinitely wise, He had some wonderful purpose or plan in view to which all things contribute in varying ways. In co-operating with God's eternal plan each creature works for its own highest good. No man alone on this earth can go against the will of his Creator.

All things else fulfill the wise designs of God through a blind necessity. Man alone is given the intelligence to understand the purpose of his existence, and the will to seek freely, and to love, the good for which God has destined him. But where all else is so wonderful, man wreaks ruin. Would a rose wilfully reject the beauty of its form, and the richness of its perfume? Would a noble tree deliberately renounce the lordly sweep of its limbs and the soft sighing of the wind in its foliage? Would some beautiful and comely maiden destroy the charm and perfection of her features except in a hysterical frenzy, when reason and free-will have deserted her?

Yet sin is just such a repellent disorder. It is the destruction of the beauty of the soul of man, the renunciation of man's greatest good. The gifts of heaven are trampled in the mire, and the God-like spirit of man is enslaved to bestialities and foulness. The noble mind, that might enjoy the vision of God, prefers the transient things of time. The wondrous will, that might freely enter into harmony with the Will of the Creator, rejects this for the discord of self-defilement. The Blood of Christ, fellowship with the Mother of God and the angels and saints, all the happiness of Heaven, and the peace and calm of godliness are set aside for the ordure of earth, the wild desire of degraded pleasures, and the tormenting quest of God-less joy. And to think that this madness should be willed by one in the full possession of his faculties; that this suicide of the soul should be carried out quite callously! What a shameful use of the glory of intellect and free-will! Thought wilfully warped to embrace falsehood, and the will deliberately embracing evil!

Surely sin is the greatest evil, and as God is the greatest good there can be no compromise between the two. By sin the soul denies in effect, and despises the sovereignty, truth and goodness of God. If God were not so completely independent, the sinner would completely destroy Him, just as sinners put Him to death, when He took human form and lived on earth. The sinner is his own and God's enemy. As sin is so opposed to God, He must withstand its antagonism with all His infinite power. He cannot parley with it for an instant.

Think therefore, of the awful plight of the sinner who dies unrepentant. The day of unchanging eternity dawns, the hour of justice and finality strike and he is found wanting. He has refused to co-operate in God's plan, he has received his life in vain; sin-soiled and rebellious as he is, he cannot be received by his Creator. Up to this moment he has received nothing but love from God, now he will begin to feel the full, fierce force of God's anger. In this life men may reject God, preferring the shadows of His goodness and beauty which are to be found in creatures, but when "the shadows pass" and the soul stands, a complete failure, before its Maker, the true nature of sin will be seen in all its hideousness. Cursed by the good God, condemned to the outer-darkness, where there is not even a faint ray of God-light to cheer it, the soul experiences a sense of pain and loss that we cannot comprehend in this life.

Here on earth we have all about us the created images of God's beauty and goodness, that can give us very real satisfaction and pleasure, even should we be so degraded as to prefer them to God, Who made them what they are. In this life sin can give some happiness, for we are surrounded while we live by the love of God and the good creatures of His kindness. In Hell there can be no happiness, for the hour of God's Love has passed into the hour of His Justice. The unrepentant become outcasts from the Source of all Good, and whatever they will find in Hell is either an enemy of God or the instrument of His avenging justice. "The worm dieth not: their fire is not extinguished." (Mk. 1, 43). Let us recall that the rich sinner in Hell had not even one drop of water to moisten his parched lips. (Luke xvi, 24). When God is finally lost, any happiness becomes impossible. Surely, if we grasp the notion of what God is, and that all the goodness and loveableness of creatures come from

Him, we shall begin to realise the malice and evil of sin. We shall shudder at the mere thought of Hell; we shall spare no pains to avoid its avenging fires and the blank hopelessness and helplessness of existence cut off from the Creator's love and mercy.

The pleasure and joys of sin are very immediate and tangible; its heinousness and harsh consequences lie below the surface and are not very apparent in this life. Similarly, the gain that virtue implies is seen only on calm reflection. Conversion from a life of sin is frequently retarded by the false idea that it brings only loss of happiness. Yet, when a doctor puts a dyspeptic person on a diet, and forbids him the use of many of the enjoyable delicacies he had indulged in, the latter accepts the doctor's verdict, believing that by the sacrifice of immediate pleasure he will be spared ultimate pain, and come to a state of well-being that will bring him a more abiding happiness. So also the sinner that can enter into a deep consideration of the truth of God's supreme value, will do himself untold good.

When it is seen that God is all, the sacrifice of any creature becomes relatively easy, because the reward is found to be far greater than the sacrifice and to contain the very good that is renounced. The sinner will have something positive for which to struggle, and the renunciation of worldly, sinful, joys takes on a new meaning, viz, that shadows and dreams are sacrificed for substance and reality, and permanent happiness ensured through passing by what is only perishable.

#### OUR CONFIDENCE IN GOD

The second fundamental truth the sinner should try to fix in the forefront of his mind is the difference between God's attitude towards sinners in this life and His attitude towards them in the next life. Our existence on earth is essentially a time of progress to a goal; eternity is finality and changelessness. All God's decrees in our regard while we live are directed towards making it possible for us to fulfill the purpose for which we were created. Even if we have sinned, we can approach Him with absolute confidence. When we think of His infinite holiness and of our own sinfulness, we may feel inclined to say with St. Peter: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke v, 8), but nothing could be more fatal than to believe that while we live our sins are an insuperable obstacle of God's love for us. The opposite is the case. The Good Shepherd goes after the lost sheep, and our attitude should be one of unbounded trust in His goodness, the attitude of the poor publican who prayed: "O God be merciful to me a sinner," the attitude of entire submission, of confident surrender. "I say to you, this man went down into his house justified rather than the other; because every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." (Luke xviii, 14).

As for motives to inspire such almost presumptuous audacity, they are to be found in abundance in the New Testament. It was to save sinners that God became man. "I am come not to call the just, but sinners." (Mt. ix, 13) "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners." (I Tim. i, 15). Christ was such a particular friend of the publicans and the sinners that the Pharisees took scandal at the fact. "As He was sitting at meat... behold many publicans and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and His disciples." (Matt. ix, 10). "Now the publicans and sinners drew near unto Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and the Scribes murmured, saying: This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." (Luke xv, 1-2). In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Christ revealed with astonishing force the goodness of God towards sinners. We need not dwell on the parable here beyond stressing that although the young wastrel had dissipated entirely his due part of the inheritance, yet, when he returned in complete and abject

surrender, his father met him even before he had arrived home, and ordered the best in the house to be provided for him. This is Christ's revelation of God's dealings with sinners. How can we doubt His love, or feel uncertain of His welcome for us?

Consider Christ's kindness and patience with the sinful woman whom He met at the Well of Jacob, how He fostered every tiny spark of goodwill and every little spiritual aspiration of hers until she came to the acceptance of the truth, and left her waterpot to go into the city, there to spread abroad the wonderful joy of soul and peace of heart that had come to her with the knowledge of Christ (John iv, 5-29). Or take His gentleness with the adulterous woman. He saved her from the justice of the Jewish law. Without any condemnation, but with consummate compassion, He urged her to amend her ways and avoid sin in the future (John viii, 3-11).

Apart from His Mother, the most faithful of all His friends was the sinner, Mary Magdalen. Her life-story begins: "And behold, a woman that was in the city, a sinner..." (Luke vii, 37). She, in whom seven devils had dwelt, was the object of His special affection (John xi, 5), sat at His feet, heard His divine lips speak of Heaven (Luke x, 39), and at the end stood by His Cross on Calvary (John xix, 25). She was a witness of the glory of His Resurrection before the Apostles themselves, and was made the apostle of this good news to them (John xx). Her sins had vanished in the ardour of her love of God, as the snows of winter melt in the warmth of the summer sun. "Many sins are forgiven her because she hath loved much, but to whom less is forgiven, he loveth less" (Luke vii, 47).

It was not without meaning that at the head of His Church He placed, not the loved disciple, the virginal and faithful John, but the weak and sinful Peter, who, in the very night of his First Holy Communion and of his Ordination swore again and again: "I know not the Man." (Matt. xxvi 72, 74). To point the moral for us, He had the evangelist tell of Peter's bitter tears of repentance, and of the three-fold protestation of love, by which Christ made him expiate his triple denial (John xxi, 16-17)

"As long as we are here below, God in His eternal kindness never ceases to call us... But let us not be of those who by the continual squandering of grace and the habit of deliberate sin even though slight, harden their hearts to the point of no longer comprehending... Let us take care not to drive away the Holy Spirit from the temples of our souls by wilful and obstinate resistance. God would leave us to our blindness... Mercy is never lacking to a soul; it is the soul that closing itself against mercy, provokes justice (Dom Columba Marmion)

## OUR DEBT TO CHRIST

As a third lever by which to raise ourselves from the degradation and shame of sin to the happiness of holiness should be placed a love and appreciation of what we owe to Christ. He has lived and died for us, He has instituted the Church with all its powers of sanctification for us.

By his sin, Adam had lost the supernatural treasures of grace, free gifts of the divine liberality, not due to man in any sense whatsoever. Adam, moreover, was utterly powerless to regain them, since he could perform no act adequate to satisfy for the infinitely grave outrage he had offered to God. Christ, however, redeemed us, not merely by paying what was due to the divine justice, but - to show us how completely we should give ourselves to God - He paid superabundantly for us. He won a plentiful redemption for us, so that we can now attain to even higher holiness than was possible for Adam. "For if by one man's offence death reigned through one (Adam); much more they who receive abundance of grace... shall reign in life through one, Jesus Christ." (Rom. v, 17). "So that nothing is wanting to you in any grace." (I Cor. i, 7).

And let us remember particularly that this wealth of blessings was won for us not by the mere good-will and well-wishing of Christ, but by the outpouring of His Blood, by His Agony and Death. It must never be forgotten that Christ is a real man. He actually loved, hoped, was indignant, sympathised, suffered, was sad and even wept as other men. Too frequently we accept His Redemption of us without counting what it cost Him, just as we receive the other great gifts of God with little appreciation of the love from which they spring. Christ's suffering, His very Real Passion, is the boldest stroke of the infinite Mind of God to prove to us how real is God's love for us. "God so loved the world, as to give His Only-begotten Son." (John iii, 10).

God in His human nature would really suffer and die, to show us how really we are loved by Him, and how we are to love Him in return. "That the world may know that I love the Father." (John xvi, 31) Sin, of course, is a very complex problem and deeply mysterious. Some people are shocked to think that God would create a being capable of rising up against Himself, as if free-will meant only the power to commit sin. God, however, gave us freedom as a wonderful power of entering with knowledge and love into His divine plans. He knew we could and would misuse it, but He did not desire that misuse of our freedom. Our free co-operation would glorify Him in a special way. Now God is keenly concerned for our good: He will not lower us to the brute level by compelling us to serve Him, by destroying our free-will. He wants us to come to Him to glorify Him, by love. And this it is that gives us the reason behind the Passion and Death of Christ, to draw us by love to God. "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to Myself." (John xii, 32).

By thinking of what Jesus has done and suffered for the love of us, we can readily convince ourselves of the infinite interest that God has in our welfare, and of the infinite tenderness and mercy with which He regards sinners that come to Him. If there is any short cut to sanctity, it is a particular devotion to the Passion of Christ. "If any man will come after Me, let him take up his Cross and follow Me." (Matt. x, 24). By entering into a union of mind and heart with the dying Saviour one will find newness and fulness of life in His Death. The more we come to perceive that the sufferings of Christ were real and for us, the more we shall be moved by them to make some return of love. Hence meditative devotions to the Passion, such as the Stations of the Cross, are of the greatest value if they are used properly, that is if one does something more than to go through an external routine of vocal prayer, genuflection, etc.

The Passion is intended to move the minds and wills of men. Think of the sadness and anguish of Gethsemani, of what Jesus suffered in being delivered to His fierce foes by the traitorous kiss of a friend. Try to enter into His feelings as the soldiers crown Him with thorns, spit on His Sacred Face, mock Him; realising that this savagery is wrought on God; that this is the proof of the antagonism between Sin and God. Tread the path to Calvary, bearing the Cross with Christ like another Simon of Cyrene, offering Him compassion and comfort like another Veronica. Stand by as they nail Him to the Cross, and remember that it is sin that nails down God's Hands and prevents Him from giving us of the riches of Heaven. Know that the Feet of the Good Shepherd had grown weary walking the world after the straying sheep until sin alone had held Him and bound Him "fast" to the Cross.

There is another aspect of Calvary which is most valuable for strengthening the repentant sinner. The Passion, as Christ's Sacrifice of Himself, is an infinitely powerful prayer for sinners. Now that Christ has taken on Himself all sin, and prayed to God for all sinners, there is absolutely nothing that the Mercy of God will not grant those who repent. Short of destroying our free-will He gives us all the help His Omnipotence can devise. He loves us so much that He still leaves us free; but as a result of Christ's Passion-Prayer, once we begin to move away from sin, we can be completely

confident that we have all the power of the Almighty God behind our efforts. It is well worth while recalling, too, that the same Jesus Christ, Who died for us on Calvary, rose for us from the dead, and ascended to Heaven "that He may appear now in the presence of God for us." (Heb. ix, 24).

This is the reason of the particular power that devotion to the Passion has of bringing sinners to sanctity. Through union with Calvary they go by the most direct route to the Heart of God, for it is as the divine Victim that Christ sits at the right hand of the Father. Christ "hath an everlasting priesthood, whereby He is able also to save for ever them that come to God by Him: always living to make intercession for us." (Heb. vii, 24-5). We have "a confidence in the entering into the Holies by the Blood of Christ; a new and living way which He hath dedicated for us through the veil, that is to say, His flesh, and a high priest over the house of God." (Heb. x, 19-21). The only thing we have to fear and mistrust is ourselves. We possess, alas, the power of continuing in sin, but any help that God can give us to rise above a life of sin is most certainly available for those of us who want to receive it. "Seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you." (Matt. vii, 7).

Christ in his kindness left us some very special and potent ways of entering into vital union with Calvary and of participating in the blessings He won for us there. These means are all bound up with His institutions of the Church to carry on His mission of saving sinners. "As the Father hath sent me, I also send you." (John xx, 21). In order that every man should have individual care and help, Christ delegated His own divine powers to the Apostles, who before they died passed them on to others, and thus down the ages through the bishops and priests of the Church we are linked with Christ. Unfortunately, however, the mistaken notion that human authority is more for the condemnation and crushing of abuse, than for the furtherance of the wellbeing and good of the subject, is too often applied to the Church.

But let us remember that the mission and purpose of the Church is one with that of Christ. As He came to save sinners, so is the Church particularly concerned with restoring to sinners the treasures of grace which they have lost. If the Church condemns error and sin, the condemnation is Christian and with the mind of Christ. Her denunciations are so many invitations to sinners to return to the true fold, to come back home, where a welcome awaits them as it awaited the Prodigal, the Magdalen, and the penitent and tearful Peter. When the sinner comes back to the Church he comes to Calvary, to that place where Death is conquered in Death, and the dead rise with a new life from the graves in which they have been entombed for years. The Church has all the inestimable and unlimited powers of holiness that the Saviour won by His life and death. She brings real, efficacious aid to those who turn to her. She looks at them not with the pharisaical eyes of pride, scorn and harsh bitterness, but with a surpassingly sincere sympathy, a touching tenderness, and a charity that holds the Mercy of God.

The supernatural helps that sinners will find in the Church are the Christ-given Sacrifice and Sacraments. Calvary is more than a date in the history of the world. It is a central point about which the life of every man must revolve. Jesus therefore set aside in regard to it all the ordinary laws of space and time that cut men off from the great facts of history. He would have it renewed mystically in every time and in every clime that human beings are found. Hence before He died He gave His Church the Holy Mass, through which we may stand by His Cross, through which we may be one with Him on Calvary not alone in spirit and thought, but vitally and effectively. And furthermore, because the Holy Mass is one with Christ's Death prayer for us, the benefits to be drawn from it are beyond measure. They are not limited by God, but only by the dispositions in which we assist at



Mass: we draw from it in proportion to the faith, love and desire of sinlessness that our souls bring to it.

The Sacraments that our Saviour left the Church are certain specialised aids to enable us to fulfill God's plan in us. By Baptism we are raised above the low level to which we had sunk as a result of the sin of Adam. By Penance we are freed from our personal sins, and given personal advice on how to regulate our lives. Confirmation strengthens us to prefer and profess Christ before the world. Our human love and our family life is made a sacred and holy thing by the Sacrament of Matrimony. When sickness and the hand of death lies heavily on us, Extreme Unction removes the last traces of sin and energises our failing will-power. The administration of the benefits of the Redemption is entrusted to certain chosen ones through the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Finally, supremely, in the Most Holy Eucharist, the Sacrament, Christ Himself comes to each human heart to link it to Himself by a bond of boundless love. The saving graces of Calvary are thus brought into contact with every part of our lives. In them we have a further proof of God's intimate interest in human nature. "For God hath not appointed us unto wrath, but unto the purchasing of salvation by Our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us: that, whether we watch or sleep, we may live together with Him." (I Thess., v, 9-10).

In the Sacrifice and Sacraments of the Church we have most powerful weapons in our struggle against sin. These are the means appointed by God to be used by men, and the prayer of Christ is the guarantee of their efficacy: He has merited on the Cross that they should be effective for their purpose. But, let it be repeated, we must use them with the proper dispositions. They will not destroy our free-will, but will help us most wonderfully to use it properly. In proportion as we strive sincerely to fulfil the Will of God, so shall we draw from the Holy Mass and the Sacraments the benefit and help that Christ merited for us.

#### SOME PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS GOD OR CREATURES?

As our first consideration showed, sin is a wrong use of free-will and contains the false judgment that a creature could be preferable to the Creator. Now when a false judgment linked with a rash love of something has gripped a person, the position will not be remedied by mere reasoning. Argument alone will not convince a love-sick youth of the folly of being in love with somebody quite unsuited to him. Similarly, to convince himself of the truth of God's supremacy will not remove a drunkard's thirst for strong drink, nor quench the flame and ardour of sensual desire in one addicted to the vice of impurity. There must be a direct approach as a complement to the directness of reasoning and logic. What would one prescribe to cure a love-sick youth of his unhappy affection? One would try, of course, the direct method of argument and reasoning, but additionally, one would advise him to remove as completely as he can from his life whatever his associations with his lady-love so that to forget would become correspondingly less difficult. Secondly, and almost equally important, one would suggest as an outlet for his thwarted, emotional energies, that he cultivate some healthy, active interests, suited to his temperament and circumstances, some sport, perhaps, or some hobby, or a friendship with some more suitable person.

On the principle that grace does not change or mutilate nature, the same approach would be most helpful for the sinner, particularly, I should say, for the drunkard and the sensualist. Omit no effort to try to realise that God contains eminently all the good that is in any creature, but use also an indirect method of self-help. In the first place, then, fly from temptation, and do not dally with it. Avoid the companions that experience has shown to be dangerous stay away from those places in

which you have frequently fallen into sin before. There is no point in taking unnecessary risks. Secondly, cultivate some healthy interests, even if these be only on the natural plane. The converted sinner must put something in his life to take up the time and attention given to sin.

A drunkard, for example, who would take on a little gardening, a little amateur carpentry, or the decoration and improvement of his home, will be far more likely to make a success of temperance than one who just mopes around aimlessly. And interest that is both spiritual and material would be of the highest value. Such would be to join an active group or society devoted to some phase of Catholic action, such as the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul or the Legion of Mary. The benefits to be gained by membership of such societies are not always appreciated to the full; it is too often forgotten that the primary purpose of such groups is the sanctification of members.

Membership of one of these bodies will give the ex-sinner something to occupy his time. He will be encouraged and heartened by the good example of his fellow-members and the special concern of the spiritual director. His work will bring before him the harm wrought by sin and the folly of feckless impiety, and - because one can see things more clearly in the lives of others than in one's own - he will perhaps realise his great dangers, and through zeal to benefit others, feel urged to try to give them good example in his own life. If "idle hands tempt the devil" in us, well-directed, interesting and useful activities will help very considerably in exorcising him, and in nullifying his influence on our lives and characters.

#### CONFIDENCE NOT FEAR

Nobody can fail to draw the obvious lesson of unlimited confidence from our second consideration on God's attitude to sinners. The practical forms of this confidence may not be seen so clearly. How does confidence affect one in the natural order? Firstly, it should think, it banishes excessive fear, and secondly, it makes one proportionately optimistic about the results of one's endeavours. It is very important for one who is fighting against evil habits, the heritage of sin or ignorance, to mistrust his own weakness, but it is also extremely needful that he should fully realise that all his sincere efforts to rise from his sins are powerful with omnipotence of God. "God is faithful, Who will strengthen and keep you from evil." (II Thess., III, 2). "My dearly beloved... with fear and trembling work out your salvation, for it is God Who worketh in you... And do ye all things without murmuring and hesitations." (Philipp. II, 12-14).

It is a principle in psychology that every vivid idea tends to reproduce itself in action. Now the two great forces that make our ideals vivid are love and fear. It is easy to see what an impetus to activity love gives, but we tend to forget that, by a strange paradox, fear moves one to perform just what one is afraid of doing. One could walk easily enough along a plank laid on the ground; but suppose the same plank were laid across a New York street from the top floor of one sky-scraper to that of another, would the normal person be able to walk across it? Not very likely. In all probability, after a short distance his nerve would fail him, and panic would be followed by despair and finally destruction. His vivid idea of falling would sway him even involuntarily off his balance.

The parallel holds to a certain degree in the spiritual life also. One must fear oneself, so as to take normal precautions and reasonable measures against sin, but there is no need to be overanxious. It is time enough to greet trouble when it comes, without creating panic and despair by visualising difficulties that may never materialise. To conquer any such pessimism one should, firstly, try to realise its futility, and recall the tremendous motives for confidence that we have in the Mercy of

God, and in the Life and Death of Our Divine Lord. "Be ye strengthened in the Lord and in the might of His power." (Eph. VI, 10).

And secondly, one can do much negatively by disregarding whatever craven fears and temptations to despair may arise - not indeed by trying to banish them, or by trying to forget them, but by going one's way irrespective of them and with the least possible concern about them. Here also some suitable occupation will be of great assistance in distracting the mind. Take for example's sake the individual with a morbid fear of ghosts, who has to travel along a lonely country road at night. If he swings along, singing a song, perhaps, or whistling some rollicking air, he may succeed in overcoming his nervousness, but if he attends to his fear he is heading for trouble. Brooding continually on the past is likewise foolish and depressing. Let the dead past bury its dead. The future it is that contains new life, and one has more to gain by cultivating the forward, robust, cheerful optimistic outlook of youth, than the backward, clouded, despondent mentality of old age, that lives in the past. "Forgetting the things that are behind, and stretching myself forward to those that are before, I press towards the mark." (Philipp. III, 13-14). "Unless you become as little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. XVIII, 3).

Let the atmosphere of the mind be radiant, happy in being forgiven, glad with confidence in the power and grace of Christ, rather than gloomy, dismal and unhappy from excessive preoccupation with one's sins and one's weakness. "Have pity on thy own soul, pleasing God, and contain thyself. Gather up thy heart in His holiness, and drive away sadness far from thee. For sadness hath killed many; and there is no profit in it... Pensiveness will bring old age before the time." (Eccli. XXX, 24-26).

#### GRACE FOR THE TAKING

There should be no difficulty in drawing a practical lesson from our third consideration on what Christ has done for our spiritual welfare. If we have entered properly into this thought we shall have awakened in us a great love of our suffering Saviour, and a desire to prove the reality and sincerity of that love of true repentance, and by ready, Christ-like acceptance of the sorrows and trials that may come to us. Particularly should here be enkindled in us an appreciation and love of those means by which we can participate most directly in the fruits of the Passion i.e.; the Holy Mass and the Sacraments.

If used in the right way, these are our most potent weapons in the warfare against sin. Firstly, then, we should hear holy Mass as reverently and as frequently as we can, trying to unite ourselves with Christ, the High Priest as He offers Himself on our behalf to the Eternal Father. Sinners, empty-handed, we stand before God, but we have complete confidence in Him, our Spotless Victim, our All-Holy Priest, Whose sacrifice - that is also ours - is most pleasing to the Father. In the second place, we should frequent the Sacraments of Penance and the Most Holy Eucharist. Both are most important if we wish to foster and promote the true well-being of our souls.

In the tribunal of Penance we shall receive Pardon of our past lapses, grace will be restored to the soul, and we shall be given valuable, and perhaps necessary, advice that our spiritual condition suggests. If we hate sin we shall not have to be urged to avail of opportunities of being absolved from its foul stain, and when we come to regard the priest as Christ's mouthpiece to speak His helpful words for our individual souls, we shall listen to his counsel reverently and attentively. We shall strive harder than before to put it into practice, realising that it is guaranteed by Him, "Who of God is made unto us wisdom, and justice, and sanctification, and redemption." (I Cor., I, 30).

As regards the frequent reception of Holy Communion, who can doubt its value against the diseases of the soul? It is the Sacrament of spiritual nourishment, the divine Bread our souls need to preserve their spiritual energy in the journey home to Heaven. It will repair in us the lesser defects and damage that we have suffered on the way; it will strengthen us for the conflicts that lie ahead, while at the same time helping to make life's journey easier by increasing our love of the things of God. It is a Holy Communion with God, that fills us with the happiness of loving and being loved. "He that abideth in charity, abideth in God and God in him." (John IV, 16).

The Fathers of the Church teach also that Holy Communion brings a lessening of concupiscence, a tempering of the bodily passions, and a tendency towards peace of heart. The young, therefore, and all those in whom the fires of passion and sensuality burn strongly should make a special effort to practice frequent Communion. They have need of great stores of spiritual sustenance, and all they have to do is to "come and take." "Come to Me, all you that labour and are burdened, and I will refresh you." (Matt. XI, 28). "All you that thirst, come to the waters... Come ye: buy wine and milk with money and without any price... Hearken diligently to me and eat that which is good: and your soul shall be delighted in fatness." (Is. LV, 1-2).

## CONCLUSION

Such then is the outline of progress from sin to salvation. It is only a very sketchy and rough diagram, for the details are filled in with as many variations as there are souls. "To every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the giving of Christ." (Eph. IV, 7). We have, in a sense, to do very little - just to be sincere, courageous, hopeful, persevering - and the power of Christ, the Strength of God, will make us mighty against all the forces of evil. If we turn to God, He will draw us to Himself. "And may God supply all your wants, according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (Philipp. IV, 19).

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