

THE THEOLOGY OF VENIAL SIN

It is not by accident, but by design, that St. Thomas begins his study of moral theology by a discussion of man's ultimate end, for in the last analysis the morality of a human act is determined by its orientation to the ultimate end. Indeed, the first principle of morality—Do good; avoid evil—becomes an effective guide to human action only when the individual is able to judge the conformity or lack of conformity of a given act with the ultimate end. "Every privation of good," says St. Thomas, "in whatever subject, is an evil, whereas sin consists properly in an action done for a certain end and lacking due order to that end. . . . When, therefore, a human action tends to the end according to the order of reason and of the eternal law, then that action is morally good; but when it turns aside from that rectitude, then it is said to be a sin."¹

Granted that every human act should be directed to the ultimate end if it is to possess its proper moral goodness, it is all too true that the farther we are removed from moral principles and the closer we approach particulars, the more danger there is of error in our moral judgments. But this danger has been greatly lessened by the fact that God has promulgated His eternal law to serve as the norm and guide of our human actions, and while the law is not the ultimate basis of the morality of human acts, it does serve as an effective, though extrinsic, norm of action. It is in this sense that St. Augustine defines sin as any thought, word, or deed against the eternal law of God. But behind the law is the lawmaker and we can therefore define sin also as an offense against God. The law, consequently, does not posit man's ultimate end, but presupposes that end, and given the nature of man and his ultimate end, the law follows as a necessary consequence of man's vocation to beatitude.

MORTAL AND VENIAL SIN

Sin is nothing else than a bad human act;² therefore, every human act that is evil is a sin. But what is the objective basis for the relative gravity of sinful actions? If the theologian considers sin

¹ *Summa theol.*, Ia IIae, q. 21, a. 1.

² *Summa theol.*, Ia IIae, q. 71, a. 6.

merely from the legal standpoint and considers it solely as an offense against the eternal law, he will answer that the gravity of a sin will depend upon the binding force of the law that is broken. And what determines the binding force of a precept? The will of the legislator. In other words, if morality is understood to rest entirely or ultimately on the observance or non-observance of the law or if the gravity of a sin is determined by the infraction of a precept or counsel, then the only basis for the distinction between good and evil, between mortal and venial sin, is the will of God to make some laws bind seriously and others under lighter obligation.

But morality is not a merely extrinsic denomination of human acts; it flows from their very essence. Consequently, it would seem that there is a more profound and ontological explanation for the distinction between good and evil actions and between mortal and venial sins. We find a clue to the solution in the words which we have already quoted: "When, therefore, a human action tends to the end according to the order of reason and of the eternal law, then that action is right; but when it turns aside from that rectitude, then it is said to be a sin."³ In other words, the morality of a human act is determined by its relation to the ultimate end. But when is a human act in conformity with the ultimate end, and therefore morally good, and when is it disorientated, and therefore sinful?

The evil of sin is the privation of good which is due to a human act. But the goodness that is due to a human act is the plenitude of being which it derives from its object, circumstances, and end. Once this is understood, it becomes evident that a purely legal concept of sin is not sufficient, for it is the weakness of a law that it does not cover particular circumstances but is directed to the common good and the generality of cases. On the other hand, certain actions are of their very nature destructive of man's orientation to his ultimate end and are for that reason forbidden by law under pain of mortal sin. But if an evil human action does not constitute a rejection of the ultimate end, though it is evil so far as it does not observe the proper mode or measure in view of the ultimate end, it is a venial sin.⁴

³ *Loc. cit.*

⁴ *Summa theol.*, Ia IIae, q. 88, a. 1: "Sins which contain an inordinateness

The privation of goodness in a human act suffices to make that act objectively evil and at least a material sin; the positive malice or contrariety to the rule of reason or moral judgment in choosing a moral evil constitutes formal sin and culpability. The theologian is aware of the great difference between material sin and formal, culpable sin, and yet even from this second and psychological aspect it is possible to delineate the ontological basis for the distinction between mortal and venial sin. Sin is formally a conversion and formally an aversion—conversion to an object that is morally evil and aversion from the rule of right reason. But acts are specified by their objects and for that reason sin is primarily a conversion to a morally evil object and as a consequence is an aversion from the rule of reason. Therefore, the formal constitutive of sin is the positive malice or act of the will by which the sinner deliberately chooses an object which is morally evil. The lack of conformity with the law follows upon the movement toward the evil object. Yet the sinner does not incline to the evil object precisely as prohibited (except, perhaps, in sin of contempt), but to an object which is affected by some prohibition.

In view of the foregoing, it follows that the conversion of the will of a sinner to an evil object that is destructive of man's orientation to his ultimate end will constitute a mortal sin, while the inordinate conversion to an object that is compatible with man's ultimate end will constitute a venial sin.⁵ In the latter case, "although he who sins venially does not actually direct his action to God, he nevertheless keeps God for his goal habitually. Accordingly, he does not take a creature as his ultimate goal, since he loves it less than God, but he sins by being inordinate in that love, as a traveler who loiters on the way but does not go apart from the way."⁶

It is of the very essence of charity that it should so direct man to God that he will subject himself to God and follow the rule of His precepts in all things. Indeed, this is required for the preservation about the means, the direction to the last end being kept, are reparable; they are called venial sins."

⁵ The reader will be cognizant of the relative ease with which subjective factors can make that which is objectively mortally sinful become a venial sin and vice versa.

⁶ *I Sent.*, dist. 1, q. 3, ad 4um. "Venial sin is not against God, nor is man's goal placed in it, nor does it deprive one of grace" (*II Sent.*, dist. 42, q. 1, a. 5).

of grace and charity and constitutes the lowest possible type of perfection.⁷ Therefore, "every mortal sin is contrary to charity by its very nature, which consists in man's loving God above all things and subjecting himself to Him entirely. . . . If, indeed, charity were an acquired habit, dependent on the power of its subject, it would not necessarily be removed by one mortal sin. . . . The endurance of a habit in its subject does not require the endurance of its act, so that when a contrary act supervenes, the acquired habit is not at once destroyed. But charity, since it is an infused habit, depends on the action of God who infuses it. . . . And it is evident that through every mortal sin which is contrary to God's commandments an obstacle is placed to the outpouring of charity, since from the very fact that a man chooses sin in preference to God's friendship, it follows that the habit of charity is lost at once."⁸ Venial sin, however, does not affect charity, for venial sin does not constitute a rejection of God's friendship; rather, a man in the state of venial sin still loves God above all things, although here and now he may lack the fervor of love of which he is capable.⁹

St. Thomas discusses the nature of venial sin from many points of view and a brief review of some of his statements on the question will enable us to delineate quite completely the nature of venial sin and its distinction from mortal sin. Thus, in speaking of the well-known distinction between acts *contra legem* and *praeter legem*, Aquinas says: "Venial sin is called a sin because it realizes the idea of sin

⁷ Speaking of the perfection of charity from the part of the one who loves, St. Thomas lists three types of perfection: first, the perfection of charity in the blessed, who are always *actually* loving God as much as they can; secondly, the perfection possible to the wayfarer, when a man makes an earnest effort to give his time to God and divine things and to scorn other things except so far as the needs of life require (and this perfection is not common to all who have charity); and thirdly, "so that a man gives his whole heart to God *habitually* by neither thinking nor desiring anything contrary to the love of God, and this perfection is common to all who have charity." (*Summa theol.*, IIa IIae, q. 24, a. 8).

⁸ *Summa theol.*, IIa IIae, q. 24, a. 12.

⁹ *I Sent.*, dist. 17, q. 2, a. 5: "The inordinateness of an action regards either the end or the means. . . . If it concerns the means in such a way that the end remains and someone lingers on inordinately about the means, such disorder, which is proper to venial sin, does not touch upon charity."

imperfectly when compared with mortal sin. . . . For it is not *against* the law, since he who sins venially neither does what the law forbids nor omits what the law prescribes, but he acts *beside* the law, because he does not observe the mode of reason which the law intends."¹⁰ Again, referring to the classic definition of sin as constructed by St. Augustine, Aquinas says: "That definition of sin does indeed fit mortal sin perfectly, but it applies to venial sin also in an imperfect and relative manner. Hence, the proper phrase is to say that venial sin is not *against* the law but *beside* it, because although it deviates from the order of the law on some point, it does not destroy the law, since it does not destroy love which is the fulness of the law."¹¹

But the Apostle commands the faithful to do all that they do for the glory of God; therefore, whoever sins, breaks this commandment and commits mortal sin. St. Thomas replies: "The precept of the Apostle is affirmative and therefore it does not bind for all times. Consequently, one who does not *actually* refer all his actions to the glory of God does not thereby act against this precept. Therefore, in order to avoid all mortal sin each time that one fails actually to refer an action to God's glory, it is enough to refer oneself and all that one has to God *habitually*. Now venial sin excludes only actual reference of the human act to God's glory, and not habitual reference, because venial sin does not exclude charity, which refers man to God habitually. Therefore, it does not follow that he who sins venially, sins mortally."¹²

¹⁰ *Summa theol.*, Ia IIae, q. 88, a. 1, ad 1um. We find here a basis for St. Thomas' teaching on the impossibility of venial sin in the state of innocence or in the angels, though Scotus maintained the possibility of venial sin in the state of innocence and Vásquez taught that angels could commit venial sin before the fall of Lucifer. But the integrity of Adam and Eve and the perfect subordination of their lower powers to reason would have precluded venial sin.

¹¹ *De Malo*, q. 7, a. 1, ad 1um. "A sin in the higher reason consists in its deviation in some way from the eternal ideas. But this can happen in two ways: either absolutely (*simpliciter*), as in the case of mortal sin, by which one departs from God's laws both actually and habitually, when he acts not only beside the law but against it, or relatively (*secundum quid*), as in venial sin, by which a man departs from God's law in act, not in habit, when he acts, not against it but beside it" (*II Sent.*, dist. 24, q. 3, a. 5, ad 1um).

¹² *Summa theol.*, Ia IIae, q. 88, a. 1, ad 2um. "He who commits a venial sin does not enjoy the created good for its own sake, but he makes use of it,

Venial sin, therefore, is not a total deviation from the ultimate end, but an inordinateness regarding the means to the end. "The inordinateness of an action," says the Angelic Doctor, "regards either the end or the means. . . . If it concerns the means in such a way that the end remains and someone lingers on inordinately about the means, such disorder, which is proper to venial sin, does not touch on charity."¹³ It follows from this that the definition of sin is not realized perfectly and completely in a venial sin. "The reality of sin is found completely in mortal sin, but in venial sin only imperfectly and relatively. Hence, what in some action is the least by way of sin is found in venial sin. . . . For that reason, mortal sin designates something complete in the genus of sin, but venial sin, something incomplete."¹⁴ "The division of sin into venial and mortal is not a division of genus into its species, which have an equal share of the generic nature, but it is a division of an analogous term into its parts, of which it is predicted in different degrees. Consequently, the perfect notion of sin, which Augustine gives, applies to mortal sin. On the other hand, venial sin is called a sin in an incomplete sense and in comparison with mortal sin."¹⁵

VENIAL SIN AND THE ULTIMATE END

If, as we have seen, venial sin is not destructive of the virtue of charity nor of man's orientation to his true ultimate end, it follows that venial sin is possible to a man in the state of grace and is, therefore, at least compatible with his ordination to the ultimate end. Even more, we learn from Scripture and the teaching of the Council of Trent that venial sin is both possible and inevitable in the just Christian.¹⁶ But sin cannot be directed to God as the ultimate end; else, it is not a sin. On the other hand, if a venial sin were said to be directed to a creature as its ultimate end, it would cease to be a venial

for he refers it to God habitually, though not actually. Nor does he act against any precept in so doing, because he is not obliged always to intend God actually" (*De Malo*, q. 7, a. 1, ad 1um).

¹³ *I Sent.*, dist. 42, q. 1, a. 3, ad 5um; a. 5, ad 1um.

¹⁴ *II Sent.*, dist. 42, q. 1, a. 3.

¹⁵ *Summa theol.*, Ia IIae, q. 88, a. 1, ad 1um.

¹⁶ Prov. 24:16; Eccles. 7-21; Jas. 3-2; Denzinger, 833.

sin and become mortal, thus destroying the distinction between venial and mortal sin. How does one escape from this dilemma?

Many answers and theories have been proposed by various theologians,¹⁷ but we believe that the solution is indicated in passages which we have already cited from the works of St. Thomas. Obviously, it must be affirmed that the ultimate end of venial sin is neither God nor the created good, and yet the just Christian preserves his ordination to the ultimate end in spite of venial sin. It is at this point that we recall the various expressions used by St. Thomas in relation to venial sin; he who commits a venial sin directs his action to God, *non actu sed habitu*,¹⁸ venial sin is *non contra sed praeter legem*,¹⁹ venial sin signifies a *deordinatio circa ea quae sunt ad finem*,²⁰ venial sin fulfills the definition of sin only in an imperfect and relative sense.²¹ In view of these distinctions we can say truly that in committing venial sin the just Christian retains his orientation

¹⁷ Cf. "The Ultimate End of Venial Sin," by A. J. MicNicholl, O.P., in *The Thomist*, Vol. II (1940), pp. 373-409, and "Venial Sin and Its Final Goal," by P. de Letter, S.J., in *The Thomist*, Vol. XVI (1953), pp. 32-70.

¹⁸ "Although he who sins venially does not actually direct his action to God, he nevertheless keeps God for his goal habitually" (*I Sent.*, dist. 1, q. 3, ad 4um). "There are two ways of turning away from the immutable end: habitually or actually. He habitually turns away who becomes attached to a goal contrary to that end, and this happens in mortal sin. . . . But he who turns away only actually, posits an act by which he does not tend to God because he is inordinately attached to a means to the end, though not in such a way that he makes the means a goal, and such is the case with venial sin" (*II Sent.*, dist. 42, q. 1, a. 3, ad 5um). "He that sins venially cleaves to a temporal good, not as enjoying it, because he does not fix his end in it, but as using it, by referring it to God, not actually but habitually" (*Summa theol.*, Ia IIae, q. 88, a. 1, ad 3um).

¹⁹ Cf. *II Sent.*, dist. 24, q. 3, a. 5, ad 1um; *Summa theol.*, Ia IIae, q. 88, a. 1, ad 1um.

²⁰ "One turns away from (the immutable end) in an act only when he posits an action by which he does not tend to God because he is inordinately attached to the means, not however in such a way as to take the means for the end, and that is what happens in venial sin" (*II Sent.*, dist. 42, q. 1, a. 3, ad 5um; a. 5, ad 1um). "He who commits venial sin is without the right order of love in some act that regards the means to the end. He is not, however, without the right order absolutely with regard to the end" (*De Malo*, q. 7, a. 1, ad 21um).

²¹ Cf. *De Malo*, q. 7, a. 1, ad 1um; *Summa theol.*, Ia IIae, q. 88, a. 1, ad 1um.

to God as his ultimate end and also tends to some created good, not as a new end, however, but as a means.

In order to clarify the issue, it will be helpful to distinguish the various kinds of venial sin and the various ways in which a man can direct his acts to the ultimate end. First, there is the venial sin which is venial only because of the lack of advertence or deliberation. The object of such an act is grave matter and if the human act were perfect, the sin would be mortal. Such is the abortive mortal sin to which Father de Letter refers,²² and it is so named because of the imperfection of the act as a deliberate act. We cannot speak of the ordination of such acts to the ultimate end. Secondly, there is the venial sin which is fully deliberate and is venially sinful because of its object. But if a deliberate venial sin is a human act, it must, as a human act, be directed to some ultimate end. We have already seen that whereas mortal sin effects a substitution for the true ultimate end, venial sin does not result in the rejection of the ultimate end. Therefore, it is the fully deliberate venial sin which we have in mind when we raise the question of venial sin and the ultimate end.

Venial sin is not ordained to God by reason of its nature as a sinful act, but by reason of the person who performs the sinful act. Indeed, since venial sin implies an inordinateness in regard to the means, while the ultimate end is retained, it seems futile to raise the question of whether venial sin as such has an ultimate end. But the Christian in the state of grace, even as he commits a venial sin, preserves his resolution not to admit any other ultimate end but God, and in this sense, at least, the ultimate end exerts a negative influence on the commission of venial sin. Therefore, it is not an empty gesture to ask whether the just Christian in any way directs his venially sinful acts to the ultimate end.

A man can direct himself to his ultimate end in three ways: actually, virtually, and habitually. "Hence man can desire his ultimate end without deliberating or choosing definite means to attain it; and he can also deliberate about the means without thinking actually about the end to which they are ordained. Thus, when a man has definitely made up his mind with regard to the end to which he is

²² Cf. "Venial Sin and Its Final Goal," *The Thomist*, Vol. XVI (1953), pp. 38 f.

going to direct his activity, when he has actually willed the end as the aim of all his activity, he begins to take counsel with himself as to how he may best, in practice attain his end. Without now actually desiring this end, he is moved by this desire to choose the means to the end. In this case he is said to have a virtual desire, or intention, of the end, as distinct from the actual intention which preceded it. This choosing of the means is a long and tedious process, and man very easily gets lost among the multiplicity of details which he has to take into account. The thousand and one worries and cares of daily life, the temptations besetting him from within and without, and ever so many other factors, conspire to distract his attention from the consideration of his ultimate end or purpose. He has never retracted his decision about the ultimate aim of all his activity; nor is he now moved by it to take steps to reach this ultimate end; he acts with the desire of his ultimate end, not because of it. In this case he is said to retain an habitual intention or desire of the end."²³

Now, a man cannot direct each and every action of his life to his ultimate end by an actual intention. The best he can do is to direct some of them actually and others virtually. But in view of all the distractions, duties, and demands of daily life, he often does not succeed even in this, but relies on the habitual intention. Thus, St. Thomas states that the Christian, in committing venial sins, still intends the ultimate end and directs his acts to God, not actually, but habitually. And this is possible in view of the fact that venial sin is an inordinateness concerning the means to the ultimate end but not concerning the ultimate end itself. Further, it follows that venial sin is not directly against the precepts but merely beside them, and for all of these reasons, venial sin fulfills only imperfectly and in an analogous sense the definition of sin.

But to what end are venial sins positively ordained? The just Christian who commits venial sins "is quite conscious that such acts are sinful, though only venially so; but he does not consider them expressly in their relation to God; he considers them in relation to his own satisfaction and happiness. This is the end to which he ordains such acts; not any one definite being or reality, but a rather confused

²³ "The Ultimate End of Venial Sin," by A. J. McNicholl, O.P., in *The Thomist*, Vol. II (1940), pp. 375 f.

and indeterminate complexity, which is conceived as capable of making him happier. . . . Since man need not, in choosing means, direct them expressly to some definite end, . . . he may prefer to abstain from ordaining his inordinate acts to any definite ultimate end, merely preferring to will them insofar as they lead to an increase in his actual contentment. He thus ordains them to his supreme good, that indefinite perfection which he seeks in all his acts, and which is, subjectively, his complete happiness."²⁴

Thus, venial sin is not ordained to God and the ultimate end either actually or virtually, and it is not ordained to any created good as an ultimate end. "In order, therefore, to avoid all mortal sin each time that one fails actually to refer an action to God's glory, it is enough to refer oneself and all that one has to God habitually. Now venial sin excludes only actual reference of the human act to God's glory, and not habitual reference, because it does not exclude charity, which refers man to God habitually."²⁵

VENIAL SIN AND PERFECT CHARITY

The fact that venial sin is compatible with habitual ordination to God and the ultimate end and that it does not affect grace and charity directly, gives rise to another question, namely, whether venial sin is an impediment to perfect charity. At least one writer has answered the question in the negative and has gone so far as to state: "It is a theologically certain truth that the will to commit venial sin does not preclude from the soul acts of perfect love and perfect contrition."²⁶ Let us investigate the theological certainty of this statement.

While it is true that the minimum degree of grace and charity suffices to resist all temptations and to merit eternal salvation, it is likewise true that a person receiving a very high degree of grace and charity may remain more or less static and never leave the state of a beginner in the spiritual life. It is immediately evident that whether a just man possesses a minimal degree of charity or a very high degree,

²⁴ Cf. McNicholl, *loc. cit.*

²⁵ *Summa theol.*, Ia IIae, q. 88, a. 1, ad 2um.

²⁶ Henry Semple, S.J., *Heaven Open to Souls* (New York: Benziger, 1916), p. 365.

the habit of charity will in no way be affected by venial sin, for venial sin does not lessen charity. Consequently, venial sin does not preclude the highest perfection of charity and St. Thomas states that it is lawful to maintain that venial sin was compatible even with the eminent perfection of St. John the Baptist and the apostles.²⁷

Moreover, St. John states: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." To be exempt completely from venial sin was the privilege of the Blessed Virgin, the right of Christ, and a proper consequence of the state of innocence, but for man in the state of fallen nature it is impossible to avoid all venial sin collectively, whatever his degree of charity. Does it not follow of necessity, then, that an act of perfect love is compatible with venial sin or the attachment thereto?

The fact of the matter is that the basis of the division of the perfection of charity is neither wholly objective (an ontological consideration of grace and charity, regardless of degree) nor is it wholly subjective (the degree of inhesion of charity in a given soul at a given time), but it involves both aspects. A more accurate view of perfection is the proportionate actuality or operation of one's charity in relation to his habit of charity. In other words, how closely does the individual Christian approximate the precept whereby he is commanded to love God with his whole heart and soul and with all his strength? When he loves God with all the intensity and fervor of which he is capable at a given time.

But if a man at a given time does love God with all the fervor of his charity, it is impossible for him at the same time to commit venial sin or be attached to venial sin. Therefore, venial sin does preclude an act of perfect love of God, because venial sin is a remiss act (at least) and is an impediment to the fervor of charity. In a word, venial sin precludes the *act* of perfect charity but it is compatible with the *habitual* perfection of charity.

"The impossibility of removing these impediments," says Father Osbourn, O.P., "does not prevent men from being perfect wayfarers. After all, these impediments, although incompatible with the perfection of paradise, do not directly oppose the perfection of the wayfarer. Not even venial sins offer direct repugnance or contrariety to the

²⁷ *De Malo*, q. 7, a. 7, ad 8um.

higher degrees of charity which merit for their possessor the title, perfect. Venial malice or culpability, it is true, cannot be consonant with charity after the manner of an ingredient entering into its constitution. It is especially impossible to conceive of a compromise between venial sin and charity on the plane of action. But an actual venial sin can be compatible with habitual charity (and vice versa) in the same subject or person; nor does it involve a total disavowal on one's dedication to charitable acts. And from this standpoint venial sin in no way diminishes the habitual charity which a person possesses and according to the higher degree of which he may be numbered among the perfect. St. Thomas thinks of a venial sin as of a speck of dust lightly cast upon the bosom of charity, marring its outward sheen and radiance, but leaving no stain or spot upon its inner grace and splendor."²⁸

REMISSION OF VENIAL SIN

The very name of venial sin designates the relative ease with which it is pardoned. The man who is already in the state of mortal sin, however, can do nothing to rid himself of venial sin, short of reception of the sacrament of penance or an act of perfect contrition coupled with the intention of receiving the sacrament.²⁹ Moreover, it is possible that in the very reception of the sacrament of penance a man may be forgiven mortal sins, but not venial sins, or certain venial sins and not others.³⁰

But what is the situation with the just Christian in regard to the remission of venial sins? The just man can obtain remission of his venial sins by contrition, attrition, reception of the sacraments such as penance, baptism, extreme unction, and Holy Eucharist, and

²⁸ J. C. Osbourn, O.P., *The Morality of Imperfections*, (Westminster, Md.: The Carroll Press, 1950), pp. 196-7.

²⁹ Denzinger 898: "Docet praeterea, etsi contritionem hanc aliquando caritate perfectam esse contingat hominemque Deo reconciliare, priusquam hoc sacramentum actu suscipiatur, ipsam nihilominus reconciliationem ipsi contritioni sine sacramenti voto, quod in illa includitur, non esse adscribendam."

³⁰ *De Malo*, q. 7: "Whoever does not repent of venial sin, but repents of mortal sin, does not have the impenitence which precludes remission of sin." Cf. *Summa Theol., Suppl.*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 4um

by the use of certain sacramentals.³¹ But if venial sin is incompatible with an act of perfect charity, how can the just man elicit an act of contrition that is sufficient to remit his venial sins outside the sacrament of penance? Because there is a great difference between an act of perfect charity and an act of perfect contrition. The perfect act of charity, as we have seen, brings a man's charity into act in all its intensity; but an act of perfect contrition is possible to one who has even the minimum degree of charity. As Vermeersch points out: "Contrition is called perfect from its motive, not necessarily from its extension or its intensity, for it can co-exist with affection for venial sin."³² And St. Thomas states: "Sorrow, however slight it may be, if it suffices for true contrition, blots out all sin."³³

However, this point need not detain us, for mere attrition suffices for the remission of venial sins and surely, if the just man is capable of an act of contrition, he is capable also of an act of attrition. But if the Council of Trent declares that contrition is perfected by charity while attrition is not,³⁴ does it not follow that the just man's sorrow for sin will always be contrition, since he possesses grace and charity? Again, we must revert to the distinction between habitual and actual charity. It is no more true to say that every act of a just man is imperated by charity than it would be to say that every act of a sinner is a sin. Hence, it may happen that the just Christian, albeit he is in the state of grace, has a sorrow for some venial sin, not because of hatred for the sin and regret at having offended God, but because of the shame at his fault or the fear of punishment. He would not then be performing an act of contrition, but an act of attrition, though the latter suffices for the remission of the venial sin.³⁵

Another question that arises in connection with the remission of venial sin is that of confessions of devotion; i. e., the utility of con-

³¹ It is evident that not all of these means have the same efficacy or power. The possibility of the remission of venial sins outside the sacrament of penance is a certainty. Cf. Denz. 1539.

³² *Theologia Moralís*, III, n. 518.

³³ *Summa theol., Suppl.*, q. 5, a. 3.

³⁴ Cf. Denz. 898.

³⁵ For a comprehensive study of this matter, see "Two Concepts of Attrition and Contrition," by P. de Letter, S.J., in *Theological Studies*, March, 1950, pp. 3-33.

fession for those who have only venial sins to confess. If venial sin is so easily remitted, does it not frequently happen that persons in the state of grace are already forgiven their sins before they receive the sacrament of penance? Does this not then render useless the absolution given by the priest? Would it not seem that one is exposing the sacrament to nullity in such cases?

That the reception of the sacrament of penance by those who have only venial sins to confess is not futile and does not expose the sacrament to nullity is verified by the fact that the Code of Canon Law explicitly commands weekly confession of persons who are presumed normally to make confessions of devotion. Moreover, the Church has declared that confessions of devotion are not to be discouraged.³⁶ From a theological point of view it must be stated that the sacrament of penance is not directed solely to the remission of sins but that it also has preservative and healing powers. Thus, the sacrament looks to the past in remitting sin, but it looks to the future in proffering the graces needed in view of subsequent temptations.

"Some venial sins are not remitted in the sacrament of penance because they have already been remitted by an act of contrition before absolution. They are then submitted as are any other previously forgiven sins."³⁷ Hence, the importance of appreciating the healing and preserving graces of the sacrament, the greater certitude that comes from the reception of the sacrament, since it takes its effect *ex opere operato*, and the stronger protection against future temptations.

VENIAL SIN AND MORAL IMPERFECTIONS

The problem of the morality of imperfections is one that has intrigued theologians since the seventeenth century and in the course of the centuries arguments based on reason and authority have been put forth by both sides of the controversy. This is not the place to enter upon a detailed account of the history of the argument nor even to evaluate the opinions and arguments of the various contenders.³⁸

³⁶ Denz. 1539.

³⁷ Merkelbach, O.P., *Summa Theologiae Moralis*, III, n. 460.

³⁸ For an authoritative account of the history of the problem and an objective presentation of the divergent opinions, see *The Morality of Imperfections*, by James C. Osbourn, O.P. (Westminster, Md.: The Carroll Press, 1950).

Rather, we shall content ourselves with stating the argument and then seeking for a solution in the light of the doctrine already enunciated concerning venial sin. The question to be answered is whether or not moral imperfections are sins.

Lehmkuhl, Genicot, and Noldin affirm that moral imperfections are not venial sins but they displease God. Tanquerey would maintain that where there is no infraction of a law or command, there is no sin, but only an imperfection. St. Alphonsus would permit conditional absolution for a penitent who confesses only imperfections, but an imperfection as such is not a sin.

According to Slater: "A sin must be distinguished from an imperfection. . . . A negative imperfection is merely the omission of a good action which is not of precept; and such an omission, when grace moves one to perform the act, though not a sin, yet is a falling short of the perfection which was within one's reach. A positive imperfection is a violation of God's will made known to us, but which does not strictly oblige us. God wishes a religious to observe his rule, but frequently this does not bind under sin. A positive imperfection is falling short not only of the perfection which was offered to us and which we might have had, but also of that which God wishes us to have, though He did not oblige us to have it."³⁹

Hugon and Garrigou-Lagrange maintain that there is a distinction between venial sin and moral imperfections, although the latter designate a lack of generosity in the acts of virtue and therefore rob us of a certain degree of perfection. Merkelbach teaches that imperfections are not sins, but if they are deliberate and especially if they are habitual, they are not without fault. Prümmer holds that moral imperfections performed without sufficient reason are sinful. Callan and McHugh consider moral imperfections to be those acts whose motives are reasonable, though they imply a falling short of a higher degree of goodness which could have been realized.

St. John of the Cross writes as follows on this question: "Yet the

³⁹ Slater, *Theologia Moralis*, I, p. 82. In regard to the obligation of the rule for religious, it is true that the rule does not bind under pain of a sin of disobedience against one's vow, but unless there is a sufficiently justifying cause, a religious easily sins against the virtue of obedience or the infraction serves as the material for some other vice such as contempt, slothfulness, anger, etc.

other voluntary desires, whether they be of mortal sin, which are the gravest, or of venial sin, which are less grave, or whether they be only of imperfections, which are the least grave of all, must be driven away, every one, and the soul must be free from them all, howsoever small they be, if it is to come to this complete union."⁴⁰ Finally, Vermeersch holds that moral imperfections cannot be absolved from blame because they can never be free from all corruption in their motivation.

The mere cataloging of opinions by various theologians on this problem arouses in us the suspicion that the root of the difficulty may lie in the definition of moral imperfection. Here, as in so many other theological disputes, a divergence in the definition of terms will logically lead to a divergence in the conclusions. Bearing in mind the general doctrines on the nature of venial sin, it would seem that we could reach a solution by distinguishing the various types of moral imperfection.

A positive imperfection in a moral act is the result of a positive privation, implying the lack of perfection which is required for the complete moral integrity of that act; a negative imperfection in a moral act signifies the absence of some further perfection which is possible but in no wise due. Thus, in regard to negative imperfections, actions which restricted by human weakness, insuperable obstacles, or the limitation of one's powers are good and meritorious acts. Must we say, conversely, that every positive moral imperfection is a venial sin, or must we make a further distinction?

If the positive moral imperfection is defined as an act which lacks the moral perfection which is due, in view of the agent and circumstances, and end, then every positive moral imperfection is a sin. Thus, for Father Osbourn, the expression *positive moral imperfection* signifies "a choice or omission falling upon matter against which the better good concretely accepted urges and invites us in a special way. . . . It is brought to the attention of a certain individual not merely that this particular alternative seems undoubtedly to be the better good for him here and now in these surroundings, but what is more, he feels a special attraction for this alternative in the sense that his own reason seems to counsel this choice in preference to the

⁴⁰ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book I, chap. 11 (Peers trans., p. 50).

other alternative. He is aware, in fact convinced, that this might be some movement of grace prompting him or an inspiration of the Holy Ghost persuading him to accept this better good. Hence, the positive moral imperfection may be described as the omission of the better good or of a work of counsel in the face of one's own reason urging the opposite and in the face of a divine inspiration inviting the contrary."⁴¹ When thus qualified and defined, how can the positive moral imperfection be called anything other than a sin, implying as it does a movement contrary to one's own prudent judgment and a spurning of actual grace or inspiration? Indeed, many theologians may be tempted to ask why the term positive moral imperfection has been used at all in such a case.

If, however, the positive moral imperfection is defined as that act which impedes an action which is better, though not of obligation, then the positive moral imperfection is not a sin, for a good act does not cease to be good even if it could be better. The negative imperfection is not a sin because there is lack of consent or deliberate malice; the positive imperfection (as here defined) is not a sin because of the lack of obligation. And this lack of obligation, it should be noted may be the result of special circumstances surrounding the act. Hence, a just recompense or a reasonable and proportionate cause will suffice to free the positive moral imperfection of the stigma of sin. On the other hand, a positive moral imperfection becomes a sin if a man goes contrary to his own prudent judgment, in view of the circumstance surrounding the act, or if he deliberately rejects what is patently the will of God or a divine inspiration. But to define a positive moral imperfection universally as the lack of moral perfection which is *due* is already to surround that action with moral obligation and cast it into the realm of the sinful.

VENIAL SIN AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

If we wish to understand clearly the effect of venial sin on growth in the spiritual life, it is necessary to recall the nature and division of Christian perfection and the meaning of the precept of charity. Once these elements have been discussed, it should be relatively easy to demonstrate the harmful effects of venial sin on the spiritual life.

⁴¹ Osbourn, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

Theologians commonly teach that Christian perfection *simpliciter* consists in charity, and the reason for this is both simple and profound. Thus, St. Thomas states that a thing is said to be perfect according as it realizes its proper end; but charity unites the soul with God, who is man's ultimate end; therefore, the essence of Christian perfection is charity.⁴² And lest this doctrine be understood as applying simply and solely to the minimum degree of charity which is required for salvation, the Angelic Doctor continues: "Such perfection as this can be had in this life and in two ways. First, by the removal from a man's affections of everything that is contrary to charity, such as mortal sin, and there can be no charity apart from this perfection. Therefore, this perfection is necessary for salvation. Secondly, by the removal from a man's affections not only of that which is contrary to charity, but also of that which hinders the soul's affections from tending wholly to God. It is possible to have charity apart from this second perfection, for example, in beginners and in the proficient."⁴³

We have already seen that venial sin is not only perfectly compatible with grace and charity, but that isolated venial sins are to be found even in the lives of the very holy. It would seem, therefore, that the effect of venial sin on the spiritual life is negligible, since no man can possibly avoid all venial sins collectively and the venial sins themselves do not alter in any way the degree of grace and charity in the soul of the just. One could readily subscribe to such a position if it were true that the perfection to which Christians are called is the minimum perfection of grace and charity which is necessary for salvation.

But the minimum degree of grace and charity is not the goal or *terminus*; it is only the beginning, and this is evident from the very precept of charity and the nature of charity to increase. If we consider a man's degree of charity at any given time, then surely that man can be said to be perfect in an ontological and static sense; but if we consider the man's charity as operative and functional, then we

⁴² Cf. *Summa theol.*, IIa IIae, a. 1. "The perfection of the Christian life consists simply in charity, but in the other virtues relatively" (*ibid.*, ad 2um).

⁴³ *Summa theol.*, IIa IIae, q. 184, a. 2. We see from this text that in the mind of St. Thomas there is a great difference between the degree of charity required for salvation (the minimum suffices) and the degree of charity required for Christian perfection *in via*.

must say that he is possibly a long way from perfection in the dynamic and psychological sense.⁴⁴ As to the precept of charity, there can be no doubt that it aims at the complete love of God which St. Thomas refers to as being proper to the perfect, while common perfection is found in the beginners and the proficient. Although this high degree of perfection is not commanded to be had here and now, it must be the goal toward which the Christian strives without interruption.⁴⁵ The precept, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and with all thy strength," means simply that the Christian is to endeavor to reach that habitual state in which he loves God as much as he possibly can, according to his degree of grace and charity.

Once we understand the type of perfection which is posited as the goal of every Christian by the precept of charity, it becomes immediately evident that venial sin is not to be readily tolerated in the spiritual life. We can also understand why some of the mystics and spiritual writers have written as they did about the harmful effects

⁴⁴ James C. Osbourn, O.P., *The Morality of Imperfections*, pp. 201 ff.: "Positive human law usually exacts no more than the precise matter or work commanded, but divine law reaches over the external work into the regions of purpose. The intrinsic mode of virtuous action consists of that contribution made by the will in accepting and proposing to accomplish any act for the proximate end (*finis operis*) to which it is ordained by its nature.... The intrinsic mode of charity as prescribed by the great precept is that special totality of love signified by the terms, *thy whole heart, thy whole soul, etc.*... Therefore the intrinsic mode of charity connotes the totality of action which falls under the strict reaches of the precept of charity. It becomes evident immediately in view of the three stages of a wayfarer's perfection described above that the mode of charity generally speaking will not consist in a determinate indivisible such as an inflexibly defined degree of charity or a given number of subordinated actions. On the contrary and owing to variant subjective factors in human activity, the intrinsic mode of charity, for instance, will have a certain latitude ranging from the merest minimum sufficient in one person to a greater maximum required of another for common perfection. It is precisely this general minimum of activity sufficient for all or any man to avoid mortal sin which the precept requires as far as the intrinsic mode of charity is concerned. At this minimum of activity as a starting point, the extrinsic mode of the precept or virtue of charity begins and extends through a wide range to the maximum, namely, the charity of heaven."

⁴⁵ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Perfectione Vitae Spiritualis*, c. 6.

of venial sin in the life of the Christian, though perhaps at first glance the statements may have appeared excessive and unduly exaggerated.

What are the effects of venial sin on the spiritual life? First, venial sin lessens the fervor of charity and decreases the generosity of the soul in the service of God. St. Thomas speaks of venial sin as a hindrance to charity or a retardation of charity. Thus, he says that by venial sin man's affection is retarded so that it does not bear promptly on God.⁴⁶ Again, speaking of passive scandal, he says that it is always a sin, because the individual is either completely thrown off the course to God or he is retarded in his advance.⁴⁷

Secondly, venial sin may deprive the soul of many actual graces. This may happen either because the venial attachment to created things prevents the soul from cooperating with an actual grace or because the venial attachment renders the soul indisposed and unworthy for the reception of an actual grace. These first two effects are often the reason why otherwise devout souls seem to reach a point in their spiritual growth when further progress is impossible. St. John of the Cross treats at length of these two evil effects in Book I of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

Thirdly, venial sin makes the practice of virtue increasingly difficult. Habits are acquired through the repetition of acts and they must be preserved through use. Consequently, however strong a man may be in a given virtue, the repetition of acts that are venially sinful will effectively weaken and ultimately destroy that virtue and supplant it with the opposite vice. Therefore, one should not lightly dismiss venial sins because they are so small, but one should be concerned about them because they are so numerous.

The fourth effect follows the third by a logical necessity, for if the repetition of venial sins renders the practice of virtue difficult and even disposes for the acquisition of the opposite vice, it is evident that venial sin predisposes for mortal sin. The individual becomes increasingly attached to some created thing, the fervor of charity is gradually lessened, a habit of sinning is slowly cultivated, and the

⁴⁶ Cf. *Summa theol.*, IIIa, q. 87, a. 1.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Comm. in IV Sent.*, dist. 38, q. 2, a. 2.

day may come at last when the individual makes the tragic leap from venial to mortal sin.

The last three effects of venial sin are the debt of temporal punishment (to be paid in this life or the next), the possibility of a lesser degree of glory in heaven, and a kind of stain. It should be noted, however, that venial sin does not cause a stain on the soul as such, for venial sin is not destructive of the splendor of grace in the soul. Rather, the stain of venial sin refers to the fact that such sins prevent the full brilliance of grace and the virtues from shining forth in the life and deeds of the Christian.

From all that has been said, it should be evident that venial sin is truly an impediment to the attainment of Christian perfection in the sense of a complete and total love of God to the best of one's ability. Here again we see the different points of view that arise from a purely legalistic approach to Christian perfection and the progress that is measured by the demands of love. It is the difference between the hireling and the son; between the Pharisee and the Publican. The Christian who measures his life and his actions by the law will ask, "What must I do?" But the Christian who lives according to that higher law of charity will ask, "What else can I do?"

JORDAN AUMANN, O.P.
St. Peter's Priory
Winona, Minn.

DIGEST OF THE DISCUSSION

The discussion was opened by a question from Father Carraher, of Alma, California who asked for a clarification of the statement that venial sin tends to its object as to a means while mortal sin tends to its object as end. Father Aumann replied that venial sin uses some means to the ultimate end inordinately, while retaining the habitual order to the ultimate end; on the other hand, mortal sin rejects the true ultimate end and substitute another end that is incompatible with the true end.

Father Sheridan, S.J. (Toronto) referred to the distinction of sin as *praeter legem* and *contra legem* and inquired about the intrinsic element that makes some acts destructive of charity.

Father Connell, C.S.S.R. (Washington) admitted having difficulty with the same problem and posed the matter in the concrete by offering the example of the different effects, *ceteris paribus*, of the theft of \$1.00 and of \$1,000.00.

Father Kelly, S.J. (St. Mary's, Kansas) offered the explanation that the will to injure another is different in each of these cases. Charity, like human friendship, is susceptible of different degrees of injury.

Father Donlan, O.P. (St. Rose, Dubuque) said that the distinction between venial and mortal sins on the part of their respective material objects derives from the quality of those objects. Certain objects are of such quality that they are incompatible with charity and cannot be subordinated to the ultimate end. In the order of the universe, such objects absorb man's faculties to such a degree that the pursuit of them effectively excludes God. The material objects of venial sin are of such a quality that they do not and can not constitute the material cause of a serious deordination, and can be subordinated, by a habitual intention, to the ultimate end.

Father Connell, C.S.S.R. stated the principle that the gravity of an offense is measured by the dignity of the one offended. Does not the application of this principle make any offense infinitely evil? He cited the case of Original Sin and averred that he found difficulty in understanding why St. Thomas taught that Adam and Eve in the state of innocence were incapable of first committing a venial sin.

Father Hennessy, S.J. (Fordham) explained that the subjective dispositions of the first parents contained the explanation for this teaching.

Father Palmer, S.J. (Fordham) cited the teaching of Cardinal Billot who shows that venial sin indirectly professes a love for God insofar as it demonstrates the sinner's unwillingness to sever completely his union with God.

Father Kelly, S.J. (St. Mary's, Kan.) stressed the objective distinction between venial and mortal sin. To reduce the distinction to a purely subjective disposition is contrary to Catholic teaching and is an error that is found at the very heart of Protestant moral thought.

In what turned out to be the concluding remark, an unidentified speaker stated that there are certain sins which are always objectively

mortal. Blasphemy of the Creator, for example, is always objectively a mortal sin. While the imperfection of the act can render such an act venial, this in no way changes the nature of the material object considered in itself.

T. C. DONLAN, O.P.
St. Rose Priory
Asbury Road
Dubuque, Iowa