

## MASTURBATION AND OBJECTIVELY GRAVE MATTER: AN EXPLORATORY DISCUSSION

Manuals of moral theology teach that "direct and perfectly voluntary pollution is always and intrinsically a grave sin."<sup>1</sup> On the level of popular instruction theological nuances disappear; many children are taught that masturbation is always a mortal sin. In the light of recent psychological knowledge, theologians have cautiously been considering the subjective imputability of masturbation.<sup>2</sup> Josef Fuchs very gingerly proposes the general conclusion that "grave subjective guilt is not rarely lacking."<sup>3</sup> The guarded theological conclusion proposed by Fuchs and others has apparently been seeping into confessional practice and popular instruction.<sup>4</sup>

Does the "objectively grave but perhaps not subjectively culpable" solution really correspond to the reality of the question? The purpose of the present paper is to argue that the act of masturbation does not always involve grave matter. Note well that the paper does not try to prove that masturbation is not sinful or that masturbation can never involve grave sin. The scope of the discussion is very limited: masturbation is not an action which is *ex toto genere suo grave*.

<sup>1</sup> Marcellino Zalba, S.J., *Theologiae Moralis Summa*, Vol. II (Matriti, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1953), p. 366.

<sup>2</sup> See Frederick Von Gagern, *The Problem of Onanism* (Cork, Mercier Press, 1955), pp. 89-94, and also the articles by Angermair and Fleckenstein in the Appendix; P. Snoeck, S.J., "Masturbation and Grave Sin," *New Problems in Medical Ethics*, Vol. I, ed. Dom Peter Flood, O.S.B. (Cork, Mercier Press, 1962), pp. 46-57; George Hagmaier, C.S.P., and Robert Gleason, S.J., *Counseling the Catholic* (New York, Sheed and Ward, 1959), pp. 73-93 and 215-227; John C. Ford, S.J.; and Gerald Kelly, S.J., *Contemporary Moral Theology*, Vol. I (Westminster, Md., Newman Press, 1958), pp. 174-201. Further bibliography is found in these references.

<sup>3</sup> Josephus Fuchs, S.J., *De Castitate et Ordine Sexuali*, 3rd. ed. (Roma, Editrice Università Gregoriana, 1963), p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> Richard A. McCormick, S.J., "The Priest and Teen-Age Sexuality," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 65 (1964-65), pp. 379-387; 473-480; Richard A. McCormick, S.J., "Adolescent Masturbation: A Pastoral Problem," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 60 (1959-60), pp. 527-540.

## REASONS FOR RE-EXAMINING THE TEACHING

Dialogue with the modern world shows that other Christians, educators, and psychologists do not believe that a single masturbatory act constitutes a serious and grave matter.<sup>5</sup> Even Catholic educators do not view individual masturbatory actions, especially among adolescents, as seriously harmful to the development of the person.<sup>6</sup> The attitude of the vast majority of these people of competent knowledge and good will might be wrong, but Catholic theologians must enter into dialogue with them in the search of truth.

Psychological studies indicate that masturbatory actions are generally symptomatic.<sup>7</sup> Empirical and statistical studies point out that the majority of adolescents go through a more or less prolonged period of masturbatory activity. "We can say without fear of contradiction that the masturbator is the rule, and the abstainer the exception."<sup>8</sup> Such activity does not seem to involve a harmful influence on the maturity and development of the person. Yet Catholic theology teaches that masturbation is intrinsically grave matter; i.e., the act itself is prohibited because in itself it is seriously wrong. Do modern scientific findings seem to contradict the teaching that masturbation is of itself a serious matter? Does the teaching of theologians really come to grips with the intrinsic meaning of masturbation?

Confessional practice indicates that often the masturbator has not broken his relationship of love with God. The prudent confessor

<sup>5</sup> Anthony R. Kosnick, *The Imputability of Acts of Masturbation Among Males* (Rome, 1961), a doctoral dissertation, p. 12. "For many non-Catholics masturbation constitutes no moral problem whatsoever." The author cites a number of references to substantiate his statement.

<sup>6</sup> J. G. Prick and J. A. Calon, "Masturbation Among Boys," *New Problems in Medical Ethics*, Vol. I, p. 37: These authors assume that the "onanism of puberty can be understood in the light of the very nature of the normal conditions of puberty." Von Gagern (p. 97) says, "Self-abuse is in accordance with normal development at their introverted stage of early puberty, for it is a symptom of immaturity."

<sup>7</sup> The authors mentioned in footnote 2 give detailed analyses of the causes or occasions of masturbation. E.g., Hagmaier-Gleason (p. 81): "Masturbation can mean many different things to different penitents." Von Gagern calls masturbation a symptom (p. 95).

<sup>8</sup> Hagmaier-Gleason, p. 75.

judges the general disposition of the penitent on the gospel criterion of union with God and neighbor. Frequently the external signs indicate that the masturbator, especially the adolescent, has not broken his relationship of love with God and neighbor. Since the relationship of love with God should involve some stability, no individual can psychologically be in and out of a profound union of love with God three or four times a week! The "objectively grave—subjectively not culpable" approach offers a good pastoral solution for the priest or confessor. However, theologians must ask the further question: does not the confessional experience of a frequent lack of subjective guilt indicate that the matter itself might not be objectively grave?

There are at least three other major objections to the "objectively grave—subjectively not culpable" approach. (1) Such an approach seems to say that if everything were normal, masturbation would be a mortal sin. The logical conclusion would be that the masturbator does not commit mortal sin because he is not normal! Yet, statistics show that, for the adolescent, masturbation is the rule. (2) Some experts in psychology indicate that the present teaching of always grave matter in masturbation occasions "irrational and excessive guilt."<sup>9</sup> (3) Insistence on the teaching that masturbation always involves grave matter exposes the teaching of the Church to the ridicule of many learned scholars and people of good will.

#### SIN IN THE THEORY OF THE FUNDAMENTAL OPTION

The precise area of difficulty appears to be the fact that the manuals have considered the act of masturbation in a very static way and completely apart from the person placing the action. Since human life is a continually growing process, any static consideration will be somewhat unreal. Likewise, moral theology can no longer consider the action apart from the person who places the action.<sup>10</sup> In the light of the inadequacies of the manualistic considerations of sin and in the light of a more scriptural and dogmatic concept of sin,

<sup>9</sup> Hagmaier-Gleason, p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," (*Gaudium et Spes*), n. 51.

theologians are beginning to see the human act and sin in relation to the fundamental option of man.

The theory of the fundamental option is definitely rooted in the teaching of Augustine and especially in St. Thomas' teaching on the last end.<sup>11</sup> According to the Thomistic teaching there are many particular individual choices that a man makes. Some choices, for example, choice of a vocation, are more basic than others. The more fundamental choices guide and direct other individual choices. Ultimately, there are only two possible fundamental options—the love of God or the love of a creature, which in the last analysis is self. Man either chooses God as his ultimate end and directs all his activity toward God, or he chooses self and directs all his activity toward self. A particular individual action has meaning insofar as it makes incarnate and intensifies the fundamental option.

A more existential consideration sees man as an image of God with a twofold freedom—freedom with regard to particular choices (*liberum arbitrium*); and a fundamental and existential freedom of option in the profundity of his person. Around this basic and profound freedom man directs and integrates his total personality. Man in the depths of his own existence engages himself for God or for a creature. This project or stance, which man takes for or against God, guides and directs his other activity. Individual actions are seen as the expression of the relationship of love binding the particular person to God. The existential involvement in the depths of the person expresses itself in the individual external action.<sup>12</sup>

The theory of the fundamental option also coheres with a more personalist understanding of grace. Theologians today do not emphasize created grace, but uncreated grace, the relationship of love existing between God and man.<sup>13</sup> God's love for man is creative

<sup>11</sup> M. Flick, S.J. and Z. Alszeghy, S.J., "L'opzione fondamentale della vita morale e la grazia," *Gregorianum* 41 (1960), pp. 593-619; Alszeghy-Flick, "Il peccato originale in prospettiva personalistica," *Gregorianum* 46 (1965), pp. 705-732; J. J. Sikora, S.J., "Faith and the First Moral Choice," *Sciences Ecclésiastiques* 17 (1965), pp. 327-337. Further bibliography is given in these articles.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Fransen, S.J., "Toward a Psychology of Divine Grace," *Lumen Vitae* 12 (1957), pp. 203-232.

<sup>13</sup> Alszeghy-Flick, *Gregorianum* 46 (1965), pp. 705-732; John Hyde, S.J.,

and expresses itself in his gifts to man. Sin becomes the breaking of this relationship of love with God. Again, the particular action has meaning insofar as it expresses this profound, personal relationship between God and man.

The theological speculations on the fundamental option merely build on the biblical notion of sin, with a special dependence on St. Paul. St. Paul generally uses the singular, *hamartia*, in his reference to sin and distinguishes *hamartia* from transgressions. *Hamartia* is the personified sin that dwells in the heart of man and manifests itself in external actions. The external action has an existential meaning insofar as the action comes from the *hamartia* that dwells in the heart of man. St. Paul divides all men into two classes: these under the law of *hamartia*, who do evil works; and those under the law of the Spirit, who do good works.<sup>14</sup> As the Scripture phrases it: the good tree brings forth good fruit, while the evil tree brings forth evil fruit. Theology develops the same idea in the distinction between the state of sin and the state of grace. The person in the state of grace performs good works, whereas the person in the state of sin performs sinful works.

In the theory of the fundamental option, the particular action is seen not in static isolation but in relationship to the development of the person. Such an existential consideration, however, must be balanced by an objective consideration, which also views the act in relation to the person. The torture of the Inquisition and the cooperation with the Nazis were wrong actions even though the persons involved in such actions may not have broken their fundamental option of love for God. Objectively evil actions may result from subjective limitations and pressures—and not necessarily from a sinful fundamental option.

More important in the present discussion of the fundamental option is the distinction between mortal and venial sin. Generally,

"Grace: A Bibliographical Note," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 32 (1964), pp. 257-261.

<sup>14</sup> S. Lyonnet, S.J., *Le Pêché: Judaïsme—Nouveau Testament—Pêché Originel* (Extrait du Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible VII, col. 481-567). The rather lengthy extract, which summarizes many of Lyonnet's other articles and contains a complete bibliography, is available from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome.

moral theology manuals speak of sin as venial, either by reason of the imperfection of the act or by reason of the lightness of the matter. But can only a difference of degree in matter constitute the great difference between mortal and venial sin? According to the theory of the fundamental option, the difference between mortal and venial sin lies in the existential involvement of the subject in a particular action. Mortal sin is an action which involves a fundamental option, whereas venial sin remains a more superficial and peripheral action not involving the core of the person. Bernard Häring insists that Augustine and the scholastic writers maintain that the ultimate difference between mortal and venial sin lies in the imperfection of the act, i.e., the subjective involvement in the action.<sup>15</sup>

The following arguments seem to bolster the fact that the difference between mortal and venial sin consists in the personal involvement in the action.<sup>16</sup> (1) Traditional scholastic teaching maintains that Adam and the angels could not commit a mere venial sin. The pure spirit and man without sin must necessarily involve themselves totally in the actions they perform. (2) Early scholastic speculation defined venial sin by reason of the imperfection of the act, especially in considering the first indeliberate motions of the appetite which are not completely under the full control of reason. (3) Some saints believed that they would break their relationship with God even over rather small matters. Perhaps exaggerations in the lives of saints have come from poor hagiography; but for two people in a close union of love even a seemingly insignificant matter has great importance for their relationship. (4) Although holding to a reciprocity between matter and form, scholastic theology has maintained that the form gives meaning and intelligibility to the matter. (5) The theory of the final option in the moment of death also

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Häring, C.S.S.R., *The Law of Christ*, Vol. I (Westminster, Md., Newman Press, 1961), p. 363. Also see A. Landgraf, *Das Wesen des lässlichen Sünde in der scholastik bis Thomas von Aquin* (Bamberg, Görresverlag, 1923); R. Blomme, *La doctrine du péché dans les écoles théologiques de la première moitié du XIIe siècle* (Louvain, 1958).

<sup>16</sup> Häring, pp. 350-364, give some of the reasons mentioned in the text. Although Häring does not employ the term "fundamental option," his whole exposition of the difference between mortal and venial sin is based on the reality which we have called the fundamental option.

presupposes that mortal and venial sin differ by reason of the imperfection of the act.<sup>17</sup>

What then is the value of the distinction between grave and light matter? Such a distinction has meaning only as a presumptive guideline and not as a metaphysical norm.<sup>18</sup> Grave matter is such that ordinarily a subject will engage the depths of his person in the action. Light matter is such that ordinarily the person does not involve the core of his personality in the action. Light matter indicates that the action will generally be superficial and peripheral—and not a fundamental choice. Many of our daily actions are merely peripheral and do not completely involve our persons. The distinction between grave and light matter is not iron-clad, but only a presumptive guideline. *A fortiori*, the expression *ex toto genere suo grave* loses much of its absolute character.

Likewise, theologians should carefully distinguish between grave and light sin and grave and light matter. No one should say blasphemy (in the abstract) is a grave sin, but rather that it is grave matter. A theologian, when discussing an action in the abstract, can speak of the gravity of matter, but it would be better to avoid speaking of the gravity of sin. Sin refers to the relationship between God and man.

But our investigation must go one step further. Is there a valid presumption that masturbation is an action which is always grave matter (*ex toto genere suo grave*)? Does the act of masturbation so involve the core of the person that man generally make a fundamental option with regard to it? The empirical evidence cited in the first portion of this paper indicates that masturbation, especially among adolescents, does not involve a fundamental option. Since masturba-

<sup>17</sup> For the theory of the final option, see Ladislaus Boros, S.J., *The Mystery of Death* (New York, Herder and Herder, 1965); Roger Troisfontaines, S.J., *I Do Not Die* (New York, Desclee, 1963); Karl Rahner, S.J., *On the Theology of Death* (New York, Herder and Herder, 1961).

<sup>18</sup> Häring, p. 362, comes to the same conclusion. Häring deserves great credit as the first author of a general treatise of moral theology to treat sin in this way. Unfortunately, in his consideration of special moral theology Häring does not always carry through his theoretical consideration of the presumptive nature of grave and light matter. Of course, one must realize that Häring originally wrote his moral theology treatise over ten years ago.

tory activity is symptomatic, it can have many different meanings. The ambiguous nature of masturbation argues against the theory that masturbation always involves grave matter. It would seem impossible to conclude, even as a presumption, that every masturbatory act as such involves a fundamental option.

#### A RE-EVALUATION OF THE TEACHING OF THE MANUALS

The basic assertion of this paper is that the act of masturbation is not always objectively grave matter. In the preceding section I have tried to prove the assertion in the light of the theory of the fundamental option. Now I will endeavor to show that the basic assertion is an application of the best insights of the traditional Thomistic teaching to what contemporary man knows about masturbation. The Church, throughout its teaching, has formulated a distinction between mortal and venial sin. However, the philosophical distinction as it exists in the theology textbooks stems from a Thomistic interpretation and has never been solemnly taught as such by the Church.<sup>19</sup> Recently, a different theory and definition of mortal sin has been proposed.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, a theologian should not exaggerate the dogmatic value of the understanding of the philosophical difference between venial and mortal sin.

St. Thomas tried to find the difference between mortal and venial sin in the acts themselves and not in the punishments; the diverse punishments are effects of the acts. Mortal sin is *contra caritatem, contra finem, contra ordinem*; whereas venial sin is *praeter caritatem, praeter finem, praeter ordinem*.<sup>21</sup> Thomas also noted the difference on the basis of reparability. Mortal sin destroys the ordering to the ultimate end, which is the fundamental principle of the spiritual life. Consequently, there remains nothing intrinsic in man which can repair the damage of mortal sin. Since venial sin involves a deordination of means (and not end), the ultimate principle

<sup>19</sup> M. Huftier, "Péché mortel et péché véniel," *Théologie du péché*, ed. Ph. Delhaye (Tournai, Desclée, 1960), pp. 363-451; C. Vogel, "Le péché et la pénitence," *Pastorale du péché* (Tournai, Desclée, 1961), pp. 147-234.

<sup>20</sup> Dom Cyprian Stockford, "Sin, Hell and Sacraments," *The Downside Review* 81 (1963), pp. 22-36.

<sup>21</sup> Huftier, pp. 430-436.



of the spiritual life remains and can repair the damage of venial sin (*I II*, q. 88, a.1, corp.).

Thomas does speak about sins *ex genere suo grave* and *ex genere suo leve*. But the determination of the objective gravity depends on whether the object itself is repugnant to charity, which orders man to his ultimate end. Consequently, a sin is mortal *ex genere suo* if it is against the love of God (e.g., blasphemy, perjury) or against the love of neighbor (e.g., homicide, adultery). (*I II*, q. 88, a.2, corp.) Elsewhere, Thomas also defined mortal sin *ex genere suo* in terms of the object which is opposed to the ultimate end, charity.<sup>22</sup> In discussing particular sins, Thomas refers to the same criterion—mortal sin *ex genere suo* exists if the object is against love of God and neighbor.<sup>23</sup>

With regard to sins against chastity, Thomas applies the same criterion: "Mortal sin is every sin which is committed directly against the life of man" (*II II*, q. 154, a.2, corp.) Fornication is a mortal sin because of the harm such an action does to the child who might be born of such a union. With regard to pollution, Thomas merely mentions that it is against that natural order of venereal actions of the human species (*II II*, q. 154, a.12, corp). Since God is the author of nature, Thomas concludes that an injury is done to God when the order of nature is broken (*II II*, q. 154, a.12, ad 1<sup>um</sup>). Many theologians today propose basically the same reason for the gravity of masturbation—"a substantial inversion of an order of very great importance."<sup>24</sup>

The concept of matter *ex toto genere suo grave* as enunciated in the manuals of moral theology stems from the Thomistic teaching.

<sup>22</sup> ". . . est veniale ex genere propter materiam in qua peccatur. In illa autem materia peccatum perfecte invenitur in qua, si peccetur, virtus caritatis ad Deum et ad proximum dissolvitur, per quam vita est animae, et ideo quando aliquis peccat in his sine quibus recte servatis non remanet subjectio hominis ad Deum et foedus humanae societatis, tunc est peccatum mortale ex genere." *In II Sent.*, dist. 42, q. 1, art. 4, in corp. "Quaecumque igitur peccata intentioni ultimi finis et dilectioni opponuntur, mortalia sunt." *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1. 3, cap. 139.

<sup>23</sup> E.g., disobedience (*II II*, q. 105, a.1.); stealing (*II II*, q. 66, a.6); injustice (*II II*, q. 59, a.4); sloth (*II II*, q. 35, a.3); wrath (*II II*, q. 158, a.3); gluttony (*II II*, q. 148, a.2).

<sup>24</sup> Fuchs, p. 68; V. Vangheluwe, "De Intrinsic et Gravi Malitia Pollutionis," *Collationes Brugenses* 48 (1952), pp. 108-115.

For example, Dom Lottin, one of the best of the Thomistic moralists, describes mortal sins *ex toto genere suo grave* as those which "directly offend God or a divine attribute (infidelity, heresy, hatred God, idolatry, blasphemy, etc.); those in which grave matter is indivisible (homicide, violation of the Eucharistic fast); those which if they were only forbidden under penalty of venial sin would be too easily committed (direct violation of the seal of confession, all voluntary *luxuria* even incomplete)." <sup>25</sup> The third category, which includes *luxuria*, seems to betray the basic Thomistic note of realism. Sin can never be conceived as a penalty. The Church cannot use sin as civil rulers use penalties to force compliance with laws. Sin is the reality of man's breaking his relationship of love with God and neighbor. The fundamental attitude of Thomistic morality is the intrinsic nature of morality—something is forbidden because it itself is wrong. If the object itself, even in its widest extension, is not opposed to charity, then the matter cannot be grave. Perhaps the underlying reason for placing *luxuria* in such a category is that if man were able to enjoy these other sexual actuations without mortal sin, then he would never embrace marriage. Thus the good of the species would be greatly harmed. Another reason for making *luxuria* a mortal sin according to the category proposed by Lottin might be the harm that society would suffer from the frequency of such sins if they were forbidden "only under penalty of venial sin." Such reasoning does not appear to be conclusive. Consequently, the reason for the gravity of sexual sins as proposed by Lottin does not appear to be valid. The only valid criterion for determining grave matter is the Thomistic teaching—grave matter is that which is opposed to charity. Can one prove that masturbation is *contra caritatem* in the form of a substantial inversion of an important order of nature?

What do the theology manuals teach about the intrinsic malice and gravity of masturbation? Theologians in the past have not been in agreement about the ultimate malice of masturbation. Some argue that the voluntary frustration of semen is intrinsically and gravely evil. Others place the formal malice in the complete venereal pleasure outside the marital act. Others find the malice of masturba-

<sup>25</sup> Dom Odon Lottin, *Morale Fundamentale* (Tournai, Desclée, 1954), p. 490.

tion in the danger to the species, for men would not enter marriage and procreate children if masturbation were permitted. In the recent theological literature there appears to be a growing consensus that masturbation is intrinsically a grave evil because it is a substantial inversion of an order of the greatest importance.<sup>26</sup>

Theologians must ask a precise question: does the single act of masturbation constitute a substantial inversion of a very important order of nature? Five reasons seem to prove that a single masturbatory action does not constitute a substantial inversion of a very important order.

(1) Older theologians have had too narrow and unilateral an understanding of masturbatory activity. From a purely biological and physiological viewpoint, masturbation may constitute a substantial inversion of sexual actuation. However, a total human consideration embraces much more than the mere biological emission of semen. The psychological understanding of masturbation does not seem to warrant the severity with which moral theologians speak about masturbation. Masturbation as a total human action does not seem that important or serious.

(2) Consideration of the gravity of masturbation has again been too narrow and unilateral in concentrating almost exclusively on the relationship of sexuality with procreation.<sup>27</sup> Sexuality must also be considered in relationship to other persons and to the individual himself. Masturbation might indicate a narcissistic behavior pattern, a period of temporary stress, or a developing stage of adolescent sexuality. Since masturbation is a complex human reality involving a multiplicity of relationships, the moralist distorts reality by considering masturbation solely in terms of procreation.

(3) Inadequate physiological knowledge merely heightened the unilateral emphasis on the procreational and biological aspects.

<sup>26</sup> Fuchs, p. 68; Vangheluwe, pp. 108-115.

<sup>27</sup> Since the Middle Ages and especially in the present century there has been a development in the importance attached to the love union aspect of sexuality. For the best historical consideration of the Church's teaching on marriage, see John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception: A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1965).

Since science thought that semen was the primary and only active agent in procreation, the arguments against masturbation stressed the teleology of the semen. Only in the last century did theologians begin to realize a consideration based on the teleology of the semen was too unilateral because it did not explain the reality of female masturbation.<sup>28</sup> However, a disordinate stress on the the teleology of semen has contributed to a misjudgment about the seriousness of masturbation.

(4) It does not seem that a single masturbatory action can constitute a substantial inversion of an order of very great importance. Perhaps in the past theologians have illegitimately transferred to the individual act the importance that belongs to the sexual faculty.<sup>29</sup> I am not saying that individual actions are never important; but in the total consideration of masturbation, individual actions do not always constitute a substantial inversion of human sexuality.

(5) Most contemporary theologians and educators recognize that in the past there was an overemphasis on sexual sins. The overly spiritual heresies from Gnosticism to Jansenism have warped our understanding of human sexuality. The inadequate and distorted notions of the past have contributed to the importance and gravity attached to individual masturbatory actions. A word of caution, however, is in order. Today, when many are espousing the "Playboy philosophy," Catholic teaching must uphold the dignity and importance of human sexuality. However, Catholic teaching must avoid the temptation of overreacting to laxist, and ultimately inhuman, notions of sexuality.

#### POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS

What about the traditional teaching of the Church? There appears to be no traditional, authoritative, unchangable teaching of the Church that masturbation is always objectively grave matter.

<sup>28</sup> A. Lecomte, *L'Ovulation Spontanée* (Louvain, 1873), p. 117.

<sup>29</sup> For a well balanced Protestant view of the relationship between the sexual faculty and the sexual act, see the response of R. Paul Ramsey in *The Vatican Council and the World of Today*, the proceedings of a conference held at Brown University, March 15, 1966, and prepared for publication by the Office of the Secretary of the University.

Remember that the philosophical distinction between mortal and venial sin and the question of matter *ex toto genere suo grave* did not exist before St. Thomas. With regard to masturbation itself, there is no conclusive proof that Scripture mentions the malice (let alone the always grave matter) of masturbation.<sup>30</sup> The fathers of the Church are practically silent on the simple question of masturbation. No mention is made of masturbation with regard to the public penance in the early Church. More frequent mention of masturbation appears in the penitentials.<sup>31</sup>

The authoritative interventions of the magisterium before the present century never explicitly teach that the matter of masturbation is always grave; but such teachings do imply, at least in general, the gravity of the sin of masturbation. The letter of Leo IX (1054) considers masturbation in the context of the promotion of clerics to orders and their reinstatement in orders following penance.<sup>32</sup> The Holy Office under Alexander VII (1655-1656) condemned as a group 45 propositions as being "*ut minime scandalosae.*" Proposition 24 reads: "*Mollities, sodomia et bestialitas sunt peccata eiusdem speciei infimae; ideoque sufficit dicere in confessione se procurasse pollutionem*" (D.S. 2044). The condemnation does imply that masturbation is necessary matter for confession. The Holy Office, under Innocent XI, in 1679, condemned a group of 65 propositions: "*sicut iacent, ut minimum tamquam scandalosae et in praxi perniciosae*" (D.S. 2166). Proposition 49 states: "*Mollities jure naturae prohibita non est. Unde, si Deus eam non interdixisset, saepe esset bona et aliquando obligatoria sub mortali*" (D.S. 2149). The precise object of the condemnation might only be the fact that on occasions there could be a *sub gravi* command to masturbate!

<sup>30</sup> Fuchs, p. 63, is typical of the approach of the modern manuals about the scriptural teaching on masturbation.

<sup>31</sup> The author is grateful to Ferenc Nagy, S.J., for sending the conclusions of his unpublished doctoral dissertation (Pontifical Gregorian University), which studied the evolution of the Church's teaching on masturbation in the first ten centuries. The author is also grateful to the students of his graduate seminar in the School of Theology of the Catholic University of America who did much historical research covering the same period.

<sup>32</sup> D.S. 688. The letter of Leo IX, *Ad Splendidum Nitentis* comments on a previous letter of Peter Damien, *Liber Gomorrhianus* (P. L. 145, col. 159-190).

The interventions of the present century have concentrated especially on masturbation for medical reasons. Despite interventions of the Holy Office (July 24, 1929) and allocutions of Pope Pius XII,<sup>33</sup> one respected theologian maintains that "masturbation" for the purpose of seminal analysis is probably licit.<sup>34</sup> At least the proposing of such an opinion indicates that the interventions of the magisterium in this regard do not involve an irreparable commitment.

In the whole question of the gravity of masturbation (to say nothing of *ex toto genere suo grave*) the official magisterium of the Church has never even come close to an irreparable teaching. Perhaps the strongest argument from the teaching of the Church comes from the constant teaching of catechisms since the time of Trent. However, this teaching was always modified on the existential plane by the application of the principles governing the necessity of knowledge and the necessity of advertence for mortal sin. Consequently, in the light of a better understanding of the matter of masturbation, it could be that masturbation is no longer considered a matter which is always and necessarily grave.

The teaching on parvity of matter directly and immediately concerns incomplete sexual actuation or pleasure outside marriage and not the question of masturbation. In 1612, Claudius Aquaviva, the general of the Society of Jesus, severely forbade the Jesuits to hold the possibility of light matter in imperfect sexual pleasure, but the condemnation was in practice and not necessarily in theory.<sup>35</sup> In 1659 the *Revisores* of the Society of Jesus admitted that the opinion favoring the possibility of light matter was still extrinsically probable

<sup>33</sup> *A.A.S.* 21 (1929), p. 490. Pope XII, in an allocution on March 23, 1952, about the formation of a right conscience in youth, affirmed the gravity of the obligation in sexual matters even for adolescents and said it was erroneous to think that ordinarily passion takes away grave guilt (*A.A.S.* 44 (1952), p. 270 ff.). References condemning masturbation for medical purposes include *A.A.S.* 45 (1953), p. 678 and *A.A.S.* 48 (1956), p. 472, 473.

<sup>34</sup> Bernard Häring, C.S.S.R., at a two week institute for professors of moral theology at Regis College, Toronto, Canada, in July 1963, publicly defended as probable in practice the opinion that voluntary emission of the semen for medical purposes is not wrong.

<sup>35</sup> G. J. Waffelaert, *De Virtutibus Cardinalibus: De Prudentia, Fortitudine, et Temperantia* (Brugis, 1889), n. 187, 188, pp. 302, 303. Arthur Vermeersch, S.J., *De Castitate et De Vitiis Contrariis* (Romae, 1919), pp. 355 ff; Noonan, p. 358.

and not condemned by the Church.<sup>36</sup> Despite some interventions on the subject by Clement VIII and Paul V, as well as Proposition 40 condemned by Alexander VII, G. J. Waffelaert avoided making a judgment on the matter because in practice there seems to be no difference between the theory of parvity of matter and the distinction between venereal pleasure and sensible pleasure. Those who make such a distinction between sexual and sensible pleasure can come to the same practical solutions as those who hold parvity of matter.<sup>37</sup> The above remarks make no attempt at being a complete consideration of the question of parvity of matter, since such a question does not directly effect the proposed theory on the gravity of masturbation. However, the teaching on parvity of matter must also be rethought in the light of the fundamental option.<sup>38</sup>

In conclusion, moral theologians must become more aware of their proper function. In the past, we moralists spent most of our time interpreting the documents of the magisterium for the Christian people. Today the Vatican Council and theologians are beginning to recognize the importance of the experience of Christian people.<sup>39</sup> Theologians must also interpret the experience of Christian people for the magisterium. The experience of Christian people, coupled with new theological and scientific insights, raises questions about the presently accepted moral teaching on the objective gravity of masturbation. I am merely proposing my personal views and asking for your reactions and considerations. The Catholic Theological Society of America should be the ideal forum for such a discussion. By engaging in constructive dialogue on modern theological problems, the C.T.S.A. can better serve both the magisterium and the whole Church.

CHARLES E. CURRAN  
*The Catholic University of America*  
*Washington, D.C.*

<sup>36</sup> Waffelaert, n. 187, p. 301.

<sup>37</sup> Waffelaert, n. 188, p. 303.

<sup>38</sup> For an historical study of the question of parvity of matter José M. Diaz, S.J., "La doctrina moral sobre la parvedad de materia in re venerea desde Cayetano hasta San Alfonso," *Archivo Teológico Granadino* 23 (1960), pp. 5-138.

<sup>39</sup> "The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," (*Lumen Gentium*), n. 12; "The Declaration on Religious Freedom," (*Dignitatis Humanae*), n. 1. See also the extensive theological literature on the prophetic office in the Church.

**Digest of the Discussion:**

The undersigned opened the discussion by expressing agreement with the pastoral need emphasized by the paper: that too many priests and their penitents take semi-deliberate and indeliberate acts of self-abuse as formal mortal sins. But the solution does not seem to demand any change in the doctrine on the gravity of the matter, but rather in the stress and clarity on the meaning of full realization and full, free choice of the will required for formal mortal sin.

That directly voluntary violations of purity by unmarried persons are always grave in matter has been the constant and practically universal teaching of the Church for at least the past three centuries. Perhaps this teaching owed its origin to a misinterpretation of the lists of sins in St. Paul's epistles, but it would seem that Christ's promise to his Church would be broken if the Church had erred this universally for so long a time on a matter considered decisive for salvation.

Fr. Curran raised the question of whether the matter in sins of masturbation constitutes an object about which one can make a full commitment for or against God. It seems clear that there is a difference in gravity of matter in sins of theft, wounding and such. Perhaps even these differences can be explained in terms of objects about which one can make such a commitment.

However, taking the terminology as it has been understood in the past, one might argue against Fr. Curran's thesis of the possibility of light matter in masturbation, that revelation as known from creation and from the teaching of theologians as reflecting the teaching of the ordinary magisterium, and the pronouncements of the Holy Office, show masturbation to be materially a grave sin. This can be explained by saying that it is the abuse of a very sacred power and function intended by God as a sharing in the creation of a new human being destined for eternal happiness in the beatific vision of God; that since it is such a sacred power and function, any directly voluntary abuse of it is serious matter.

*Fr. McCarthy* (Allegheny, N.Y.) started the question period by asking why it is that a nocturnal pollution is not considered materially sinful and yet the same act awake is a sin. If the physical



components of the acts are the same, why should not the waking act be natural and therefore perhaps not sinful?

His question was answered by *Fr. Augustine Rock, O.P.*, (Blackfriars, Chicago). The fact that something happens naturally sometimes, does not make it licit to will it. Death comes to many naturally; but it is still wrong to kill oneself.

*Fr. Matthew Herron, T.O.R.* (Loretto, Pa.) opined that an act of self-abuse is often done without any voluntariness.

*Fr. George Malone* (U. of Ill. Medical School, Chicago) pointed out that the Holy Office documents are sometimes cited as though irreformable or infallible, although they are not infallible pronouncements, with which *Fr. Curran* agreed. When the undersigned was asked what note he would give to the thesis that the matter in masturbation is always grave, he suggested that it could be considered infallible from the ordinary magisterium of the Church if so taught by the whole Church for three centuries as a doctrine affecting eternal salvation, as an interpretation of the sixth commandment; that the universal teaching of moral professors in seminaries for so long would be a reflection of the teaching of the hierarchy. *Fr. Curran* added a few points of information: that in 1659 Jesuit "revisores" had allowed an opinion that absolution could be given to someone who held that this sin admitted parvity of matter; and that *St. Alphonsus* had cited eleven authors who held such an opinion, although the Saint himself did not consider the opinion either intrinsically or extrinsically probable.

Creighton moral professor, *Fr. James Scull, S.J.*, feared that labeling a doctrine infallible *ex ordinario magisterio* hinders dialogue on a question which needs further investigation. Nevertheless the Church would seem defectible if it could lead all its members into error with regard to gravity of matter. On the other hand, perhaps God wants something different in this age with its development of man's knowledge.

*Fr. Francis Filas, S.J.* (Loyola, Chicago) brought up the fact that physiological causes can and often do contribute to the natural tendency to relieve oneself: exhaustion, fullness of the tubules of the prostate, full rectum, and such.

*Fr. Robert Springer, S.J.* (Woodstock, Md.) preferred not to

let the discussion become too biological. He suggested that what we call masturbation may be more than one thing: physical release of semen or a symptom of psychological problems. Perhaps a study of the concomitant phantasies would help find the cause.

*Fr. Nicholas Rosal* (St. Francis College, Brooklyn) insisted that both St. Thomas and St. Alphonsus teach the gravity of the sin. In the I, II the Angelic Doctor teaches that the gravity depends on the end and object of an action. Some actions are *per se* known as grave. The exercise of the sexual function is *per se* known as of great importance because of its relation to new human life. Yet for formal grave guilt there must always be some kind of complete involvement, which corresponds to the sufficient reflection and full consent of the catechism. Only those acts will be formal moral sins which include a full commitment.

*Fr. Curran* closed the session with reference to articles on the Thomistic idea of grave matter as *contra finem, contra caritatem, contra ordinem*.

Recorded by: JOSEPH J. FARRAHER, S.J.  
Alma College  
Los Gatos, California