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S I N

BY REV. JOHN B. HARNEY, CSP

FROM its earliest days to this hour the human race has been constantly afflicted by sin. Of the fifteen, or twenty, or thirty billion descendants of Adam and Eve, nobody can closely estimate their number, only two totally escaped its deadly infection: Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and Mary, His Immaculate Mother. Even they came *externally* within its reach and felt its withering blast, for it nailed Him to a cross; pierced her with a sword of grief; and brought physical death to both of them.

When sin made its bid for entrance into their lives our first parents knew exactly what it was, and also what made it fascinating to them. It was a direct challenge to God. He is the Creator of all things. Since He has made them they belong entirely to Him. He is in every way their Lord and Master. From the least to the greatest, from the most insignificant to the most wonderful they are absolutely bound to do exactly what He wishes in every conceivable situation, without hesitation or reluctance.

Of this obligation Adam and Eve were perfectly aware. Unlike the other living creatures around them they had been endowed with intellectual power; they knew how they had come into being, why they had been made and what their Creator expected of them. They knew also that He had bestowed on them the high prerogative and power of freedom; of deciding independently of all other beings, independently even of Himself. What use they would make of the material and physical world which He had placed under their do-

minion. But in giving them that power He had not surrendered His own Supreme Authority. They were still accountable to Him, and knew that spiritual death would be the penalty of disobedience.

The craft of Satan, described as a serpent in the inspired record of those events, proved to be their undoing. Thrown out of heaven when he, with many followers defied his Maker, he persuaded Eve that she and Adam would become as gods, knowing good and evil, if they would eat the one fruit which God had forbidden them to touch. Fascinated by that alluring prospect, she plucked and ate, and gave of it to Adam who also ate.

That was the first human sin. A man and a woman, in full possession of all their glorious faculties and powers, made in the very image and likeness of God, as yet untarnished and unweakened, *freely chose* to disbelieve their Maker and to trust the father of lies. From the beginning to the end it was their own doing, their own decision, their own choice. Satan had played a part. It was the part of a liar, a trickster, a seducer. That was all that he could do. He could not put the least pressure on them. They could have sent him and all his cohorts hurtling back into hell as swiftly as Michael and his angels had flung them out of heaven. But they decided to cast their lot with him, and thereby made him a potentate and prince in this world. Now, our "adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion goeth about seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter v. 8).

Man Defies His Maker

All human sin is akin to that of Adam and Eve. It is the work of each individual sinner. It is his own free, deliberate choice to disobey God; to think, to desire, to say, or to do something that he considers contrary to the will of God. It is

a setting of himself against God; a turning of his back on God to follow his own inclinations.

Sometimes he may be told plainly by others that he has a wrong idea of what God wants. Sometimes their words may raise serious doubts in his mind. If he then says within himself: "I don't really know what is right or what God wants, but I will not bother myself about it for I know what I want and that settles the whole business for me," then he has sinned flagrantly even if his subsequent words and deeds have been precisely what God really wished. He has sinned because he was ready, willing and determined to disregard God at any cost. It was only by accident that he happened to do God's will.

Hence sin is not a visible, tangible, physical, or material reality, however frequently or intimately it may be bound up with what can be seen, or heard, or felt. It is not chiefly the external act of theft, or adultery, or murder, or any other evil deed that a man may do, but it is the immaterial act of his will by which he freely chooses and determines to do something that he knows or fully believes to be contrary to the law of God. So surely and plainly is this the case, that if one bent on a sinful deed, is compelled by circumstance beyond his control, such as the sudden appearance of a policeman, to forego the execution of his evil design, he has none the less incurred the full guilt of his original intention. That is the case also with one who belatedly, but spontaneously abandons his wicked desire, no matter why he quits. Our Lord's words leave no room for doubt. "I say to you that whosoever looks on a woman to lust after her hath already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. v. 28). The core of sin is in the heart of him who wills it, not in any physical action by which he makes it manifest. Its external completion is but its husk and shell, adding little more than intensity as a rule to its wickedness.

This Thing Called Sin

Sin has been rightly defined as a free, i. e., a deliberate transgression or violation of a divine law. Saint Augustine, with whom Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor, fully agrees, has defined it as a deed, or word, or desire against the Eternal Law. This definition is quite accurate and complete. However, it must not be interpreted in a rigidly narrow sense, as if it says or means that nothing is to be considered a sin unless it has been *explicitly* prohibited by God, or is manifestly a violation of some duty which He has clearly and *positively* enjoined. God has not given us many laws *directly* and *personally*. He has indeed inscribed a few basic principles of conduct in our very nature. Thoughtful men are agreed on that. But they do not go together very far in their analysis of those principles which we call the Natural Law. Their reasonings lead to disputes and uncertainty. Therefore, God made a revelation of His mind and will, chiefly through Moses, the great law-giver. The Ten Commandments which he brought down from Sinai to the chosen people are to this day, and will be perpetually the chief divine standards of right and wrong. Since their implications are not obvious nor easily perceived, God has provided us with further enlightenment and instruction. Our Lord Jesus Christ did that in person while He was on earth. He provided wisely and effectively for its continuance thereafter through His infallible Church, the interpreter and vindicator of all divine laws.

All Subject to Authority

The legitimate holders of civil power in kingdoms, empires, and republics also have legislative authority. Their enactments bind the consciences of their subjects, except when they conflict with laws decreed by higher and more sacred legislators, or are plainly violative of either divine or human rights.

The basic truth which underlies this teaching is that all authority is from God. "Let every soul be subject to higher powers. For there is no power except from God; and those that are ordained of God. Therefore he that resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God. And they that resist purchase to themselves damnation" (Romans xiii. 1-2). These words of Saint Paul make it clear that there is the taint of sin in all wilful violations of the reasonable and just decrees of those who have legitimate authority.

The multiplicity of laws, rules and regulations which have emanated from these varied holders of authority, and therefore indirectly at least from God, convincingly shows that they are not of equal importance and gravity. Even when reasonable and fair, many are trivial. Apart from this observation they will not be mentioned in this pamphlet. It will deal only with violations of divinely given laws.

Some are exceedingly grave. We call their violation *mortal*, deadly, because they inflict spiritual death, the loss of God's grace, on those who commit them. Some are comparatively slight. They do not drive the grace of God out of those who commit them, but only lessen and slow down its operation. Therefore, we call them *venial*; easily expiated, condoned, forgiven.

Human Actions Against God

The gravest of all sins are plainly those which assail God directly and personally: denial of His existence, of His goodness, of His justice; His love; worship of false gods; persistent resistance to His known teaching and will; attribution of the evident miracles of Jesus Christ to the devil; blasphemous speech against God; presumption; despair; obstinacy in sin; impenitence even to the end of one's life.

Less grave, but still deadly, are the numberless offenses that men commit against their fellow men. They are *sins—offenses against God*. He has made us. He loves us. We belong to Him. He takes care of us. The laws which He has laid down for us are not merely for His own honor and glory; they are also for our protection, and for the preservation of all the rights, gifts, privileges, and possessions which He bestows on us through the entire course of our earthly life. Seven of the Ten Commandments which He gave through Moses on Sinai are plainly and directly for the maintenance and vindication of these rights.

Sin Differs from Sin in Gravity

The wilful violation of any one of them is a grave sin. Yet in these violations there are different degrees of gravity, corresponding to the rights involved. A man's physical life is of more value to him than his reputation; his good name more than his purse. Hence the wilful destruction of human life is the deadliest sin of man against his fellow man. Murder, infanticide, abortion, so called "mercy killing," and also *contraception* are all grave violations of God's law: "Thou shalt not kill." That contraception should be thus branded and condemned is not evident at first sight. One may ask in puzzlement or scorn: "How can life be destroyed where there is no life? Where life has simply been headed off? Made impossible?" A moment's clear thinking provides the answer. The seed that was spilt on the ground, that was blocked off from its rightful destination, or was destroyed by a drug, was not a *dead* but a *living thing*. True, it was only a germ, but it was a germ of human life, and therefore should not have been wantonly wasted. "Thou shalt not kill" says No to that.

All these and many more sins are called *mortal* because they are, and all normal men know that they are seriously

contrary to the will of God. They entail immediately the loss of His favor and friendship, i. e. spiritual death. They are analagous in their nature and consequences to those human diseases and injuries which ordinarily result in physical death.

Judgment of Christ on Sin

That some sins are of this character is clearly the teaching of Jesus Christ. In His description of the Great Judgment to which all men will be summoned at the end of this world, He tells us that He will separate them as a shepherd separates his sheep and goats; the sheep on His right, the goats on His left. Those on the right, He will welcome, praise, and reward with everlasting life. Those on the left, He will banish, condemn and punish. "Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, which was prepared for the devils and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me not to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me not to drink. I was a stranger and you took me not in; naked and you covered me not; sick and in prison, and you did not visit me." They will protest that they never treated Him so heartlessly. But He will reply: "Amen I say to you, as long as you did it not to one of these least, neither did you do it to me. And these" he added "shall go into everlasting punishment" (Matt. xxv. 41-6).

Plainly our Lord looked on sins of indifference and heartlessness toward our needy brethren as grave and deadly violations of His second great commandment: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." They are not, however, the only sins that cause spiritual death. That is made clear in many passages of Holy Scripture, especially in the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians: "Know you not that the unjust shall not possess the kingdom of God? Do not err; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor the effeminate, nor liers with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunk-

ards, nor railers, nor extortioners shall possess the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. vi. 9-10). Surely those sins are grave and deadly which shut men out of God's kingdom.

To have a clear and accurate realization of what constitutes a mortal sin we must consider carefully much more than the deed, the words, or the desires which are objectively against the law of God. The individuals against whom they seem to stand are not always accountable or responsible for them in the same measure and degree. That is obvious and is universally admitted in the case of those apparent culprits who are insane or are plainly delirious at the time that they say or do what is objectively reprehensible. It is also quite certain that many other people who seem to be normal are at times partially or even wholly irresponsible for various misdeeds done while they were hardly more than half conscious, or were laboring under some serious mental handicap. It is always difficult to estimate the extent, the importance, and the actual value of those extenuating circumstances. Happily, it is rarely our duty to do that for others. We can and must do it for ourselves. We know all the facts. One principle, however, must always be kept clearly in mind. It is this. No man does or can commit a mortal sin unless he *knows*, or *strongly suspects* that the contemplated action is mortally sinful, and yet decides to do it. To act while uncertain on that point is to sin gravely.

Man's Higher Faculties Involved in Sin

It has already been indicated that there can be no question of sin unless one's intellect and one's will are both involved in the act under consideration. Those two spiritual powers are separate and distinct faculties of our souls, with wholly different objectives and functions. They are, however, very intimately related. Neither can carry on, even momentarily

without the other. Of these two, the intellect is always the first to act, for the will is a blind, unseeing faculty. Its function is to choose, to decide, to determine. It cannot inaugurate any activity of the soul or of the body, but must wait until a signal of one sort or another has been given to the intellect. That signal may come from outside the man, a ray of light, a noise, a spoken word. It may come from within him, the twitching of a nerve, the stirring of an appetite, a recollection, a dream. It may be clear or vague, strong or weak, but it must be at least enough to make an impression on the intellect; otherwise, the will cannot come into play. But once that signal has been perceived, however faintly, the will springs into action and thenceforth remains in charge of the intellect's subsequent activity. It is the will which ultimately decides whether men will act well or badly when confronted with a temptation to sin; the intellect merely tells them what to do. They can, of course, heed or ignore its judgment, for their wills are free and cannot be coerced, even when physical violence prevents the fulfillment of their choice.

Our intellects do not always give our wills right and sound advice. Quite frequently they approve what is wrong and evil. Occasionally they condemn what is right and good. In either case they play a part in every decision of the will, for while it is free, and is able to throw aside even the soundest of intellectual judgments, it does not, nor can it choose what is wholly evil in every way and from every point of view, but only what is set before it as good and desirable in some way. Thus every man knows that it is evil to kill an innocent, unoffending neighbor, but when that neighbor is standing squarely and immovably in the way of another man's thirst for power or wealth, it may seem good and necessary to a Hitler, a Stalin, or some other gangster to get rid of him.

Factors Influencing Human Conduct

There are two chief reasons why men often give wrong answers to questions about the moral character of various desires, words, and actions. The first is *ignorance*; the second *inadvertence*. These are very different intellectual handicaps, and must therefore be examined separately, though in the long run they generally lead to practically identical results.

Since contradictory answers are given to those questions it is obvious that some people are ignorant of the truth on those points. That ignorance is the fact with which we are dealing. We are not trying to determine what answers are right or wrong; which men are ignorant or well informed. We are concerned only with the bare, bald fact of ignorance, and are asking only one question about it. Is it a valid excuse for any man's intrinsically wrong desires, words, and deeds? In what circumstances? To what extent? Under what conditions?

They Know What They Do

We are, of course, assuming two facts about the man in question. First, that his conduct is intrinsically wrong, contrary to the mind and will of God. Secondly, that he does not know his conduct is wrong. Note well that it is not a question of his knowing how and why his conduct is wrong. Rank ignorance on that point is, or may be, fully in keeping with sure knowledge that he is acting against the law of God. We are assuming, unequivocally, that he does not know his conduct is wrong. We ask: Is his ignorance always or ever a valid excuse for his misdeeds?

Since we are thinking of a normal man, with average intelligence, we cannot answer that question with an unqualified yes or no. The right answer is sometimes a very positive no;

at other times a hesitant yes. There are, for example, some truths about God—that He exists; that He is the Maker; the Lord, the Supreme Master of heaven and earth; the Rewarder of good and Punisher of evil; which no man can honestly question, doubt, or deny. Even the untutored Iroquois knew them—yet there are hundreds of the mental calibre of Ingersoll who do deny them, who mock and ridicule the Almighty God. We have an Atheist League in the United States.

There are moral laws: Thou shalt not kill—Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor—of whose holiness and binding force no man can be honestly ignorant. Yet they are violated day in and day out, not only by men who are universally detested as criminal, but by men who assume the air and wear the garb of Godliness. They are ignorant? Yes! But is it to the point of finding therein a valid excuse for their deviltry?

Ignorance, especially of basic religious truths and moral principles, is plainly not an excuse for many of the gravest sins. When it is presented in extenuation of patent wrongdoing we must therefore inquire into its character and origin. Is it real? Or is it a pretence—a sham? If it is a sham, it must be thrown out of consideration. It is worse than useless, for it is also a hypocritical lie. If it is real, it must be investigated. How is it that the man is ignorant in those matters? He has excellent brain power. He is well-informed on other subjects that call for closer study and reasoning—for example the good and the evil in our capitalistic and industrial system. Why is he so ill-informed, so dull, so wrong-headed in matters that concern his conscience, the morality of his desires and actions? Is his ignorance due to a native feebleness of intellect? to an unavoidable lack of sound education? to a faulty, perverse education imparted by teachers whom he trusted implicitly, but unwisely? Or was it due to his own

indifference? to his wilful neglect of notable opportunities to secure accurate instruction and enlightenment? to a half hidden wish not to know the truth, not to be sure of it? A score, a hundred questions along these lines must often be asked and answered correctly if one is to discover whether the ignorance by which the moral judgments of many men are thrown out of harmony with the mind and will of God, will serve them as a shield against punishment for offenses which better informed men know are gravely against the laws of God. One thing is quite certain in this connection. The ignorance of a man who could easily have known the truth, who should have known it, who deliberately neglected or refused to become acquainted with it, is not an excuse for his misdeeds.

Happily it is not for any among us to form definite judgments about any man except ourselves. The demand of Christ is clear and all-embracing: "Judge not, that you may not be judged. For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged, and with what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you again" (Matt. vii. 1-2).

Ignorance of the Law Does Excuse

We may, however, and we must take into account various truths and principles which have a clear bearing on the validity and value of the excuse often urged in extenuation of an evident misdeed: "I did not know that it was wrong." Consider a few: sexual relations in what have been smugly called "trial" or "companionate" marriages; the prevention of conception by contraceptive practices, medicines, and instruments; seriously intended consultation of fortune-tellers, seers and astrologists; advocacy of "mercy killings." All these (and, of course, many more evil deeds) are objectively grave, deadly violations of one or another Divine law. But hundreds, thousands, and even millions of men and women think other-

wise. They confidently, plausibly, and at times even eloquently advocate now one, now another of those false opinions; and, as occasion arises, act in accordance with their erroneous convictions. A large number of these people undoubtedly know better; are in bad faith. They do not concern us here and now. But many more are just as surely *honest* and *sincere*. They are *truly* ignorant. What is to be thought and said of their ignorance? Is it chargeable against them? Are they in any degree responsible for it?

The right answer is *no*. Though these people may be of more than average ability and education, may be college or university graduates, may have achieved distinction in some field of intellectual activity, those false judgments are wholly without guile or guilt. In that point they are not culprits, but victims of misinformation. No matter how far wrong they go in thought or conduct they are not conscious violators of the law of God. Until a man does violate that law freely and deliberately he is without sin. He is akin to Saint Paul, who while still Saul the Pharisee, persecuted Jesus Christ in His faithful followers (Acts ix. 1-2), thinking like many other persecutors that he was rendering a service to God.

The Fog in Human Thought

As *blameless* ignorance cancels responsibility for intrinsically evil desires, words, and deeds, so also does a lack of advertence to their real character. In this ignorance and in advertence are alike. The latter may be aptly described as temporary, transient ignorance. It is a much more widespread evil. For the hundred who do not know right from wrong in many matters, there are a thousand who know but do not stop to think. They go blithely on their way; thinking, saying, desiring, doing many wrong things, often leaving a ghastly trail of ruin in their wake, but almost wholly unconscious of

the harm they have done to others, and only dimly if at all aware of their sinfulness.

The frequent failure of many men to advert to the wrongfulness of much that they say and do, can be due to many different factors. A man, at times, is only half awake. His mind may also have been blurred by overindulgence in strong drink. It may have been dulled or coarsened by his associations and friendships. It may have been half-paralyzed by some upsetting experience. Whatever the occasion or cause of his inadvertence to the sinful character of his behavior, while that inadvertence lasts, it diminishes, and may even be complete enough to wholly absolve a man of responsibility, though somewhat akin to ignorance in that regard, it is greatly different in duration. Ignorance is usually long-lived. As a rule, it can be dissipated only by painfully arduous study or reflection. Even then it is often incurable. Inadvertence, on the contrary, is rarely more than a matter of minutes. A single flash of perception can break its spell. Peter, all unmanned by fear, cursing and swearing falsely, was snapped out of his folly by a single glance of his Master's eye. Full responsibility caught hold of him *instantly*. That is also the case with every man whose misconduct is due in some degree to inadvertence—a temporary intellectual blindness. Realization begets responsibility. If he then deliberately goes through with what he began thoughtlessly, the thunderbolt of guilt strikes him.

Culpability Diminished But Not Destroyed

We, of course, do not know when or to what extent any man's *ignorance* or *inadvertence* comes into play, lessening or wiping out his guilt, when he is engaged in some wrong-doing. But God does know, and gives full weight to those extenuating circumstances. Sometimes we say, in the stumbling inadequacy of our thought and speech, that *God makes allowance* for our

innumerable handicaps and weaknesses. Other men boldly say that God, with human sin flaunting itself shamelessly before Him simply *ignores* it, does not impute it to those whom He wishes to save or has predestined to eternal joy and glory. That is an article of faith for one of the great Protestant creeds.

There is no truth in this blatant assertion that God is indifferent to some sins. He sees all things as they are; He judges them as they are. He does not actually make *allowance* for our ignorance, our dullnesses, our stupidity, our weakness, or any other of our manifold shortcomings and handicaps, but simply takes them all into consideration and gives them all their full weight, whether they be for or against us. His judgment is infinitely right, holy, just; a flawless mirror of His inconceivable perfection. He does not arbitrarily minimize any sin that still mocks Him; He does not refuse to *impute* sin to any soul in which sin remains unrepented and therefore unforgiven.

God's Judgment Is Unerring

Since God is infinitely perfect, we know that He does not pass one unvaried judgment on all human sins. We ourselves see that there are great differences between them; between the anger that prompts a man to commit a cold-blooded murder and the anger that stops with a hasty word of complaint; between a lie by which a man deliberately blasts another's reputation beyond cure or reparation and a harmless lie by which a schoolboy hopes to escape a scolding. All men perceive such differences, at least vaguely. What men see dimly, God sees unerringly. On that ground rests the distinction between *mortal* and *venial* sins—a distinction of tremendous importance.

Some, as we have already seen, assail God personally, directly, unmistakably, unequivocally. For all but congenital

idiots, those are always deadly sins. Some assail one or another of our fellow men, depriving, or striving to deprive him of essential and valuable rights—to his life, to his good name, to his temporal possessions.

Those also are by nature mortal sins. They entail the immediate loss of God's friendship, and ultimately, unless He forgives them, banishment from His kingdom. That He does forgive them though they be red as crimson (Isaias i. 18), on easy and generous terms, we shall see in a moment.

Limitations of Human Nature

But first it must be pointed out that many transgressions are not grave sins in His sight, though there is in them a falling-short of the perfection He desires. There are so many of these minor sins that it is best to mention only a few, preferably some of those which have been recorded in the New Testament for our instruction. The disciples of Christ showed annoyance with the importunities of the woman of Canaan who persistently begged our Lord to cure her daughter (Matt. xv. 22). They rebuked the little children who crowded around Him (Matt. xix. 13). They were quite indignant with James and John for trying surreptitiously to get the highest places in His kingdom (Matt. xx 24). They complained nastily of Mary Magdalen for having lavishly poured expensive ointment on His head, saying that she had wasted it and might better have sold it to help the poor (Matt. xxiv. 18). They were frightened out of their wits by a storm, though the Lord lay quietly asleep in the boat beside them (Matt. viii. 25). They ran away like scared rabbits from the mob that dragged Jesus out of the garden (Matt. xxvi. 56). The sons of Zebedee wanted to bring fire from heaven on the heads of inhospitable Samaritans (Luke ix. 54).

These actions were not mere imperfections—almost imperceptible flaws. One does not need a moral microscope to see that they were exhibitions of sinful dispositions and traits—impatience, irritability, resentment, veiled as well as open ambition, rash judgments, vindictiveness, timidity, cowardice. They were undoubtedly sinful, and had in them the seeds of very grave sins, but the gentleness with which our Lord corrected and rebuked them show that they were not really grave disorders. They were sins, but not deadly; because they were only slightly out of harmony with God's perfect will.

As a corollary we add that what is rightly said about them may be as justly said about innumerable short-comings, defects and faults which spot and stain the lives of almost all men. They are venial sins.

God Reads Secrets of Heart

Many other sins that are by nature grievously offensive to God, such as violent outbursts of anger and profanity, many rejections of Divine truth and violations of Divine laws, do not fall into the low pits of guilt because they are due in large measure to the fallibility of our intellects and to the inherited weakness of our wills which cannot quickly subdue insurgent passions. These handicaps of our higher natural powers have already been discussed in this pamphlet as fully as circumstances permit. Now, therefore, we can merely repeat the general principles which flow from a study of our own nature.

When a man who violates some grave law (or a dozen) is *truly unaware* of that fact, or *truly inadvertent* to it, (and is not answerable for his ignorance) then no matter what law he breaks he does not sin mortally.

God is infinitely wise. He cannot be deceived. He has a perfect comprehension of every man's abilities and limitations.

He knows how and why man's minds so often go astray; how and why their wills stumble, stagger, and collapse. God is also absolutely just. He has ever in mind even the most infinitesimal details in the life and the environment of each and every man. And He gives to each detail its exactly right and full value in His ineffably just judgments.

For this reason we know and say that He judges many of our sins far less severely than they are judged by other men. They have not been committed with that full knowledge and that full deliberation which are essential constituents of mortal sin.

The Greater the Knowledge, the Greater the Responsibility

In this connection, however, we must be very sharply on guard against two errors. The first is that of excusing, or minimizing our sins too readily on the score of ignorance. Quite frequently ignorance is an aggravation, rather than a diminution of guilt. A judge, for example, who has handed down an utterly wrong and harmful decision in a case of serious importance, cannot be excused on the ground that he was ignorant of legal principles and precedents which *plainly* called for a very different verdict. It was his business and his strict duty to have known these things. His ignorance was not a mere misfortune; it was an instance and a proof of criminal negligence.

In very much the same way many men who sin gravely will be without excuse even though they may be able to say truthfully that they did not know they were sinning, or at any rate did not know that their sins were grievous. This is more likely to be the case with Catholics than with any other group. The others, as a rule, do not know as well as Catholics the

difference between right and wrong in many problems with which they have to deal. This is not said in disparagement of their ability or their conscientiousness, but simply to state and face the facts. These people—I write of intelligent, well educated men and women who are also church going Protestants—are woefully ignorant of many vital truths, both doctrinal and moral. This is not astonishing, for they were given a false start in their religious life, and they have not yet made their way out of the labyrinthian errors into which they were thrust. Many, following blind leaders who yet wear an air of Godliness have plunged so deep into the mazes of falsehood that nothing less than a miracle of Divine grace will ever be able to bring them to a knowledge of truth and righteousness. For them, ignorance may well be a strong and valid excuse.

But for those who began life with the gift of Divine faith; who have had the priests of the Church as their teachers and guides; who have had within easy reach but have wilfully failed to make use of the absolutely sound, reliable, and even infallible means which God has graciously given them of separating the wholesome wheat of truth from the huge heaps of chaff which clutter this world, ignorance will rarely be a legitimate or acceptable excuse. Instead, it is almost always an aggravation of the guilt that is inherent in their violations of God's laws. For if they are ignorant of His will, it is usually because they have not wished, have not sought, have not tried to keep their minds in accord with His truth, nor their wills in harmony with His laws, but have preferred darkness to light and ignorance to knowledge. For such as these the plea: "I did not know" is worthless. For others who have broken His law in blameless ignorance, it is of high value.

The second error against which we must be on guard in this connection can be best presented by an illustration. A recent immigrant from Canada where the Epiphany is a Holy-

day of obligation, deliberately missed Mass on that day thought it a Holyday here, as it was in his own home town. Later somebody corrected that impression. "Then" he said with a smile of satisfaction, "I didn't commit any sin at all by missing Mass." His smile was premature. For he had thought *at the time* that he was sinning; he had done it deliberately; he had sinned gravely.

God's Remedy For Sin

There remain two questions for us to consider *here and now*. They are the most vital and crucial questions we can ever ask.

The first: What has God done to help us out of the morass of our sins—out of the wretchedness, the misery, the inconceivable agonies which are the due wages of sin? What is He doing now?

The second: What can we do for ourselves? What are we going to do?

Many men have been unable, many are still unable to answer those questions. Many have given, and many are still giving wild, fanciful, false answers.

The first has been answered; cleverly, vividly, reassuringly, by God Himself. The second has also been answered, but only in part, by the millions who have had their allotted span of earthly life; the rest of the answer will be given by each man, and it will be just what each man will choose.

God's answer to the challenge of sin was, and is, and will be forever, love and mercy. He did not give it in full, all at once, in one brilliant all revealing burst of light, but very, very slowly, at widely separated intervals.

Divine Plan For Redemption

First, God *promised* that a Redeemer would be sent to rescue man; only that, nothing more. He did not say, nor even hint when the Promised One would appear.

For a short while men believed that promise. But when He did not come quickly, they soon questioned, doubted, denied the promise, and mocked it by fashioning gods for themselves out of wood, and stone, and bronze. These gods they worshipped with ever varying rites; some merely empty, vain, ridiculous; others filthy, obscene, and bloody.

Centuries went by. The Promised One had not come. God had not spoken again. But He had not forgotten His promise, nor disowned it, nor let it be utterly forgotten by men. Though many more centuries of idolatry and wickedness were to pass before His arrival, God made preparations for His coming. He chose one race, one family to be His people. He gave them a long series of holy, inspired men to plant in them knowledge of Himself, the one only true God. In a large degree, but with many a wretched lapse into the idolatry of neighboring heathen nations, they treasured that knowledge, worshipped Him, and proclaimed His laws.

At last the promised Redeemer came. He was "the true light which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world. He was in the world, and the world was made by Him: But the world knew Him not. He came unto His own; and His own received Him not" (John i. 9-11).

God's Ways Are Not Man's

He was not such a Redeemer as they had desired and expected—a mighty warrior, driving their enemies before Him as a strong wind drives dust; setting up an earthly kingdom more

glorious than that of David. Therefore, they cried out that He was a blasphemer, an enemy of Caesar, that he must die. He let them have their way with Him. He died on a cross.

But not until He had done the work for which He had been promised and had come. He had redeemed mankind. He had blotted out the handwriting that stood against us. He had opened the door of heaven for us. He had given to us as many as receive Him power to be made the sons of God.

He is the One promised by God to Adam in the first hour of human sin. He is God's reply to the challenge of sin. A man, a son of David, conceived indeed by the Holy Ghost, but born of the Virgin Mary. A man who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; who descended into hell; rose again on the third day; ascended into heaven and now sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. A man, but also the only-begotten Son of God; God of God; Light of Light; true God of true God; full of grace and truth.

Christ Continues His Work

He is the answer, the full, complete, perfect answer to our question: "What has God done to help us out of the morass of our sins?" He is also the answer to our further question: "What is He doing now?" For though he no longer walks visibly among us, yet He lives and labors among us in many ways, especially through those whom He has chosen, appointed and empowered to act as His ambassadors, His teachers, the dispensers of His mysteries, His priests, His ministers of reconciliation. But why should we call to mind or mention all those through whom we have received gifts, graces, blessings? Whatever good has ever come to us has come from God. "Every best gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights." (Jas. i. 17). "In Him we live and move and are" (Acts xvii. 28). To Him, therefore,

above and before all others, we must give our grateful thanks for whatever saves us from sin, heals our self-inflicted wounds, and brings us homeward toward God.

Captains of Our Fate; Masters of Our Destiny

Our second question: What can we do for ourselves? What are we going to do? is no less important than our inquiry about God's plans and activities. It is far more difficult to answer. For this reason: the answer depends on ourselves, wholly and definitely—not on God. Just as it rested with each one of us individually in the moment of our first serious temptation, to decide whether we would stand or fall, so now that we have fallen, it rests with us to say whether we will lie prostrate or rise again. We cannot do that of ourselves alone, any more than one who has broken his legs and arms in a headlong plunge from the top of a high precipice can climb back to the top without help. But God pities us; offers us His help; even pleads with us to accept it. He does not force it on us. He cannot. He gave us freedom of will when He made us. Whether we use that freedom well or evilly, it is ours forever. We can say to Him, and many do say by word or deed, "Don't bother me. Get away from me. Leave me alone." God always hears us. And God always takes us at our last word to Him though it be one of shrieking defiance as we go *down, down, down* into the bottomless pit whose fires will never be extinguished.

Yes, it rests with us who have sinned grievously and are still in this world to decide what we will do about our own sins, and to decide thereby what God will do about them in the hour of our death and in the day of the Great Judgment.

Make no mistake. If you are a young man, healthy, strong, in the prime of life, do not say: "I have plenty of time for all that. I'm too busy now. By and by I'll straighten things

out; get them fixed up; settled." To such an one God said long ago: "Thou fool! this night do they require thy soul of thee" (Luke xii. 20).

Bygones Are Not Bygones

If you are an old man, do not say: "I cut my capers and sowed my wild oats long ago. Since then I've been a very decent citizen. I am highly honored and respected. God isn't concerned with what I did forty years ago. If He hasn't forgotten all that, He surely will let bygones be bygones."

Tricky, delusive, groundless fancies, all these and similar hopes. If you have not blotted out the deadly sins of your youth by genuine, heartfelt repentance, they still stand against you. You may have forgotten them; God has not. Nor will He ignore them.

But He will forgive them if you will do your part. "The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a contrite heart: and He will save the humble of spirit" (Psalm xxxiii. 14). These are the conditions of your pardon: you must be contrite; you must be humble. This much all Christians know, even those who have been half blinded by false teachers, This also true Jews know, for they have heard, and read, and believed the words of the Royal Psalmist. This may suffice for them; it may make clear to them the only means they have of becoming clean in the sight of God. But it is not enough for you. You have been taught clearly and more fully than they, what the Promised One, Jesus Christ, has done to save men from their sins.

Christ's Condition For Forgiveness

When He had convinced the Apostles on Easter night that He was alive, He said to them: "Peace be to you. As the

Father hath sent Me, I also send you." When He had said this He breathed on them, and He said to them: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained" (John xxi. 21-23).

Those words came from the lips of Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, the conqueror of sin and death, within a few hours after He had manifested His divine nature, power and authority. They are plainly to the point for all sinners. They show God's way to peace. He might have pardoned us, given us peace in many ways. This was the way He chose and determined, through those of our fellowmen to whom He has entrusted the ministry of reconciliation.

There is nothing strange in this way of acting. It is perfectly in line with God's providence. His innumerable gifts, graces, blessings come to each one of us through the visible things of His creation, usually through our fellowmen. Thus, also, we obtain pardon of our sins. But not without much cooperation on our part. The Apostles, and the priests of the Catholic Church who have inherited their ministerial powers must have both knowledge and discretion. They are not free to act on their whims and impulses, their likes or dislikes. They must know what is to be forgiven, not in a vague fashion which merely proposes riddles and invites guesses, but clearly, fully, specifically, exactly. They must know also the sinner's dispositions and intentions. The forgiving of sins usually involves the imposing of obligations on the sinner who asks for pardon—reparation of the harm and injury done to others; ways and means of avoiding relapses; penance for the contempt and ingratitude shown to God; evidence of the sinner's contrite and humble spirit. These things cannot be taken for granted. That is why one who has sinned must examine his conscience, be sorry for his sins, have a firm purpose of amend-

ment, confess his sins truthfully to a priest, and accept the penance imposed on him.

Boundless Mercy of God

Occasionally one who has sinned deeply has neither time nor opportunity to comply with all these requirements. Death may come too swiftly. Still, if there be in his heart when it does strike, enough love of God to make him truly sorry for having offended Him, his soul will be safe. God will take the will for the deed.

This is a brief outline of what those who have committed mortal sins must do to make their peace with God. The terms are easy, gentle, compassionate, infinitely less rigorous than our deeply wounded Maker might have justly laid down. Think and see how light they are. An honest confession of our sins, with true, but possibly far from perfect, sorrow and purpose of amendment; to a duly authorized priest, who must die and will die manfully rather than betray us. Could God find a kinder, more considerate way of enabling us to step out of the muck and mire of our sins into the clean sunshine of His favor?

Some have fancied and have said that there is another way. They have not been so empty headed as to think that God forgets sins. Even they know that He does not forget; that He cannot forget. Forgetfulness is a proof of weakness, not of strength. So they have said that in the case of some very stout sinners, who have sinned day and night for years, God simply does not *impute* their sins to *them*. It is not that he is unaware of those sins. No! He knows them and sees them in all their filthiness, brutality, viciousness, and brazen effrontery. But because He has predestined those favored men to heaven, He meets them, as death ushers them one by one into His holy presence, saying: "Well done, good and faithful

servant" (of lust, of thievery, of drunkenness, of murder, of blasphemy) "enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." (Who hates iniquity and all the works of iniquity). What blasphemous folly!

These obligations, self examination, contrition, purpose of amendment, confession, and performance of penitential works, are not necessary for the pardoning of merely venial sins. As we have seen they do not offend God gravely, though they displease Him. Either they are trifling in themselves, a bit of exaggeration in telling a story, somewhat excessive hilarity over a joke, momentary distractions in prayer, dawdling over the fulfilment of a duty, or, if more serious, they are transgressions that have been committed without that knowledge and deliberation which would make one fully responsible for them. Obviously, however, since there is in them some deordination, that must be rectified. No soul that is spotted or stained with sin, however slightly, will be admitted into heaven until those blemishes have been removed by good works, by patient endurance of earthly trials, tribulations, and sufferings, or by the purging fire of purgatory.

All Sin Offends God

These considerations should prompt us, they should even drive us as they drove the saints, to watch and pray that we may not be led, nor fall into temptation. Yet many make light of venial sins, forgetting that although they are venial they still displease God. How wrong! How unwise! How dangerous! They may think that they are playing a game with the devil, tricking, fooling, beating him. Have they never heard that one who sups with Satan must have a long spoon? Often it is shorter than one thinks; then it is the devil who laughs.

We are thinking and speaking of intentional, deliberate venial sins. One who commits them, especially one who com-

mits them frequently, is on slippery, treacherous ground. The dead line of mortal sin is not far away. One miscalculation, by even a hair's breath, one has wounded one's self mortally. Instead therefore of trying to see how close one can come to the edge of the precipice without falling over, how much one "can get away with" in safety, one should carefully and prayerfully keep away as far as possible from peril. "He that loveth danger, shall perish in it" (Ecclesiasticus iii. 27).

Indulgence in venial sins leads almost inevitably to deadly sins. It dulls our perception of spiritual realities, it drains away our wish and will to avoid grievous sin; it makes us negligent, careless, reckless; it adds fuel and strength and fury to every temptation; it weakens the holy aspirations and high resolves of our early years; above all, it lessens the flow of God's grace in Whom and by Whom alone can we escape mortal sin and eternal death.

