ORIGINAL SIN

The Problem

There are three common misunderstandings of Original Sin. The *first* assumes that the doctrine denies human freedom and therefore exempts us from responsibility for the condition of the world and of human relationships. This first school of thought rejects such a doctrine and insists instead that with the right technology, politics, and education, we can and must strive to overcome social and individual evils.

The *second* identifies Original Sin with the absurdity of human existence. We can do nothing about our situation. We are radically and thoroughly flawed. This is the view of pessimistic existentialism, e.g., Sartre.

The *third* misunderstanding equates Original Sin with personal sin—a personal sin which somehow is imposed on our otherwise innocent shoulders. Such a view of Original Sin forces us to accept it, or write it off, simply as a "mystery" or to reject the doctrine as an intrinsic contradiction. How can one be really guilty of something that someone else committed?

Accordingly, the doctrine of Original Sin does not play a very large part in contemporary Catholic theology and even less in liberal Protestant theology. It no longer enters into our theology of human existence. We assume, for example, that Baptism annuls it in any case, so that it remains a vital problem only for unbaptized babies.

Biblical Notion

Old Testament

Contrary to a popular belief within the Church, the Old Testament has no formal concept of Original Sin. Clearly it is aware of sin and especially of its corrupting effects (Genesis 6:12). But Genesis 2:8-3:24 (the account of the first sin of Adam and Eve) should not be read apart from chapters 4-11. Genesis 3 is only an introduction to what amounts to a series of anecdotes intended to show how sin, once admitted into the world, spreads everywhere, bringing death and destruction in its wake.

New Testament

In the New Testament, and especially in *Paul*, we find the substance of a doctrine of Original Sin (1 Corinthians 15:21-23, and Romans 5:12-21). In the latter passage Paul speaks of Original Sin by first drawing a parallel (verse 18) between Adam and Christ. Because of Adam we are sinners without the Spirit (verse 19), but because of Christ we are sought by God's saving will and are, therefore, in a state of objective redemption. And both these effects—the one from Adam's sin and the other from Christ's saving work—are antecedent to human freedom and personal decision. What *we* do is to ratify the deed of Adam by personal sin (verse 12) or the deed of Christ by faith.

Paul, of course, does not, nor can he, explain *how* this is so, how it is that we are affected by the sin of Adam without any personal decision. He insists only *that* it is so, and he argues from the universality of *death*. Because we all die, we are all implicated in sin, since death is the effect of sin. This sense of our corporate involvement in sin cannot be separated from the biblical belief in the solidarity of the human community and in its notion of corporate personality, sometimes linked with the Suffering Servant of God in Isaiah 40-55.

But since death is the effect of sin, death (the death of Christ) can also be the instrument of its destruction. It is by dying to sin with Christ that we are liberated from it (Romans 6:1-23). Through Christ's death comes new life. In dying with Christ we rise also with him (1 Corinthians 15:3,17; Galatians 1:4). Our dying and rising with Christ does not eliminate the enduring conflict between the spirit and the flesh, but we can achieve the final victory through Christ and the Spirit (Romans 8:1-17).

Post-biblical Theological Developments

Augustine

The biblical teaching on Original Sin, which as we have noted is exceedingly brief, was not developed until Augustine. The Greek Fathers (Irenaeus, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, *et al.*) were too much involved against the heresies of Gnosticism and Manichaeism

(both of which insisted that all matter is evil) to lay stress on such a doctrine. They were trying to show, on the contrary, how the incarnation elevated and transformed the whole created order. But the situation was just the opposite for Augustine. He faced not those who rejected the goodness of nature but those who glorified nature to excess, i.e., the Pelagians. Unfortunately, Augustine portrayed Original Sin as a situation in which every human being finds himself or herself, but from which only some are rescued. Although God desired the salvation of all in Christ, only those who are justified by faith and Baptism are actually saved.

Furthermore, Augustine linked Original Sin with *concupiscence* (i.e., the human person's *spontaneous desire* for material or sensual satisfaction). It is an effect of Original Sin and is transmitted by the libido in the parents' love by which a person first comes into existence. To the extent that concupiscence infects every human act, all of our deeds are in some sense sinful. Augustine did not suggest that every such deed is a *new* sin, but he never worked out the intrinsic difference between Original and personal sin because, for him, the consequences of both kinds of sin are the same in the next world.

Middle Ages; Trent; Post-Trent

In the Middle Ages, from Anselm of Canterbury onward, the essence of Original Sin was increasingly equated with the *lack of sanctifying grace* (medieval theology's new term for the divine indwelling) brought about by Adam's actual sin. Concupiscence now appeared simply as a consequence of Original Sin (Aquinas). Thus, it became possible to explain how Baptism blotted out Original Sin without at the same time canceling all of its effects, including concupiscence.

The Council of Trent (to which greater attention will be devoted below) agreed with the Protestant Reformers that Original Sin, caused by Adam's sin, affects all (except Mary) and that it is really overcome by justification. But *against* the Reformers, Trent insisted that Original Sin does not consist in concupiscence itself, since this remains even in the justified. Rather, Original Sin is the lack of original righteousness (justice) and holiness. Post-

Tridentine theology tried to answer the obvious difficulties associated with the traditional doctrine of Original Sin—e.g., How is it possible to translate blame from Adam to ourselves?

Contemporary Theologians

Contemporary theologians (especially Rahner) reject the notion that Original Sin is simply the sinful act of the first man or is a matter of collective guilt, since both of these views lead to contradictions and are not required by the dogma of Original Sin in any case. It is a mystery because grace itself is a mystery. The self-communication of God is antecedent to our free decision or proof of our worthiness (*ante praevisa merita*). Just as there is a state of holiness which is antecedent to our personal decision and which nonetheless qualifies and conditions our moral lives, so there is a lack of holiness which ought not to be, and that lack posits a state of unholiness which is also antecedent to our personal decision and which qualifies and conditions our moral lives. The fact that the mystery of Original Sin is subordinate to the mystery of grace explains why the actual doctrine of Original Sin appears in the Bible only when our divinization by the Spirit is explicitly grasped (as in Paul).

Contemporary theologians also reject the notion (suggested by Augustine and others) that Original Sin is more pervasive and more universal than is redemption, since everyone is affected by Original Sin but some are not effectively touched by the cross and resurrection of Christ. On the contrary, Original Sin and being redeemed are two constitutive components of the human situation in regard to salvation, which at all times determine human existence. "It may be assumed that sin was only permitted by God within the domain of his unconditional and stronger salvific will, which from the beginning was directed towards God's self-communication in Christ" (K. Rahner,"Original Sin," *The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, p. 1151).

A *positive* statement of contemporary theology (especially Rahner) comprises the following principles:

1. All human beings are offered grace and, therefore, redemption *through Christ*, and not simply insofar as they are

human beings or members of the human community. This grace is given us as the *forgiveness of sins*. Indeed, Jesus himself thought of his own death on the cross as an expiatory death "for all." (More on this, of course, in Part III on Christ, especially chapter 12.)

2. The human person lacks God's grace precisely because he or she *is* a person and a member of the human community. At the same time God wills that we should have grace. Thus, if it is not present, this must be because of some guilt freely incurred (otherwise it contradicts God's will). Yet the absence of grace (a condition incurred freely by sin) is also against God's will, even when the individual is not at all responsible for its absence. This lack of grace, which ought not to be, has in an *analogous* sense the character of sin: It is very much *like* sin, in that it is contrary to the will of God, but it is at the same time *unlike* sin, in that it does not involve a free decision against God's will. But God remains attached to us in spite of the sin of Adam. God bestows grace freely now, not in view of Adam, but in view of Christ. As children of Adam, we do not have grace. As sons and daughters of God in Christ, we do.

3. The lack of grace is an inner condition of each one of us in that we are all human, but it is also *situational*. We are born into a "situation" in which, because of Adam's sin, grace is not at our disposal in the manner and measure which God intended. Accordingly, we now have to make our decision about salvation under the impact of both *concupiscence* and *death*, each of which is an effect of Original Sin. For that reason, and in spite of the work of Christ on our behalf, all of us are still directly concerned with Original Sin in our daily lives. We are, to that extent, "wounded" or weakened in our natural powers.

4. On the other hand, this does *not* mean that death and concupiscence are totally unnatural, that we would not have experienced them were it not for Adam's sin. It means, rather, that both are in contradiction to what we are in the concrete. They are indications of the as-yet-incomplete victory of grace. The process of history begins at the point where neither death nor concupiscence has been eliminated.

5. Our human situation in the face of a free moral decision is always *dialectically* determined: We are in Original Sin through

Adam and at the same time are oriented toward Christ and the God of glory. Either we freely ratify our state of Original Sin by personal sin, or we freely ratify our redeemed condition by faith, hope, and love. Our situation is one in which our decision to ratify is always qualified by concupiscence and death, on the one hand, and by the fact of our having been redeemed, on the other. Our moral standing before God, however, is always and finally determined by our free choice, weakened though it be.

6. The doctrine of Original Sin remains always pertinent to our lives as Christians and to Christian theology. It indicates (a) that grace is given historically, and not as a necessity of human existence; (b) that it comes from Christ, not from Adam at the beginning of history; (c) that the goal of history is greater than it was at the beginning of history; (d) that our situation of death, concupiscence, and other experiences of human limitation cannot simply be abolished in history, because they were there from the beginning; and (e) that our efforts, therefore, to overcome the effects of Original Sin (injustice, war, etc.) constitute a duty that cannot be completed in this world and, therefore, a duty that is never done.

Official Teachings of the Church

Sixteenth Council of Carthage

The Sixteenth Council of Carthage (418), a gathering of two hundred bishops, condemned the errors of the British monk *Pelagius*, who reduced Adam's sin to one of bad example and insisted that grace is not absolutely necessary for salvation. The canons (or principal doctrinal formulations) of the council were later approved by Pope Zosimus (d. 418).

Indiculus

The *Indiculus* (between 435 and 442), a summary of the doctrine of grace, was composed probably by Prosper of Aquitaine (d. 460), a disciple of Augustine and the strongest opponent of *semi-Pelagianism*, which held that none of us requires grace at the beginning

but that God grants it as needed later. This document subsequently received papal approval and was used as the standard exposition on grace by the end of the fifth century.

Second Council of Orange

The Second Council of Orange (529) finally settled the matter against the *semi-Pelagians*. This local council accepted the teachings of Caesarius of Arles (d. 542), another of Augustine's disciples, plus material from Prosper of Aquitaine. Pope Boniface II (d. 532) approved Orange's action.

Council of Trent

The Council of Trent (sixth session, 1547), "Decree on Justification," said: We have lost innocence through the sin of Adam, and have inherited not only death but also sin. Nevertheless, we are redeemed by Christ interiorly and not just by a divine decree which leaves us unchanged within. Although we still suffer from the effects of Original Sin, God's justice inheres in us (see especially chapter 16 of the decree).

Humani Generis

Pope Pius XII's encyclical letter *Humani Generis* (1950) insisted on the truly gratuitous character of the supernatural order (i.e., God was not *required* to create us for glory) and on the importance of our common descent from one pair of parents.

SYNTHESIS: TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

It is obvious by now that theology does not follow the same clear lines of direction that one might find in such disciplines as accounting, law, chemistry, or the statistical sides of political science and economics. Like all of the humanities, theology is

concerned with the question of human existence. But human existence can only be studied by human beings. We ourselves raise the question *about* ourselves. We have already noted in the preceding chapter that there is no standpoint from which we can "look at" God objectively, in a detached manner, as it were. This is so because God permeates as well as transcends us. For the same reason, there is no standpoint from which we can "look at" ourselves objectively, in a detached manner. We are at once the subject and the object of the inquiry. Consequently, our answers are always inadequate. They lead to further questions and to further attempts at newer answers.

The Christian "standpoint" is inevitably qualified by the conviction that God is real, that the real God is available to us, and that the real, available God is a principle of consciousness, knowledge, and moral action within each one of us, even within those who do not explicitly advert to God's presence as well as within those who explicitly reject the possibility of a divine principle of human existence.

We are persons who are self-aware (i.e., we not only *know*; we *know that we know*, and we know ourselves *as knowers*). *We are beings in possession of ourselves as subjects.* And this is the case even before we have had an opportunity to reflect on our existence from various disciplinary points of view (all of which we have placed under the umbrella of *anthropology*).

The knowledge that we have of ourselves before any of us has had an opportunity for systematic investigation and reflection is called *a priori* knowledge (as opposed to *a posteriori* knowledge, i.e., the knowledge of objects which is disclosed to us through study and examination). For the Christian, and indeed for every religious person, our *a priori* knowledge of ourselves as persons includes the light of faith as a "supernatural existential." In other words, *God is present in us from the beginning as the principle and the power of self-knowledge.* We are, "from the very circumstance of (our) origin, . . . already invited to converse with God" (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, n. 19). We do not come to the knowledge of God by a step-by-step investigation of data, arguments, and evidence. Rather, *our knowledge of God begins at the very moment when we become really conscious of*

is to heal and to restore the morally and/or physically sick member to full communion with the Church so that once again he or she can participate in its life and mission.

Beyond that, the Church itself is disclosed in these sacraments as an essentially healing and forgiving community, as the sacrament of the healing and forgiving Lord. The Church is also the penitent Church, ever bathing the feet of Christ with its tears and hearing his words, "Nor do I condemn you" (John 8:11). And because of its unshakable confidence in the triumph of God's mercy and grace in Christ, when night falls the Church holds high the lamp of hope and reveals itself as the sacrament of *universal* salvation, the community which gives up on no one and no situation, no matter how seemingly hope-less.

All Christians are initiated into the Church through the same essential process, but not all Christians are called to live as Christians in the same mode of existence. Most are called to live in intimate union with another in marriage. Some few others may (also) be called to a life of service of the Christian community itself, specifically through a ministry which attends directly to the order and mission of the Church. So fundamental are both the call to human life itself and the call to the life of the Church that each of these calls and its corresponding commitment is celebrated as a sacrament: the one, the sacrament of *Matrimony*; the other, the sacrament of *Holy Order*.

Like all the sacraments, both these sacraments are directed to the nature and mission of the Church. In Matrimony the Christian community is itself built up and manifested at its most natural and local level. The union of Christ and his Church is symbolized (Ephesians 5:22-32). In Holy Order the Christian community is provided structure and direction for the exercise of its mission. These are the sacraments of *vocation* and of *commitment*. The Church is revealed in them as a community called forth (the root meaning of the word *church — ekklesia*) and committed to a life of love and service.

Section One: Sacraments of Healing

PENANCE

History

New Testament Period

The text to which Catholic doctrine has appealed in asserting the sacramentality and divine origin of Penance is John 20:22-23, which records one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound, they are held bound" (see also Matthew 16:19, 18:18). By itself, the text does not "prove" that Jesus instituted the sacrament of Penance as we know it today or that he conferred the power to forgive sins only on the Apostles, their successors, and their chosen delegates. We have no basis even for concluding that these are the "very words" of Jesus, given the different approach to history in the Fourth Gospel, over against the Synoptics.

On the other hand, the text *is* entirely consistent with Jesus' abiding concern about sin and his readiness to forgive and to heal (Matthew 9:2-8; Mark 2:5-12; Luke 5:20-26). In all three reports of Jesus' cure of the paralytic at Capernaum there is mention of the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins is also prominent in the preaching of the Apostles (Acts of the Apostles 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18). Accordingly, even though John does not tell us how or by whom this power was exercised in the community for whom he wrote, the very fact that he mentions it shows that it was exercised.

Second and Third Centuries

The material for this period is scant. What evidence there is suggests that Penance was available for the baptized. *The Shepherd of Hermas* (ca. 150), an important para-scriptural document, takes for granted the practice of post-baptismal forgiveness, although it balks at the possibility of a third opportunity for forgiveness. The first to deny the Church's and the bishop's right

to forgive those guilty of serious sins were the *Montanists* and the *Novatians*, both arguing that certain sins (e.g., apostasy, murder, adultery) were outside the Church's powers.

Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Centuries

The purists were condemned by the *Council of Nicea* (325). It explictly directs that the dying are to be reconciled and given *Viaticum* (literally, "on the way with you"; it is the term used for Holy Communion for those at the point of death—i.e., "on the way" to heaven).

During this period Penance was public in character and came to be known as "Canonical Penance" because local councils devoted a number of canons, or juridical decisions, to regulating its practice. Canonical Penance was administered only once in a lifetime, since Baptism was normally received late in life and was seen as calling for a deep conversion, neither easily nor frequently set aside. The Church demanded proof of reconversion before restoring the grace of Baptism through Penance.

Canonical Penance was always reserved for serious sins, e.g., apostasy, murder, heresy, adultery. These were matters of common, public knowledge. The offender would receive a form of liturgical excommunication and was forced to leave the celebration of the Eucharist at the Offertory, along with the catechumens. For less serious offenses there were other forms of penance: almsgiving, fasts, charity to the poor and the sick, and prayers.

Public penance required the sinner's demonstrating a change of heart, presenting himself or herself before the bishop and the local community, and joining the local group of penitents. Then, after a suitable period of probation, he or she would be readmitted to the Christian community by a rite known as the "reconciliation of the penitent." As the needs of the people and the circumstances of the Church changed, private penance became more the rule and so, too, the actual "confession" of sins. By the end of the sixth century Canonical Penance came to be known simply as *Confession*.

Seventh to Eleventh Centuries

This period is marked by a pronounced Celtic influence as the missionary efforts of the Church reached into the British Isles, far removed from the influence of Rome and from all of Europe. (The Irish monks themselves were to bring this Celtic influence to bear upon the Continent in the seventh century.) Since the liturgical life of the Celtic church was monastically oriented, private penance became normative for priests and religious, and under their direction it spread among the laity as well. It was imposed even for trivial offenses and became increasingly divorced from the larger community of faith. In fact, a person could be restored to the Eucharist even before completing the penance. If the penance were deemed too onerous, the penitent could ask for a *commutation* to a lighter penalty. It was also possible to substitute the payment of a sum of money instead of performing the actual penance. This practice was known as *redemption*. Furthermore, Penance was administered by priests as well as the bishop. In order to help the priests in the selection of appropriate penances, a codification of penitential practices was developed, the so-called penitential books (*libri poenitentiales*). These were lists of every kind of sin, with the exact type of penance attached. The minister of the sacrament was no longer the healer and the reconciler. He was now the *judge*. A formula of absolution was also developed at this time.

Eleventh to Fourteenth Centuries

Four principal changes occur in this period. Penance becomes satisfaction, confession, contrition, and absolution. In the ancient Church the emphasis was on the *reconciliation* of the sinner with the Church and ultimately with God. Now the emphasis shifts to the doing of a penance, or the making of *satisfaction*, for sin. When this became too strenous, the practices of commutation and redemption were introduced. Secondly, *confession* of sins originally served the purpose of insuring that adequate satisfaction was being imposed, but gradually confession came to be considered as having its own efficacy, its own power to reconcile the sinner. Thus, we find at this time the development of arguments urging

the necessity of confessing to a priest. Thirdly, in the writings of Abelard (d. 1142) and Peter Lombard there was a shift to *contrition*, i.e., the conversion of heart. The sinner, if truly contrite, was already forgiven even before confession. So pronounced was this new stress on contrition that the purist Albigensians and Waldensians denied any efficacy whatsoever to confession to a priest, a view condemned by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. All orthodox theologians and canonists came to the defense of the role of the priest, and this led to a fourth shift: to *absolution* by a priest. Since absolution was *not* part of the practice and teaching of Penance in the early Church, there was some dispute among the medieval authors about its place in the sacrament. By the time of Thomas Aquinas, however, absolution came to be regarded as essential, along with confession and contrition.

From the Middle Ages to Vatican II

Thomas' theology was endorsed in the Council of Florence's *Decree for the Armenians* (1439): (1) Penance is a sacrament; (2) it consists of contrition of the heart (including the resolution not to sin in the future), oral confession to the priest, satisfaction (e.g., prayer, fasting, almsgiving), and absolution by the priest; (3) the effect of the sacrament is the forgiveness of sins.

The Reformers, and Luther in particular, rejected this teaching. Although Luther accepted the sacramentality of Penance, he believed there was an abiding danger of regarding the works of the penitent as more important than faith in God's mercy. He also rejected the reservation of the power of forgiveness to priests. The first official reaction to Luther's views came in a bull of Pope Leo X (d. 1521), *Exsurge Domine* (1520). Calvin also accepted private confession and absolution as a means of arousing faith and confidence in God's mercy, but he denied its sacramentality.

The definitive response to the Reformers came from the Council of Trent (*Doctrine on the Sacrament of Penance*, Session XIV, 1551). It taught that Penance is a sacrament instituted by Christ; that it is distinct from Baptism; that the three acts of the penitent are contrition, confession of all serious sins in number and kind, and satisfaction; that absolution is reserved to priests

alone; and that the priest must have jurisdiction, since absolution is a juridical act.

The Tridentine doctrine remained normative in Catholic theology and practice down to the Second Vatican Council. What is to be said of that teaching in light of our present understanding of the historically conditioned character of all doctrinal pronouncements (as acknowledged, for example, by the 1973 declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith)?

1. The council taught that the *confession of grave, or serious, sins* is necessary by divine law (*iure divino*). In no way, however, does divine law canonize any concrete form which this confession may have taken in history—e.g., the private confession of sins to a priest. None of those varieties of forms which have been employed in the history of the Church can be said to contradict the intention of Christ. Hence, there are always, in principle, liturgical alternatives to private confession as we have known it from the Middle Ages to the present.

2. The *detailed* confession of all serious sins was also affirmed by Trent as being *iure divino*. However, this is not to be understood in the strict sense. It was the council's purpose only to defend against the Reformers' teaching that integral confession was manifestly contrary to the venerable tradition of the Church. The council did not intend to make the integral confession of sins the only way in which the sacrament may be received. It is the *normal* form. Other forms are possible according to needs and circumstances.

3. The council also affirmed that the confessor is a judge and that the sacrament is a tribunal. But this, too, must be seen in light of the council's concerns about the Reformers' new teaching, namely, their utter rejection of the power of the keys and their insistence that the proclamation of the word alone is efficacious in the remission of sins. The council also wished to maintain that absolution is to be given not in an arbitrary fashion but as a result of a working knowledge of the case.

4. The council's model of judge and tribunal must be understood, finally, in light of the figure employed by the council, namely, that the sacrament resembles more the judgment made by

a physician on a sick person who comes to him for help than by a civil judge who denounces and punishes a guilty person. So somebody whose sorrow is in its initial stages, or is imperfect, can be reconciled through the healing grace of the sacrament.

Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council called for a revision of the rite and formulae for the sacrament of Penance "so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament" (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,* n. 72). The sacrament's purpose, the council's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* declares, is to "obtain pardon from the mercy of God" and to be "reconciled with the Church whom (sinners) have wounded by their sin, and who, by her charity, her example and her prayer, collaborates in their conversion" (n. 11).

The New Rite of Reconciliation

Although not on a par with the new *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (to which we referred in the previous chapter), the new *Rite of Penance* does bring out the ecclesial dimension of the sacrament more fully than does the traditional (i.e., post-Tridentine) practice of private confession. In the new rite, the effect of the sacrament is identified as reconciliation with God and with the Church. The minister functions more as a healer than as a judge. Emphasis is placed on conversion inspired by the Church's proclamation of God's word. And communal celebration of the sacrament is provided for and encouraged.

"The celebration of this sacrament is thus always an act in which the Church proclaims its faith, gives thanks to God for the freedom with which Christ has made us free, and offers its life as a spiritual sacrifice in praise of God's glory, as it hastens to meet the Lord Jesus" (Introduction to the new *Rite,* n. 7).

The Church and Penance

In its celebration of the sacrament of Penance, the Church reveals itself as the sacrament of God's mercy in the world, but also as a sinful community, still "on the way" to the perfection of the

Kingdom. Those who sin and who must avail themselves of the sacrament are just as much "the Church" as are those who, in the name of the Church, act to reconcile the sinner with God and the Church. The Church knows what it is both to forgive and to be forgiven, mindful always of the Lord's own prayer, "Forgive us our sins for we too forgive all who do us wrong" (Luke 11:4).

A Church which cannot admit its sin is not the Church of Christ. A Church which cannot forgive the sins of others against itself is not the Church of Christ. *How* the liturgical process of conversion, repentance, and forgiveness is to be structured is always of less importance than *the fact that* it goes on continually within the Church.

ANOINTING OF THE SICK

History

New Testament

Apart from James 5:14 there is no mention of *Anointing* as a sacred rite in the New Testament. The pertinent text is as follows: "Is there anyone sick among you? He should ask for the presbyters of the church. They in turn are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Name [of the Lord]." It continues: "This prayer uttered in faith will reclaim the one who is ill, and the Lord will restore him to health. If he has committed any sins, forgiveness will be his. Hence, declare your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may find healing" (5:15-16).

The "elders" or "presbyters" are those appointed and ordained by Apostles or disciples of Apostles (Acts of the Apostles 14:23; Titus 1:5). The presbyters are described by James as having extraordinary spiritual gifts which enable them to heal the sick. Sickness, it must be noted, was attributed to sin, as in the Old Testament and contemporary Judaism, and so it posed a problem for the early Church. At the sickbed it is the task of the presbyter to pray for the sick person and to anoint him or her with oil in the name of the Lord. The oil is regarded as a vital substance, a restorative. There is nothing magical implied, however. It is not the oil but the prayers to the Lord which provide the hope of recovery and the forgiveness of sins. (The recommendation that

their formulation always presupposes experience itself. Once formulated, those principles also have a critical impact on our subsequent evaluation of experience. We reconsider our estimation of past and present experiences, and we revise our anticipation of future experiences in light of these principles. In other words, principles are at once *products* of experience and *shapers* of experience. For that reason, moral theology cannot follow the method of classicism alone (which may underestimate the impact of process on principles) nor the method of historical consciousness alone (which may attend too little to the impact of principles on process). Catholic moral theology is concerned with principles and process alike.

WHO IS THE CHRISTIAN?

The answer to this question can be formulated in only a cumulative fashion. Thus, the Christian is *a radically social human person in whom God is present in grace but who is, at the same time, prone to act against the divine presence.* Thus far we have described any and every human being. The Christian is, first, a human being. But the Christian is a particular kind of human being, not in the sense that a Christian has a different biological or psychic structure, but in the sense that a Christian has moved to *a different level of human consciousness.* The Christian is one who *believes in Jesus Christ, and whose whole life is shaped by that belief.* The process by which the Christian moves to that new level of consciousness is *conversion.*

Since we have already addressed ourselves at some length to the question of human existence in chapters 4 and 5, we shall not repeat that discussion here. We shall focus instead on those elements of our cumulative definition of the Christian to which specific attention has not yet been given in this book, namely, the questions of *sin* and *conversion.*

Sin

Biblical Notions

A first understanding of the word *sin* in the Bible is "to miss the mark." To sin is to fail to achieve one's goal or to fail to measure up to one's highest standards. In the *Old Testament,* with its emphasis on the Covenant, sin is *infidelity to the covenantal relationship* between God and ourselves. It is our failure to live up to the terms of the agreement. It is a missing of the mark. Sin is also a form of idolatry. It is a substituting of human concerns and interests for God's sovereign will (Exodus 32:1-6; Deuteronomy 9:7-21). We sin against the God whom we do not see by violating the rights of our neighbor whom we do see (Leviticus 19:9-18; Isaiah 1:23-25). Rejection of the neighbor is rejection of God (Ezekiel 18:3-32).

The same relationships are present in the *New Testament.* Love of God and love of neighbor are inextricably linked (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-37). It is striking that where the word for sin appears in the *Synoptics,* it almost always is used in connection with the *forgiveness of sins.* Jesus himself associates with sinners and calls them to repentance (Matthew 9:10,13; 11:19; Luke 7:34; 15:1-2; 19:7). For Jesus sin comes only from the heart, and only insofar as it does is the human person defiled (Matthew 15:18-19; Mark 7:20-22). But the sinner need only ask for forgiveness (Luke 18:13-14). There is joy in heaven over the sinner's return (Luke 15:7,10).

The malice of sin is more explicit in John: It is lawlessness (1 John 3:4), wrongdoing (5:17), lust and pride (2:16), darkness (3:9-11). But Jesus is also the conqueror of sin (John 8:46; 1 John 3:5). He is the lamb who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). The fullest theology of sin in the New Testament appears in the writings of Paul, and in the first part of the Epistle to the Romans in particular. It is not observance of the Law which brings us victory over sin, he writes. The Law only makes us aware of our sin. In Christ we die to sin. Our old sinful self is crucified with him "so that the sinful body might be destroyed and we might be slaves to sin no longer" (Romans 6:6). Therefore, we are now all "alive for God in Christ Jesus" (6:11). But if we are

indeed new creatures in Christ, freed of sin, we must act in accordance with our status. And yet we do in fact sin. We act against who we are and against the God who is within us: "What happens is that I do, not the good I will to do, but the evil I do not intend" (7:19). Our inner selves want to follow the way of the spirit, but our outer selves are still pulled by the flesh. The Spirit has already been given to us as "first fruits" of the new creation, of the redemption of our bodies (8:23). The Spirit helps us in our weakness and makes intercession for us (8:26). "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (8:31). Therefore, Paul is not conceding here the inevitability of sin, only the permanent state of conflict which characterizes human existence: conflict between the spirit and the flesh. We need not be defeated. We can achieve victory in Christ. His Spirit has taken possession of us.

Freedom and Responsibility

The spirit-flesh conflict raises the larger theological question of freedom and responsibility. It is important to note, first, what freedom is *not*. It is not a faculty alongside other faculties (e.g., intellect, will) by which a person decides to do this or that. Freedom enters into the very definition of what it means to be human. To be free is to be present to oneself, to be in possession of oneself, to be conscious of oneself as a distinct, responsible being. Freedom does not so much allow us to *do something* as to *be someone*.

Such freedom, however, is not absolute. Only God is absolutely free, i.e., fully and perfecting self-possessive and responsible. Human freedom is *limited* from without and from within. *From without* our self-possession is qualified by our situatedness in history. Since the world is "mediated by meaning" (Lonergan), our very self-understanding and, therefore, our very freedom are shaped by the meanings which are mediated through our experience (e.g., what our parents tell us we are, what our friends and relatives and neighbors tell us, what society tells us, how our institutions, including the Church, define us, what our economic and social status discloses to us). Our freedom is also limited from without by various natural and physical realities and events—i.e.,

by the sheer facticity of worldly existence. *From within* our freedom is qualified by the fact that we can never be fully present to ourselves. There is a psychic universe, a portion of which Freud and others have only recently discovered, which remains hidden from our consciousness and yet influences profoundly our awareness, our vision, and our sense of personal responsibility.

Freedom, therefore, is *the relatively limited capacity to decide who we shall be*. It is not something that is active only from time to time, such as at the moment of a choice or decision. Freedom is permanently operative. It governs our whole being all the time. Such freedom is not an immediate datum of our experience. We cannot see it or readily identify it by testing. Nor is freedom (to use Karl Rahner's analogy) like a knife which always remains the same in its capacity for cutting, and in cutting always remains the same knife. Freedom is not simply an instrument for meeting specific needs of choice. It is that fundamental capacity for making a final and irrevocable choice to *be* someone, to be a particular kind of human being. In that sense, freedom is the capacity for the eternal, for God. It is that which allows us to orient ourselves beyond ourselves, to recognize who we are ultimately and to shape our entire life (not just this or that individual act) according to that new self-consciousness of who we are in the presence of God.

And this is precisely what contemporary Catholic moral theologians such as Joseph Fuchs and others mean by the "*fundamental option*." In being truly converted to the Kingdom of God, everything we do assumes its direction, purpose, and meaning in light of the Kingdom, i.e., in light of God's will. This does not rule out the possibility, indeed the probability, that we shall occasionally act against this fundamental choice for God. But only a fundamental reversal of that choice (what the traditional textbooks called *aversio a Deo*, a "turning away from God") is sufficient to cancel out the original decision to understand oneself in relation to God and to orient one's whole life in view of that new self-understanding. In other words, no single act by itself is sufficient to merit eternal punishment in hell unless that act is of sufficient depth and magnitude to constitute a fundamental repeal of the conversion experience. Only a *mortal sin*, Thomas Aquinas wrote, truly deserves the name "sin" (*Summa Theologica* I-II,

q. 88, a. 1). So rare an occurrence should that be in the case of one who is sincerely oriented to God that for the first several centuries the Church expected its members to have recourse to the sacrament of Reconciliation no more than once in their entire lifetimes, if that often! (See chapter 22 on the sacrament of Penance.)

Freedom, then, is a *transcendental* capacity (see chapters 4 and 5 on Transcendental Thomism's understanding of human existence). It is a capacity which allows a person to go beyond himself or herself, to become something other than he or she is, and not simply to do this or avoid that. But because it *is* a transcendental capacity, we can never be directly conscious of it. We acknowledged earlier (in chapter 5) that it is impossible for us to answer completely the question "Who are we?" because we are at one and the same time the questioner and the one questioned. Only God has a view of human existence which is objective and comprehensive. Indeed, as soon as we begin reflecting on our freedom we are already exercising it. We experience ourselves as free, but there is no scientific way of verifying our freedom as we verify, for example, the existence of the lungs or the kidneys. We argue to freedom not only on the basis of our experience, which in any case can be distorted by external and internal forces, but on the basis of the implications of its denial. *If we are not free, we are not responsible. And if we are not responsible, human existence is reduced to mechanical existence.* Without freedom and responsibility there is no love, no faith, no hope, no trust, no compassion, no friendship, no justice. Everything is calculated, predetermined, subject only to accident and/or *mis*calculation.

In summary, in our original, transcendental experience of ourselves as *subjects*, i.e., as distinct, conscious, interrelating, free persons, we know who we are. But we can never objectify with absolute certainty what we know. We know more of ourselves than we can say. No statement, no formulation can ever capture fully what we experience of ourselves as selves, no more than we can adequately report to another the beauty of a symphony, the powerful impact of a speaker, or the horror of an accident. We are at once present to ourselves and distant from ourselves. We are *present* to ourselves in that we are who we are and that we alone are directly conscious of who we are. But we are also *distant* from

ourselves in that even our self-knowledge is impaired by factors and forces outside and inside ourselves.

The Capacity for Sin

Freedom is the capacity to say either "Yes" or "No" to God, i.e., to see ourselves either as having ultimate worth because we are alive by a principle which transcends us, or, on the other hand, to see ourselves as merely a constellation and network of biological responses and of psychological and sociological conditioning. Evidence (not overwhelming proof) of our capacity to say "Yes" to God appears in various acts of heroism and of extraordinary generosity where self-interest is clearly subordinated to the interests of others. One need only reflect on the obscenity of Auschwitz and Buchenwald to find similar evidence of our radical capacity to say "No" to God.

On the other hand, we can never point to a particular moment or act in our lives and say that precisely here and not somewhere else we made a fundamental and irrevocable choice for or against God. Whether our lives are oriented toward God or away from God can be judged only on the basis of the totality of our lives, not on the basis of a totaling up virtuous acts and sinful acts and then figuring the difference. Nor are we saying that the possibility of a "No" to God is about the same as that of a "Yes." *Although the Church has always taught that we have the capacity to reject God fundamentally (mortal sin), it has never taught that there are, in fact, persons in hell.* Insofar as Sacred Scripture describes the miseries of eternal punishment, it presents them as possibilities of human life and as instructions about the absolute seriousness of our moral decisions.

Furthermore, *we can never be certain that we have finally and fully said "No" to God, even in an act which appears on the surface to be of such a kind.* We cannot say with certitude to what extent outside and inside forces manipulated us, because that is never obvious to superficial examination. "We can never know with ultimate certainty whether we are sinners. But although it can be suppressed, we do know with ultimate certainty that we really *can* be sinners, even when our bourgeois everyday life and our own

reflexive manipulation of our motives appear to give us very good grades" (Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 104).

What is to be said, finally, of *God's sovereignty*? If we have the capacity to say a final and definitive "No" to God, does not that limit God's power over us? It is God who created us as free beings and who willed and established our freedom. Subjectivity, therefore, must exist without limiting the sovereignty of God. If that seems too simple, consider the alternatives: (a) we are not free, and, therefore, not really human; or (b) God is essentially limited, and, therefore, not really God.

Mortal, Serious, and Venial Sin

As we reflect on our own lives and on the lives of others (the latter is usually the easier task), we recognize that those lives are marked by ambiguity and inconsistency. No one is perfectly good all the time, nor absolutely evil all the time. There is good and bad in everyone, it would appear. This indicates, first, that our fundamental option does not insure uniformity of behavior. It also indicates, secondly, that there are forces which impede our intended course of action. Why this should be so, we can never say. *That* this is so, we know all too well. This condition derives from what we know as *Original Sin*.

Venial sin is a human act which is not fully human, i.e., not fully consistent with our fundamental orientation toward God. In venial sin there is a genuine decision to do this or that *action*, but there is no decision to become this or that sort of *person*. In venial sin a person chooses to do a particular deed, but he or she also wants even more deeply to be the kind of person who stands opposed to the deed. In every venial sin, therefore, there is a contradiction between the act and the person doing the act.

Venial sin admits of *degrees* of seriousness. Some actions are objectively more serious violations of the Gospel than others. Some sinful motives are more clearly defined than others. Some circumstances make an attitude or a deed more serious than others. *Serious sin*, therefore, is even more inconsistent with the Gospel than is venial sin. But serious sin is not the same as mortal sin. Missing Mass on Sunday is an example of a serious sin.

Mortal sin is an act which fully engages the person. The person chooses not only the act but also the kind of person he or she wants to be or become in and through the act. An older view in moral theology assumed that the commission of every objectively serious act involved or engaged the fundamental option; in other words, it held that every *serious sin* is a *mortal* sin. That is, if (1) an act was seriously sinful, and (2) a person knew it was seriously sinful, and (3) freely consented to it nonetheless, it was a mortal sin.

The insights of both psychology and sociology compel us to revise that assumption. If these actions were always mortally sinful under these three conditions, and if those who committed them had frequent recourse to the sacrament of Penance throughout their lives, then we are left with the conclusion that many people are constantly changing their very self-definition. Is it conceivable that a person could define himself or herself as someone oriented toward God, then repudiate that definition one Sunday morning by deciding against attending Mass in order to watch a sports event, and then reassert that definition in Confession a few hours or a few days later? To suggest this, some moral theologians are saying, is to undermine our very dignity and to cheapen us as persons.

But is this approach really so much opposed even to traditional (i.e., medieval and post-Tridentine) moral theology? Even that theology insisted that every moral act has to be evaluated in terms of *object, end,* and *circumstances*. First, you have to see if, in fact, it is the kind of act that might engage a person's fundamental relationship with God—e.g., murder. Secondly, you have to attend to the purpose, intention, or motive of the agent; e.g., Did X shoot Y in order to protect the life of Z? Thirdly, you have to consider all of the cirsumtances; e.g., Was the killer acting under hypnosis, or had he or she just suffered a traumatic experience? By bringing together the act, the motive, and the circumstances, the traditional theology also brought together subjective and objective morality.

On the other hand, this *three-source theory* may also have confused the two realms of objective and subjective morality. When asked which of the three sources was the most important,

some moralists would answer, "The first, the deed itself." But sin is always in the *will*. The primary determinant of morality must be the *motive*, not the act itself. Indeed, some would say that motive is the *only* determinant insofar as morality is not a matter of deeds but of persons acting as persons. To be moral is to be true to oneself, to be seeking always to *be* the one who responds to the call of God and to *act* in ways consistent with that vocation. To be immoral is to refuse to *be* that kind of person, and therefore to refuse to act in ways consistent with that being.

While it is true that some traditional moralists exaggerated the objective morality of the act, traditional moral theology in general has never divorced the act from the other two subjective factors in the three-source principle. Thus, even though the stealing of a loaf of bread might be a "small matter" (*parvitas materiae*), it could become a grave matter (*gravitas materiae*) if the person one stole it from was at the point of starvation. Accordingly, the three traditional questions we might put to ourselves regarding the morality of particular acts still have value: (1) How serious was the act I performed or failed to perform? (2) What was my motive, as far as I can reasonably determine? (3) What were the circumstances surrounding my decision to do what I did, and how did those circumstances affect my decision?

Capital Sins

Some sins are so deeply rooted in our fallen human nature that they are the source of other, related lapses. These are known as the seven capital sins: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. They are discussed again below, in connection with the moral virtues. Thus, anger and sloth are sins against the cardinal virtue of fortitude, lust and gluttony against the cardinal virtue of temperance, and so forth. (See Henry Fairlee, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, Washington, D.C.: New Republic Books, 1978.)

Conversion

A Christian is not only a radically social human person in whom God is present in grace and who is, at the same time, prone to acting against the divine presence. A Christian is also a person who has moved to a different level of human consciousness. The Christian is one who believes in Jesus Christ and whose whole life is shaped by that belief. The process by which the human person moves to that level of consciousness is called *conversion*. More precisely, it is *Christian* conversion, since conversion to God is an invitation and a possibility for every human being.

In the previous chapter we focused on the element of conversion in the preaching of Jesus (Mark 1:15) and of the early Church (Acts of the Apostles 2:38). It was a call to repentance and belief, to a change of mind, or consciousness, and to a new mode of behavior in keeping with that change of mind. The New Testament, therefore, says that we are to live according to the demands of the Kingdom of God. We are to make God the center and source of our being. We are to allow ourselves to be transformed by the redemptive, healing presence of God and then to allow God to continue to work through us to redeem and heal others and the whole world, enemies as well as friends, the outcasts as well as the respectable, the poor as well as the rich, sinners as well as the righteous.

This, of course, is a broader and more profound understanding of conversion than was traditionally proposed since the Council of Trent, with its necessary emphasis on the intellectual and objective character of faith. To be converted was to accept divine revelation as authoritatively presented by the Church. A "convert" was a non-Catholic who had become a Catholic. The determining feature of conversion, therefore, was ecclesiological, not Christological or anthropological. It had to do, primarily, that is, with one's new relationship to the Catholic Church rather than with one's new self-understanding in relationship to God and/or to Jesus Christ.

To use Bernard Lonergan's terms (*Method in Theology*, New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), conversion means shifting horizons. For Lonergan, an *horizon* is that which circumscribes or sets