

Lesson 6: ON SIN AND ITS KINDS

51. Q. Is Original Sin the only kind of sin?

A. Original Sin is not the only kind of sin; there is another kind of sin which we commit ourselves, called actual sin.

Sin is first or chiefly divided into original and actual; that is, into the sin we inherit from our first parents and the sin we commit ourselves. We may commit "**actual**" sin in two ways; either by doing what we should not do-stealing, for example-and thus we have a sin of commission, that is, a bad act committed; or by not doing what we should do-not hearing Mass on Sunday, for example-and thus we have a sin of omission, that is, a good act omitted. So it is not enough to simply do no harm, we must also do some good. Heaven is a reward, and we must do something to merit it. Suppose a man employed a boy to do the work of his office, and when he came in the morning found that the boy had neglected the work assigned to him, and when spoken to about it simply answered: "Sir, I did no harm"; do you think he would be entitled to his wages? Of course he did not and should do no harm; but is his employer to pay him wages for that? Certainly not. In like manner, God is not going to reward us for doing no harm; but on the contrary, He will punish us if we do wrong, and give no reward unless we perform the work He has marked out for us. Neither would the office boy deserve any wages if he did only what pleases himself, and not the work assigned by his master. In the same way, God will not accept any worship or religion but the one He has revealed. He tells us Himself how He wishes to be worshipped, and our own invented methods will not please Him. Hence we see the folly of those who say that all religions are equally good, and that we can be saved by practicing any of them. We can be saved only in the one religion which God Himself has instituted, and by which He wishes to be honored. Many also foolishly believe, or say they believe, that if they are honest, sober, and the like, doing no injury to anyone, they shall be saved without the practice of any form of religious worship. But how about God's laws and commands? Are they to be despised, disregarded, and neglected entirely, without any fear of punishment? Surely not! And persons who thus think they are doing no harm are neglecting to serve God-the greatest harm they can do, and for which they will lose Heaven. God, we are told, assigned to everyone in this world a certain work to perform in a particular state of life, and this work is called "vocation." One, for instance, is to be a priest; another, a layman; one married; another single, etc. It is important for us to discover our true vocation; for if we are in the state of life to which God has called us, we shall be happy; but if we select our own work, our own state of life without consulting Him, we shall seldom be happy in it. How are we to know our vocation? Chiefly by praying to God and asking Him to make it known to us. Then if He gives us a strong inclination-constant, or nearly constant-for a certain state of life, and the ability to fulfill its duties, we may well believe that God wishes us to be in that state.

After we have begged God's assistance, we must ask our confessor's advice in the matter, and listen attentively to what the Holy Ghost inspires him to say. The signs of our vocation are, therefore, as stated: first, a strong desire, and second, an aptitude for the state to which we believe we are called. For example, a young man might be very holy, but if unable to learn, he could never be a priest. Another might be very learned and holy, but if too sickly to perform a priest's duties, he could not, or at least would not, be ordained. Another might be learned and healthy, but not virtuous, and so he could never be a priest. Aptitude, therefore, means all the qualities necessary, whether of mind, or soul, or body. The same is true for a young girl who wishes to become a religious; and the same, indeed, for any person's vocation. We should never enter a state of life to which we are not called, simply to please parents or others. Neither should we be persuaded by them to give up a state to which we are called; for we should embrace our true vocation at any sacrifice, that in it we may serve God better, and be more certain of saving our souls. Thus, parents and guardians who prevent their children from entering the state to which they are called may sin grievously by exposing them to eternal loss of salvation. Their sin is all the greater when they try to influence their children in this matter for selfish or worldly motives. As they may be selfish and prejudiced without knowing it, they too, should ask the advice of their confessor, and good persons of experience. Oh! how many children, sons and daughters, are made unhappy all the days of their life by parents or superiors forcing them into some state to which they were not called, or by keeping them from one to which they were called. This matter of your vocation rests with yourselves and Almighty God, and you are free to do what He directs without consideration for anyone.

52. Q. What is actual sin?

A. Actual sin is any willful thought, word, deed, or omission contrary to the law of God.

Three ways we may sin, by "**thought**"--allowing our minds to dwell on sinful things; "**word**"--by cursing, telling lies, etc.; "**deed**"--by any kind of bad action. But to be sins, these thoughts, words and deeds must be willful; that is, we must fully know what we are doing, and be free in doing it. Then they must be "**contrary to the law of God**"; that is, violate some law He commands us to obey, whether it be a law He gave directly Himself, or through His Church. We can also violate God's law by neglecting to observe it, and thus sin, provided the neglect be willful, and the thing neglected commanded by God or by His Church.

53. Q. How many kinds of actual sin are there?

A. There are two kinds of actual sin--mortal and venial.

"**Mortal**," that is, the sin which kills the soul. When a man receives a very severe wound, we say he is mortally wounded; that is, he will die from the wound. As breath shows there is life in the body, so grace is the life of the soul; when all the breath is out of the body, we say the man is dead. He can perform no action to help himself or others. So when all grace is out of the soul we say it is dead, because it is reduced to the condition of a dead body. It can do no action worthy of merit, such as a soul should do; that is, it can do no action that God is bound to reward--it is dead. But you will say the soul never dies. You mean it will never cease to exist; but we call it dead when it has lost all its power to do supernatural good.

"**Venial**" sin does not drive out all the grace; it wounds the soul, it weakens it just as slight wounds weaken the body. If it falls very frequently into venial sin, it will fall very soon into mortal sin also; for the Holy Scripture says that he that contemneth small things shall fall by little and little. (*Ecclus. 19:1*). A venial sin seems a little thing, but if we do not avoid it we shall by degrees fall into greater, or mortal, sin. Venial sin makes God less friendly to us and displeases Him. Now if we really love God, we will not displease Him even in the most trifling things.

54. Q. What is mortal sin?

A. Mortal sin is a grievous offense against the law of God.

"**Grievous**" that is, very great or serious. "**Against the law.**" If we are in doubt whether anything is sinful or not, we must ask ourselves: is it forbidden by God or His Church? and if we do not know of any law forbidding it, it cannot be a sin, at least for us.

Suppose, for example, a boy should doubt whether it is sinful or not to fly a kite. Well, is there any law of God or of His Church saying it is sinful to fly a kite? If not, then it cannot be a sin. But it might be sinful for another reason, namely, his parents or superiors might forbid it, and there is a law of God saying you must not disobey your parents or superiors. Therefore a thing not sinful in itself, that is, not directly forbidden by God or His Church, may become sinful for some other reason well known to us.

We must not, however, doubt concerning the sinfulness or lawfulness of everything we do; for that would be foolish and lead us to be scrupulous. If we doubt at all we should have some good reason for doubting, that is, for believing that the thing we are about to do is or is not forbidden. When, therefore, we have such a doubt we must seek information from those who can enlighten us on the subject, so that we may act without the danger of sinning. It is our intention that makes the act we perform sinful or not. Let me explain. Suppose during Lent a person should mistake Friday for Thursday and should eat meat--that person would not commit a real sin, because it is not a sin to eat meat on an ordinary Thursday. He would commit what we call a material sin; that is, his action would be a sin if he really knew what he was doing. On the other hand, if the person, thinking it was Friday when it was really Thursday, ate meat, knowing it to be forbidden, that person would commit a mortal sin, because he intended to do so. Therefore, if what we do is not known to be a sin while we do it, it is no sin for us and cannot become a sin afterwards. But as soon as we know or learn that what we did was wrong, it would be a sin if we did the same thing again. In the same way, everything we do thinking it to be wrong or sinful is wrong and sinful for us, though it may not be wrong for those who know better. Again, it is sinful to judge others for doing wrong, because they may not know that what they do is sinful. It would be better for us to instruct than to blame them. The best we can do, therefore, is to learn well all God's laws and the laws of His Church as they are taught in the catechism, so that we may know when we are violating them or when we are not, i.e., when we are sinning and when we are not.

55. Q. Why is this sin called mortal?

A. This sin is called mortal because it deprives us of spiritual life, which is sanctifying grace. and brings everlasting death and damnation on the soul.

When the soul is sent to Hell it is dead forever, because never again will it be able to do a single meritorious act.

56. Q. How many things are necessary to make a sin mortal?

A. To make a sin mortal three things are necessary: a grievous matter, sufficient reflection, and full consent of the will.

"Grievous matter." To steal is a sin. Now, if you steal only a pin the act of stealing in that case could not be a mortal sin, because the "matter," namely, the stealing of an ordinary pin, is not grievous. But suppose it was a diamond pin of great value, then it would surely be "grievous matter." **"Sufficient reflection,"** that is, you must know what you are doing at the time you do it. For example, suppose while you stole the diamond pin you thought you were stealing a pin with a small piece of glass, of little value, you would not have sufficient reflection and would not commit a mortal sin till you found out that what you had stolen was a valuable diamond; if you continued to keep it after learning your mistake, you would surely commit a mortal sin. **"Full consent:"** Suppose you were shooting at a target and accidentally killed a man: you would not have the sin of murder, because you did not will or wish to kill a man.

Therefore three things are necessary that your act may be a mortal sin:

The act you do must be bad, and sufficiently important;

You must reflect that you are doing it, and know that it is wrong;

You must do it freely, deliberately, and willfully.

57. Q. What is venial sin?

A. Venial sin is a slight offense against the law of God in matters of less importance, or in matters of great importance it is an offense committed without sufficient reflection or full consent of the will.

"Slight " that is, a small offense or fault; called **"venial,"** not because it is not a sin, but because God pardons it more willingly or easily than He does a mortal sin. **"Less importance;"** like stealing an ordinary, common pin. **"Great importance;"** like stealing a diamond pin. Without **"reflection"** or **"consent,"** when you did not know it was a diamond and did not intend to steal a diamond.

58. Q. Which are the effects of venial sin?

A. The effects of venial sin are the lessening of the love of God in our heart, the making us less worthy of His help, and the weakening of the power to resist mortal sin.

"Lessening of the love;" because it lessens grace, and grace increases the love of God in us. It displeases God, and though we do not offend Him very greatly, we still offend Him. **"Weakening of the power to resist:"** If a man is wounded, it will be easier to kill him than if he is in perfect health.

So mortal sin will more easily kill a soul already weakened by the wounds of venial sin.

59. Q. Which are the chief sources of sin?

A. The chief sources of sin are seven: Pride, Covetousness, Lust, Anger, Gluttony, Envy, and Sloth; and they are commonly called capital sins.

A **"source"** is that from which anything else comes. The source of a river is the little spring on the Mountainside where the river first begins. This little stream runs down the mountain, and as it goes along gathers strength and size from other little streams running into it. It cuts its way through the meadows, and marks the course and is the beginning of a great river, sweeping all things before it and carrying them off to the ocean. Now, if someone in the beginning had stopped up the little spring on the mountain-the first source of the river-there would have been no river in that particular place. It is just the same with sin. There is one sin that is the source, and as it goes along like the stream it gathers strength; other sins follow it and are united with it. Again: each of these **"capital sins,"** as they are called, is like a leader or a captain in an army, with so many others under him and following him. Now, if you take away the head, the other members of the body will perish; so if you destroy the capital sin, the other sins that follow it will disappear also. Very few persons have all the capital sins: some are guilty of one of them, some of two, some of three, but few if any are guilty of them all. The one we are guilty of, and which is the cause of all our other sins, is called our *predominant sin* or our *ruling passion*. We should try to find it out, and labor to overcome it.

Every one of these capital sins has a great many other sins following it.

"Pride" is an inordinate self-esteem. Pride comes under the First Commandment; because by thinking too much of ourselves we neglect God, and give to ourselves the honor due to Him. Of what have we to be proud? Of our personal appearance? Disease may efface in one night every trace of beauty. Of our clothing? It is not ours; we have not produced it; most of it is taken from the lower animals-wool from the sheep, leather from the ox, feathers from the bird, etc. Are we proud of our wealth, money or property? These may be stolen or destroyed by fire. The learned may become insane, and so we have nothing to be proud of but our good works. All that we have is from God, and we can have it only as long as He wishes. We had nothing

coming into the world, and we leave it with nothing but the shroud in which we are buried; and even this does not go with the soul, but remains with the body to rot in the earth. Soon after death our bodies become so offensive that even our dearest friends hasten to place them under ground, where they become the food of worms, a mass of corruption loathsome to sight and smell. Why, then, should we be so proud of this body, and commit so much sin for it, pamper it with every delicacy, only to be the food of worms? This does not mean, however, that we are not to keep our bodies clean, and take good care of them. We are bound to do so, and could not neglect it without committing sin. The one thing to be avoided is taking too much care of them, and neglecting our soul and God on their account. The *followers of pride* are: conceit, hypocrisy, foolish display in dress or conduct, harshness to others, waste of time on ourselves, etc. "**Covetousness**," the same as avarice, greed, etc., is an inordinate desire for worldly goods. "**Inordinate**;" because it is not avarice to prudently provide for the future either for ourselves or others. Covetousness comes under the Tenth Commandment, and is forbidden by it. We must be content with what we have or can get honestly. The *followers of covetousness* are: Want of charity, dishonest dealing, theft, etc. "**Lust**" is the desire for sins of the flesh; for impure thoughts, words, or actions. It comes under the Sixth and Ninth Commandments, and includes all that is forbidden by those Commandments. It is the habit of always violating, or of desiring to violate, the Sixth and Ninth Commandments. Lust and impurity mean the same thing. The *followers of lust* are, generally, neglect of prayer, neglect of the Sacraments, and final loss of faith.

"**Anger**" comes under the Fifth Commandment. It is followed by hatred, the desire of revenge, etc.

"**Gluttony**" is the sin of eating or drinking too much. With regard to eating, it is committed by eating too often; by being too particular about what we eat, by being too extravagant in always looking for the most costly things, that we think others cannot have. With regard to drinking, it is generally committed by taking too much of intoxicating liquors. The drunkard is a glutton and commits the sin of gluttony every time he becomes intoxicated. Gluttony, especially in drink, comes in a manner under the First Commandment, because by depriving ourselves of our reason we cannot give God the honor and respect which is His due. Think of how many sins the drunkard commits. He becomes intoxicated, which in itself is a sin. He deprives himself of the use of reason, abuses God's great gift, and becomes like a brute beast. Indeed in a way he becomes worse than a beast; for beasts always follow the laws that God has given to their nature, and never drink to excess. They obey God, and man is the only one of God's creatures that does not always keep His laws. Think too of the number of insane persons confined in asylums, who would give all in this world for the use of their reason, if they could only understand their miserable condition. Yet the drunkard abuses the gift that would make these poor unfortunate lunatics happy. Again, the drunkard injures his health and thus violates the Fifth Commandment by committing a kind of slow suicide. He loses self-respect, makes use of sinful language; frequently neglects Mass and all his religious duties, exposes himself to the danger of death while in a state of sin, gives scandal to his family and neighbors, and by his bad example causes some to leave or remain out of the true Church. By continued intemperance, he may become insane and remain in that condition till death puts an end to his career and he goes unprepared before the judgment seat of God. Besides all this he squanders the money he should put to a better use and turns God's gifts into a means of offending Him. If a father, he neglects the children and wife for whom he has promised to provide; leaves them cold and hungry while he commits sin with the means that would make them comfortable. Drunkenness therefore is a sin accompanied by many deplorable evils. There are three great sins you should always be on your guard against during your whole lives, namely, drunkenness, dishonesty, and impurity. If you avoid these you will almost surely avoid all other sins; for nearly all sins can be traced back to these three. They are the most dangerous, first, because they have most followers, and secondly, because they grow upon us almost without our knowing it. The drunkard begins perhaps as a boy by taking a little, even very little; the second time he takes a little more; the next time still more, then he begins to be fond of strong drink and can scarcely do without it; finally he becomes the slave of intemperance and sells his soul and body for it. The passions of dishonesty and impurity grow by degrees in the same manner. Therefore avoid them in the beginning and resist them while they are under your power. If you find yourself inclined to any of these sins in your youth, stop them at once.

"**Envy**" is the desire to see another meet with misfortune that we may be benefited by it. We are glad when he does not succeed in his business, we are sorry when anyone speaks well of him, etc. Envy comes under the Eighth Commandment.

"**Sloth**" is committed when we idle our time, and are lazy; when we are indifferent about serving God; when we do anything slowly and poorly and in a way that shows we would rather not do it. They are slothful who lie in bed late in the morning and neglect their duty. Slothful people are often untidy in their personal appearance; and they are nearly always in misery and want, unless somebody else takes care of them. Sloth comes under the First Commandment, because it has reference in a special manner to the way in which we

serve God. How, then, shall we best destroy sin in our souls? By finding out our chief capital sin and rooting it out. If a strong oak tree is deeply rooted in the ground, how will you best destroy its life? By cutting off the branches? No. For with each returning spring new branches will grow. How then? By cutting the root and then the great oak with all its branches will die. In the same way our capital sin is the root, and as long as we leave it in our souls other sins will grow out of it. While we are trying to destroy our sins without touching our capital sin-our chief sin-we are only cutting off branches that will grow again. Indeed a great many people are only cutting off branches all the time and that is why they are not benefited as much as they could be by the prayers they say, Masses they hear, Sacraments they receive, and sermons they listen to. But do not imagine that because you are not becoming better, when you pray, hear Mass, and receive the Sacraments, you are doing no good at all. That would be a great mistake, and just such a thing as the devil would suggest to make persons give up their devotions. What is the use, he might say, of your trying to be good? You are just as bad as you were a year ago. Do not listen to that temptation. Were it not for your prayers and your reception of the Sacraments, you would become a great deal worse than you are. Suppose a man is rowing on the river against a very strong tide. He is rowing as hard as he can and yet he is not advancing one foot up the stream. Is he doing nothing therefore? Ah! he is doing a great deal: he is preventing himself from being carried with the current out into the ocean. He is keeping himself where he is till the force of the tide diminishes, and then he can advance. So they who are trying to be good are struggling against the strong tide of temptation. If they cease to struggle against it, they will be carried out into the great ocean of sin and lost forever. Someday the temptation will grow weaker and then they will be able to advance towards Heaven. We feel temptations most when we are trying to resist them and lead good lives, because we are working against our evil inclinations-the strong tide of our passions. We have no trouble going with them.