

The Cardinal Virtues, Formation of Conscience, & the Nature of Sin:

Rev. Benjamin P. Bradshaw

I.) The 4 Cardinal Virtues: (CCC# 1803-1809)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that a virtue is a “habitual and firm disposition to do the good” (#1803). By our intellect and will we can come to know virtue and thereafter choose it. Because we are made in God’s image and likeness (imago Dei), we have the capacity to reason and the intellect and will to actually know that God exists and thereby choose to have a relationship with Him. We actually grow in virtue by practicing virtue, thus it is “habitual.” Likewise, we grow in sin by practicing sin and our conscience then becomes deadened and desensitized.

The Book of Wisdom tells us: “if anyone loves righteousness, wisdom’s labors are virtues; for she teaches temperance, prudence, justice, and courage (fortitude)” (Wis.8:7).

- 1.) Prudence: CCC#1806: This is the virtue that disposes practical reason to choose the genuine Good in every situation and the right means for achieving it. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience. According to Aristotle, St. Augustine, & St. Thomas Aquinas this is the most important of the virtues because with the help of this virtue one can practically apply basic moral principles to all other virtues. St. Thomas tells us that prudence is “right reason in action” (STH II-II, 47, 2). This is the virtue that guides us practically in specific circumstances to choose what is good and avoid what is evil.
- 2.) Justice: CCC#1807: The constant and firm will to give God and others the respect that they are due. When we give the proper respect due to God this is referred to as the “virtue of religion.” The just man, often mentioned in Scriptures (St. Joseph), is identifiable by habitual right thinking and the good nature of his/her conduct towards others.
- 3.) Temperance: CCC#1809: The moral virtue that moderates the attraction to the pleasures and provides a balance for the use of created goods. This virtue makes certain that our will overcomes our desires and appetites. The temperate person “directs the

sensitive appetites towards what is good and maintains a healthy discretion.”

- 4.) *Fortitude: CCC#1808*: The moral virtue which ensures firmness in difficulty and constancy in the pursuit of the good. This virtue enables us to conquer fear, including fear of death, to face difficult trials, and severe persecutions. John 16:33: “In the world you will have trials, but take courage, I have conquered the world.” This virtue enables one to renounce his/her own life for the greater good of another: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends” (John 15:13).

Growth in virtue is not easy and is acquired slowly over time, like filling a bucket one drop at a time. The Catechism tells us:

“Human virtues acquired by education, by deliberate acts and by perseverance ever-renewed in repeated efforts are purified and elevated by divine grace” (CCC#1810).

II.) The Formation of Conscience:

What is a conscience? Our conscience is: “a judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act” (CCC#1796). The Second Vatican Council refers to our conscience as the “secret core” within each of us: “Man has in his heart a law inscribed by God...His conscience is man’s secret core and his sanctuary” (*Gaudium et Spes*, #16). Thus, in conscience we have the ability to:

- Know what is right and good and to choose it.
- Discern whether judgments we have made were good or evil and to learn from them.

A good conscience makes decisions that are in accord with reason and the law of God (commandments). Each person is obliged to form his/her conscience according to the objective truths of the faith. Thus, we must realize that there is an objective truth that exists outside of what we may ‘think’ is actually true. Our Lord tells us in John’s Gospel: “You will find the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). True freedom then is found not in the ability to “do what I want” or in personal autonomy (which ironically often leads us into greater misery and slavery to sin), but in

discovery of truth and living in accord with it (*Veritatis Splendor/The Splendor or Truth*, John Paul II). We have a duty to align our *subjective* understanding of truth in accordance with the *objective* truths revealed to us in the Deposit of Faith (Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and teachings of the Magisterium). There are many in our culture who deny the existence of any objective truth with which one must conform their moral decision making and lives. This denial of any objective truth is referred to as relativism (“That may be true for you but not for me!”).

Below are some ways for us to actually form our conscience:

- Study: Spending time actually reading Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Catholic faith, such as the Catechism of the Catholic Church.
- Prayer: By regular prayer we come into contact with the “heart” of our faith (CCC#2563), wherein God meets us and brings spiritual depth to what we have learned with our minds. Prayer is vital for proper formation of conscience because without it knowledge of the faith becomes simply another academic exercise. Likewise, one may actually have knowledge of the faith while simultaneously be an unbeliever. In accord with prayer, the frequency of reception of the sacraments forms us in the faith and leads us to a deeper love of Christ and of ourselves; or as the Second Vatican Council states: “Jesus Christ fully reveals man to himself” (G.E.S., #22).
- Practice: As with virtue, we must practice the formation of our conscience, which is often done in seeking the prudent advice of others and learning from our own experience and intuition.

Because we are constantly learning from our mistakes, successes, and failures, it is vital that we do a regular examination of conscience, especially prior to receiving the sacrament of penance.

III.) The Nature of Sin:

Sin is, “the deliberate transgression of the divine law” and is “an offense against God” (Catholic Encyclopedia, 924; CCC#1850). Because God has given us free will in order that we may choose Him, sin constitutes a poor, or at times evil, choice in opposition to Him. In a specific thought, word, or action (or a series of them) a person fails to choose the Good that God has created for him and placed him/herself in contradiction to God. The sinning itself must involve a sufficient knowledge and free consent in order to actually be legitimate. The culpability for the sin lies with the individual,

although others may participate directly or indirectly in the sin as well. The remedy for sin is the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ on the Cross for us. The St. John the Apostle tells us that sin takes on different forms:

“If anyone sees his brother sinning, if the sin is not deadly, he should pray to God and he will give him life. This is only for those whose sin is not deadly. There is such a thing as deadly sin, about which I do not say that you should pray. ¹⁷ All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not deadly (1 John 5:16-17).”

Thus, St. John makes the distinction between venial (non-deadly) and mortal (deadly) sins. The Catholic Church teaches that a mortal sin is a violation of the law of God, or a sin, that is committed “with full knowledge, deliberation, freedom, and consent” of the will (C.E., 925, CCC#1857). In other words while a sin may in fact be always and everywhere a grave/mortal sin, and while one may indeed do it, the personal culpability of the person in the eyes of God for that act may be lessened or altogether non-existent depending on the circumstances. An example of this would be a young teenage girl whose father forces her to have an abortion. While abortion is always an intrinsic evil, she does not commit a mortal sin because there is not freedom and consent of her will. Her father, however, is in fact directly responsible for the gravity of the mortal sin. With regards to Mortal Sin, the Catechism is quick to point out that “feigned ignorance and hardness of heart do not diminish, but rather increase, the voluntary character of sin” (CCC#1859). Thus, when one has not been exposed to the truth or is genuinely ignorant (“unintentional ignorance”) of the Gospel, one’s personal culpability is lessened (CCC#1860). However, when one has chosen ignorance and hardness of heart by thousands of small ‘rejections’ of the Gospel over the course of a lifetime the culpability (responsibility before God) not only remains but increases. For this reason the particular circumstances, the knowledge of the person, and the objective nature of the sin must be taken into account in order to judge the gravity of it and the person’s particular responsibility. The Church teaches that those who die in a state of mortal sin are separated forever from God in hell:

“To die in a state of mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from him forever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called ‘hell’” (CCC# 1033).

The Church teaches that “sin is a personal act,” and we are personally responsible for our own sins. Similarly, we can also be responsible before God for those sins actually committed by others when we cooperate with them (CCC#1868). The following are some ways in which we can take part the sins of others and thus become partially responsible for them:

- By participating directly and voluntarily in them.
- By ordering, advising, praising, or approving of them.
- By not disclosing or not hindering them when we have an obligation to do so.
- By protecting evil doers (encouraging an environment of evil action).

By encouraging and supporting the sin of others we participate in the evil itself either *formally*, when we actually take part in the evil act of the person, or *materially*, when we do not actually perform the act but we encourage it by support or silence. Likewise, each human person is endowed with the Natural Law within them, which is the ingrained capacity to distinguish between what is inherently good and what is evil. Thus, to some extent the individual must attempt to listen to and form their own conscience with regards to that Natural Law:

“The Natural Law is nothing other than the light of understanding placed in us by God; through it we know what we must do and what we must avoid. God has given this light or law at creation” (CCC#1955, St. Thomas Aquinas).

The Catechism acknowledges the “diversity of cultures” that exist in the world and that each culture has varied moral norms for the people, but that all men and women are accountable to the Natural Law of God within them (CCC#1957).

Add to this understanding of sin, the difference between the sin of commission and the sin of omission: The sin of commission is when one freely chooses to commit an evil act (EX: Stealing). The sin of omission is when one fails to do something they are required to do out of apathy, fear, neglect, etc (EX: Skipping mass on Sunday).

So what then is the cause of sin, death, and evil in the world? Our Catechism answers this question head-on in explaining the last line of the Our Father, “Deliver us from evil”:

“In this petition, evil is not an abstraction, but refers to a person, Satan, the Evil One, the angel who opposes God...Satan is ‘the deceiver of the

whole world.’ Through him sin and death entered the world and by his definitive defeat all creation will be ‘freed from the corruption of sin and death’...When we ask to be delivered from the Evil One, we pray as well to be freed from all evils, present, past, and future, of which he is the author or instigator (CCC# 2851-2852).”

While the Fall of Adam and Eve (Original Sin) was in fact a tragedy, we also speak of God’s Providence and economy of salvation which was always there to save us (CCC#1076, 1093). All of humanity still suffers the consequences of the sin of Adam and Eve (concupiscence), even though we are washed clean of Original Sin in baptism (CCC#396-402). The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans:

“By one man’s disobedience many [that is, all men] were made sinners...Sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned...Then as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men” (Romans 5:12,19; 5:18).

In the Church’s Exultet, traditionally sung by the deacon at the Easter Vigil we hear:

O happy fault,
O necessary sin of Adam,
which gained for us so great a Redeemer!

O certe necessarium Adae peccatum,
quod Christi morte deletum est!
O felix culpa,
quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem!

Thus, while sin itself is always a tragedy, we rejoice at the Providence of God in redeeming humanity by his divine mercy and goodness.

The Popes themselves have referred to a final form of sin which is likewise alluded to in the Catechism of the Catholic Church under the section of The Human Community and our responsibilities to society (CCC#1877-1889). This form of sin is corporate or societal sin, which Pope John Paul II referred to as “structures of sin” (see: *Centessimus Annus/On the 100th Year of Rerum Novarum, Sollicitudo rei Socialis/On Social Concern*). In his encyclical *Sollicitudo rei Socialis/On Social Concern*, JP II

notes that we must avoid building “structures of sin” which are based on a “cult of having,” which ignore the needs of the poor, and which are based on unbridled capitalism and greed (#28). On the contrary, we must promote what Pope Paul VI called “a civilization of love” for the good of all of humanity (#33). When we fail to confront the evils of a culture or contribute to these structures of sin (“Culture of Death,” *Evangelium Vitae*) by the sin of omission, we take part in that sin by our lack of diligence, action, and defense of the truth. An example of this would be a Catholic politician who publically supports abortion rights. By their words they claim to be Catholic and yet in their actions they blatantly deny a basic tenant of Catholicism, which is the defense of the dignity of the human person and which is the first principal of social justice; namely the right to simply exist. Such people are guilty of the sin of scandal, or teaching leading others into sin by their own actions (CCC#2284). Jesus Himself referred to this:

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. ⁷ Woe to the world because of things that cause sin! Such things must come, but woe to the one through whom they come! (Matthew 18:6-7).”

It has been said that sin is “missing the mark” of good. Dr. Scott Hahn addresses this in his book *Lord, Have Mercy* on the sacrament of Reconciliation:

“We, too, sin not because we want what is evil, but because we want what isn’t good enough. We give our hearts, our bodies, and our souls to trifles and passing sensations when we should go, instead, to the summit of all pleasures, the eternal creator of all joy; and in fixating on God’s gifts, we turn our backs to the giver” (p.80-81).

Thus, we can clearly say that sin blinds us to reality because the only reality we see is ourselves, much like an alcoholic that sees only his addiction, while ruining his/her marriage, job, family, etc. The more we sin, the more we are blind to reality. The more we practice virtue and humility, the more we grow in genuine beatitude/happiness and the more we want to sacrifice for others. The psalmist refers to this in Psalm 36:

“Sin directs the heart of the wicked; their eyes are closed to the fear of God. ³ For they live with the delusion: their guilt will not be known and hated. ⁴ Empty and false are the words of their mouth; they have ceased to be wise and do good” (Psalm 36:2-4).

St. Gregory of Nyssa addresses the blinding nature of sin and the spiritual vision that is achieved by reconciliation with God:

“If your mind is untainted by any evil, free from sin, and purified from all stain, then indeed you are blessed because your sight is keen and clear. Once purified, you see things that others cannot see. When the mists of sin no longer cloud the eye of your soul, you see that blessed vision in the peace and purity of your own heart” (*De beatitudinibus*, Oratio 6).

Likewise, St. Paul himself refers to the darkening of the mind that inevitably occurs when one is lost in sin:

“For although they knew God they did not accord him glory as God or give him thanks. Instead, they became vain in their reasoning, and their senseless minds were darkened” (Romans 1:21).

As we sin, we become more and more misguided and lost. Yet, in his goodness God permits sin to occur because he respects our free will as a prerequisite to genuine love and religious freedom (*Dignitatis Humane*, VCII).