

RCIA Lesson 6 – The Assumption of Mary in Heaven



"When our hands have touched spices, they give fragrance to all they handle. Let us make our prayers pass through the hands of the Blessed Virgin. She will make them fragrant." - Saint John Vianney (1786 - 1859)

Day 25 - "Some people are foolish enough to believe that they can get through their whole life without any help from the Blessed Virgin Mary. Do not fear the enemy; he will not launch anything against the little ship of your spirit because Jesus is the helmsman and Mary is the star." - Saint Padre Pio (1887 - 1968)

Day 26 - "In dangers, in doubts, in difficulties, think of Mary, call upon Mary. Let not her name depart from your lips, never suffer it to leave your heart. And that you may obtain the assistance of her prayer, neglect not to walk in her footsteps. With her for guide, you shall never go astray; while invoking her, you shall never lose heart; so long as she is in your mind, you are safe from deception; while she holds your hand, you cannot fall; under her protection you have nothing to fear; if she walks before you, you shall not grow weary; if she shows you favour, you shall reach the goal." - Saint Bernard of Clairvaux

Day 27 - "Love the Immaculata ! Confide in her and consecrate yourself to her without reservation. Strive to do everything as she herself would do in your place, especially by loving God as she loves Him. If you want to grow in perfection, you cannot advance by yourselves - you need a guide. Hence, when you go to God, go through Mary and with Mary !" - Saint Maximilian Kolbe (1894 - 1941)

Day 28 - "In that first 'fusion' with Jesus (Holy Communion), it was my Heavenly Mother again who accompanied me to the altar for it was she herself who placed her Jesus into my soul." - Saint Therese of Lisieux

Christian Stories – from the Catechist

110. The Holy House of Loretto.—A few miles south of Ancona, in Italy, there is a stately church rising among the houses of the little city of Loretto. On entering in, the traveller observes a singular rectangular edifice of no great height, constructed apparently of white marble, and richly adorned with statues and sculpture. This is the famous Santa Casa, which tradition asserts to be the very same building in which Mary received the visit of the Archangel, and where the Holy Family dwelt for many years. Externally, the original walls cannot be seen; but within the coarse stonework of the original masonry is exposed to view. It measures about 31 x 13 ft. The legend of the Holy House is, that when the Christian power was expelled from Palestine, at the end of the thirteenth century, that the building might not be left to the mercy of infidels, angels lifted it from its foundations and carried it through the air, first to Illyria, and then to its present position at Loretto. From that day to this it has been the scene of numerous miracles and tokens of Heavenly favour. It has a world-wide reputation, and has been visited by Saints, Pontiffs, Kings, and crowds of pilgrims from all parts. In the Missal and Breviary, a proper Mass and Office commemorate this miraculous translation.—Northcote.

111. The Young Man's Irreverence.—It is related that a certain young man, who once was present at Mass, neglected to genuflect at the words *Homo factus est* in the Creed, whereupon the devil appeared to him in terrible form, and thus addressed him: "Ungrateful wretch, dost thou not thank and adore the God, who was made man for thee? Had He done for us what He has done for thee, we should be ever prostrate before Him in adoration and love: and thou dost not even make a sign of thankfulness." So saying, he struck him with his club and left him, like Heliodorus of old, half dead with pain and fear.—5. Liguori.

112. The Death of S. Michael.—A prince of the Saracens had the happiness of becoming a Christian. Severus, patriarch of Antioch, and follower of Eutyches, who held there was but the Divine nature in Our Lord, endeavoured to gain him over to his sect, and sent two prelates to indoctrinate him. The prince arranged for a second interview, during which an officer, to whom he had previously given the word, came and whispered something in his ear. Suddenly the prince became sad, and his eyes seemed moist with tears. "Alas," he said, "I have evil tidings: just think, S. Michael has just died, and the court of Heaven is in great tribulation!" The two prelates with a smile hastened to reassure him, and told him the angels are immortal and can neither suffer nor die. "And you would have me believe that Jesus Christ has only the one Divine nature! Yet He suffered and died! Can God die, then?" At this rebuff, so little expected, the two heretics lost no time in taking leave of a prince who showed so much sense.—Catholic Anecdotes.

114. The Child in the Wood.—A monk was passing through a forest one Christmas eve, meditating on the goodness of God in sending His Divine Son into the world to redeem us. He thought he heard the cries of a child somewhere near him, and turning aside a little, he saw lying on the snow a beautiful babe, crying and trembling in the cold. Filled with compassion, he said, as though speaking to it: "How are you thus left alone? Who has had the cruelty to leave you here?" To his surprise, the child answered him: "Alas, how can I help crying, when I am abandoned by everyone, even on this night of my love, when no one receives me or has pity on me!" and with these words he disappeared, for it was the Divine Child Himself. The monk then understood how great was the ingratitude of men towards Our Lord's mercy in the Incarnation.—S. Liguori.

Actual Sin

63. Is original sin the only kind of sin?

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

64. What is actual sin?

Actual sin is any wilful thought, desire, word, action, or omission forbidden by the law of God. 65. How many kinds of actual sin are there? There are two kinds of actual sin: mortal sin and venial sin.

66. What is mortal sin?

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

67. Why is this sin called mortal?

This sin is called mortal, or deadly, because it deprives the sinner of sanctifying grace, the supernatural life of the soul.

SCRIPTURE: "Flee from sins as from the face of a serpent: for if thou comest near them, they will take hold of thee. The teeth thereof are the teeth of a lion, killing the souls of men" (Ecclesiasticus 21:2-3).

68. Besides depriving the sinner of sanctifying grace, what else does mortal sin do to the soul?

Besides depriving the sinner of sanctifying grace, mortal sin makes the soul an enemy of God, takes away the merit of all its good actions, deprives it of the right to everlasting happiness in heaven, and makes it deserving of everlasting punishment in hell.

SCRIPTURE: "But, if the just man turn himself away from his justice and do iniquity according to all the abominations which the wicked man useth to work, shall he live? All his justices which he hath done shall not be remembered: in the prevarication by which he hath prevaricated and in his sin which he hath committed, in them he shall die" (Ezechiel 18:24). "Then when passion has conceived, it brings forth sin; but when sin has matured, it begets death" (James 1:15).

69. What three things are necessary to make a sin mortal?

To make a sin mortal these three things are necessary: first, the thought, desire, word, action, or omission must be seriously wrong or considered seriously wrong; second, the sinner must be mindful of the serious wrong; third, the sinner must fully consent to it.

(a) Things seriously evil are known to be such from Sacred Scripture, Tradition, the teachings of the Church, or from the nature of the acts themselves.

(b) The sinner is mindful of the serious wrong if at the time he commits the sin or places a cause from which he foresees the sin will follow, he either is clearly aware or at least thinks that the action is grievously sinful.

(c) A sinner fully consents to the wrong when he freely chooses to do evil, although he is entirely free not to do it. A person who deliberately consents to do something grievously sinful is guilty of mortal sin although he never actually does it, because his will has chosen evil in preference to good.

(d) When a sinner, mindful of evil, consents to it he is said to commit a formal sin.

(e) When a person does wrong but is in no way mindful of it, he is said to commit a material sin; for example, a person who misses Mass, unmindful that it is Sunday, commits a material sin. God does not hold us accountable for material sins and they do not deprive us of sanctifying grace.

SCRIPTURE: "Before man is life and death, good and evil: that which he shall choose shall be given him" (Ecclesiasticus 15:18).

70. What is venial sin?

Venial sin is a less serious offense against the law of God, which does not deprive the soul of sanctifying grace, and which can be pardoned even without sacramental Confession.

(a) Venial sin, under certain conditions, can become mortal: first, when an action which is not seriously wrong is performed by a person who thinks it is seriously wrong; second, by reason of circumstances affecting the act; for example, if a person under oath to tell the truth were to lie about a light matter; third, when the matter of several sins, in themselves not serious, adds up to a serious amount; for example, if someone were to steal small sums of money which would accumulate to a serious amount.

71. How can a sin be venial?

A sin can be venial in two ways: first, when the evil done is not seriously wrong; second, when the evil done is seriously wrong, but the sinner sincerely believes it is only slightly wrong, or does not give full consent to it.

(a) If a person being uncertain of the gravity of a sin nevertheless commits the sin, he is guilty of mortal sin because he shows himself willing to offend God seriously. One should not act in doubt but should form a certain conscience.

72. How does venial sin harm us?

Venial sin harms us by making us less fervent in the service of God, by weakening our power to resist mortal sin, and by making us deserving of God's punishments in this life or in purgatory.

SCRIPTURE: "A workman that is a drunkard shall not be rich: and he that contemneth small things shall fail by little and little" (Ecclesiasticus 19:1). "But I tell you, that of every idle word men speak, they shall give account on the day of judgment" (Matthew 12:36).

73. How can we keep from committing sin?

We can keep from committing sin by praying and by receiving the sacraments; by remembering that God is always with us; by recalling that our bodies are temples of the Holy Ghost; by keeping occupied with work or play; by promptly resisting the sources of sin within us; by avoiding the near occasions of sin.

74. What are the chief sources of actual sin?

The chief sources of actual sin are: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth, and these are commonly called capital sins.

- (a) Pride is the inordinate seeking of one's own excellence. It is opposed to the virtue of humility.
- (b) Covetousness is the inordinate seeking of temporal goods. Covetousness is two-fold: first, the inordinate seeking of temporal goods by acquiring or possessing them unjustly. This form of covetousness is opposed to the virtue of justice and is often a mortal sin; second, the inordinate seeking of temporal goods by loving or desiring them too much. This form of covetousness is opposed to liberality and is ordinarily a venial sin.
- (c) Lust is the inordinate seeking of the pleasures of the flesh. It is opposite to the virtue of chastity.
- (d) Anger is the inordinate seeking of revenge, or an unreasonable opposition to a person or thing. It is opposed to the virtue of meekness.
- (e) Gluttony is the inordinate desire for food and drink. It is opposed to the virtue of temperance.
- (f) Envy is sadness at another's good fortune because it is considered to be detracting from one's own excellence. It is opposed to the virtue of charity.
- (g) Sloth is the distaste for spiritual things because their attainment requires much labour. It is opposed to the virtue of charity.

75. Why are these called capital sins?

They are called capital sins not because they, in themselves, are the greatest sins, but because they are the chief reasons why men commit sin.

- (a) Pride is the source of presumption, ambition, vainglory, and boasting,
- (b) Covetousness is the source of hard-heartedness toward the poor, and of theft, fraud, and deceit.
- (c) Lust is the source of blindness of mind, thoughtlessness, overhastiness, instability, love of oneself, hatred of God, worldliness, and despair.
- (d) Anger is the source of contumely, blasphemy, quarrels, and murders.
- (e) Gluttony is the source of dullness of mind, excessive talkativeness, and gross and vulgar speech.
- (f) Envy is the source of hatred, calumny, detraction, joy in our neighbour's misfortunes, and distress at his prosperity.
- (g) Sloth is the source of the neglect to perform good works that are of grave obligation.

76. What are the near occasions of sin?

The near occasions of sin are all persons, places, or things that may easily lead us into sin.

- (a) There is a grave obligation to avoid the near occasion of mortal sin.
- (b) If circumstances force us into the near occasion of sin, we are obliged to make use of the necessary safeguards, such as prayer and the frequent reception of the sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist.

IMPORTANT TRUTHS ABOUT ACTUAL SIN

By means of his free will, man can give God loyal and affectionate service; but by means of the same free will he can also offend God by committing actual sin. This sin can be committed in many ways. It can be entirely within man's mind and heart, as when he deliberately takes pleasure in something evil pictured in his imagination (sin of thought) or when he deliberately wishes something evil, even

though he knows he can never do it (sin of desire). Or, a person can make use of his bodily faculties to offend God—by using his power of speech in bad language, such as blasphemy or cursing (sin of word), or by employing another bodily power, such as his hands to murder or to steal (sin of action). Finally a person can commit sin by neglecting to do something which he is obliged to do, as when he fails to go to Mass on Sunday or to help others in their need when he could and should do so (sin of omission).

When a person is in doubt as to whether or not a certain action is sinful, he is not allowed to do it until he has made reasonable efforts to solve his doubt. Usually the most practical way to solve such a doubt of conscience is to ask a priest, particularly in confession.

The most important division of actual sins, mortal and venial, is explained at length in the lesson. Some persons have the idea that it is sufficient to avoid mortal sins; they freely commit venial sins. This is a false notion. Venial sin is a great evil—next to mortal sin, it is the greatest evil in the world, worse than the most painful sickness or the most dreadful form of death. One who pays no heed to venial sins will soon fall into mortal sin. It is true, on account of the weakness of human nature brought on by original sin no one (unless he receives a special privilege from God, such as was given to the Blessed Virgin Mary), can abstain for a long time from semi-deliberate venial sins, committed without full consent of the will. But all should strive to avoid every deliberate sin, whether it be venial or mortal. No one can ever claim that God does not give him sufficient grace to avoid such sins, for St. Paul tells us: “God is faithful and will not permit you to be tempted beyond your strength” (1 Cor. 10:13).

However, venial sins, even though frequently committed, do not unite to form a mortal sin, though sometimes the matter involved in several sins, each of which in itself is venial, will accumulate to form a large amount, and thus eventually a mortal sin will be committed. Thus, if a clerk would steal fifty cents a day from the store in which he is employed, the total amount would soon become sufficient to render him guilty of mortal sin, even though the amount of each theft taken in itself would constitute only a venial sin.

We must all be on our guard against the capital sins, which are the sources of all the other sins. It is not sufficient to resolve not to give in to the capital sins—we must strive to practice the opposite virtues. Everyone should honestly examine his own character and find out his predominant passion—that is, the type of sin to which he is most inclined—and try earnestly to overcome it. With God’s grace, he shall eventually succeed.

We must particularly avoid the near occasions of sin. Nowadays there are many occasions of sin in the world, such as bad books, heretical or improper radio programs, indecent motion pictures, vile theatrical exhibitions, and persons who try to lead others into sin by their bad speech or wicked conduct. Those who frequent unnecessarily the occasions of sin are running a great risk. “He that loveth danger shall perish in it” (Ecclus. 3:27).

Above all, we have prayer and the sacraments to strengthen us against temptation to sin. Whenever an inclination to offend God besets our soul, our first thought should be to have recourse to prayer. It need not be a long prayer; even the devout calling on the names of Jesus and Mary will be of great help. And one who frequently receives Our Lord in Holy Communion obtains immeasurable spiritual strength against the weakness and evil inclinations of his nature that are the cause of so many sins.

RESOLUTION: Resolve frequently to suffer any evil, even death, rather than offend God by sin, especially mortal sin.

Actual Sin Can my soul die?

If a man drives a knife into his heart, that man is dead. If a man commits a mortal sin, he is spiritually dead. The story of mortal sin is as simple as that—and as real as that.

By baptism we are rescued from the spiritual death into which we were plunged by the sin of Adam. In baptism God united our soul to himself. God's love—the Holy Spirit—poured into our soul to fill the spiritual vacuum that was the result of original sin. As a result of this intimate union with God, our soul was elevated to a new kind of life, a supernatural life, a sharing in God's own life. From then on, it becomes our duty to preserve this divine life (we call it "sanctifying grace") within us; not only to preserve it, but to deepen and intensify it.

Once he has united us with himself by baptism, God will never by himself abandon us. After baptism, the only way in which we can be separated from God is by our own deliberate rejection of God. That happens when, in the full consciousness of what we are doing, deliberately and of our free choice, we refuse God our obedience in a serious matter. If we do that, then we have committed a mortal sin, which means simply a "death-dealing" sin. This conscious and willful disobedience of God in a serious matter, which we call mortal sin, is at the same time a rejection of God. It severs the union between our soul and God just as definitely as a pair of wire cutters would sever the union between your home and the electric light company's generators if the wire cutters were applied to the power line outside your house. In the latter event, your house would instantly be plunged into darkness; in the case of mortal sin, the same thing happens to our soul—with far more terrible consequences, because our soul is plunged not merely into darkness, but into death.

It is a death the more horrible because outwardly, there is no semblance of death, no odour of corruption, no chilling cold. It is indeed a living death, in which the sinner stands naked and alone in the midst of divine love and abundance. God's grace flows over and around him, but cannot enter; God's love touches him, but cannot penetrate. All the supernatural merits that the sinner had acquired previous to his sin now are lost. All the good deeds he has done, all the prayers that he has said, and Masses offered, and pains suffered for Christ—all are swept away in the moment of his sin.

He has lost heaven, of course, this soul in mortal sin; he has lost heaven if he should die thus cut off from God. There is no way of establishing union with God beyond the grave.

The very purpose of this life upon earth is to prove our love for God by our obedience to God. Death ends our time of opportunity, our time of trial. There is no chance for a change of heart hereafter. Death "freezes" the soul forever in the state in which death finds the soul—God loved, or God rejected. With heaven lost, there is no alternative for the soul but hell. All shame is stripped away. The mortal sin which seemed, at the time of its commission, but a simple bit of temporizing with self, now shows up in the cold light of God's justice for what it really is: an act of pride and rebellion, an act of hatred for God which is implicit in every mortal sin. And there bursts upon the soul the awful, burning, torturing hunger and thirst for the God for whom the soul was made, the God whom that soul shall never find. The soul is in hell.

We sometimes talk about God "sending" a soul to hell. That, let us make clear, is figurative language only. Strictly speaking, God does not "send" any soul to hell. The soul in hell is there because it freely chose hell for itself. The choice of hell is part of the choice involved in every mortal sin—and the choice is plain: "Love God and have God as your portion forever; reject God, and risk losing God for all eternity!" In his act of disobedience the sinner may try to evade facing that choice, but the choice is there in spite of him; the choice goes with the sin.

And all this is what it means, a little bit of what it means, to disobey God knowingly and willfully in a serious matter, to commit a mortal sin.

A sin is a refusal to give God our obedience, a refusal to give God our love. Since every bit of us belongs to God, and the whole purpose of our existence is to love God, it follows that every bit of us owes obedience to God. Not only in our outward words and actions, but in our innermost thoughts and desires as well, does this obligation to obedience apply.

Indeed, we may sin not only by doing what God has forbidden (sin of commission), but we may sin also by failing to do what God has commanded (sin of omission). It is a sin to steal—but it also is a sin to fail to pay our just debts. It is a sin to work unnecessarily on Sunday, but it also is a sin to fail to worship God on Sunday in the Mass.

It may seem an almost insultingly simple question to ask: “What makes a thing right or wrong?” And yet, time and again I have asked that very question of children, even children in the upper grades of Catholic schools, without getting the right answer. We know that it is God’s will that makes rightness and wrongness. An action is right if it is something that God wants us to do. It is wrong if it is something God does not want us to do. But I have had children tell me that a thing is wrong “because the priest says so,” or “the catechism says so,” or “the Bible says so,” or “the Church says so.”

It may not be out of place, then, to point out to parents how necessary it is to get this point across to children as soon as they are old enough to distinguish between right and wrong: that rightness or wrongness is what God does want or doesn’t want; that doing what God wants is our way, our only way, of proving to God that we love him. That will make sense to the child, as it makes sense to us. And the child will obey God much more willingly and cheerfully than he would obey a mere parent, or priest, or book.

Of course, it is through the Bible (God’s written word) and the Church (God’s living voice) that we know God’s will. But neither the Bible nor the Church makes God’s will. Even the so-called “commandments of the Church” are merely particularized explanations to us of God’s will, detailed interpretations to us of duties that otherwise might not be obvious and clear.

Parents need to exercise caution too, lest in the moral training of their youngsters they exaggerate the difficulties of virtue. If every little sin of a child is magnified into a great big sin; if the child who uses a “swear” word or says, “I won’t” is told that he has committed a mortal sin and that God doesn’t love him any more—well, that child is likely to grow up with a picture of God as a very severe and unreasonable taskmaster. If every sin is represented to him as a grievous sin, the child may grow discouraged at the plain impossibility of being good, and may give up trying. That has happened.

We know that for a sin to be a mortal sin, three things are necessary. If any of the three is missing, it is not a mortal sin.

First of all, the matter must be serious, whether it be a thought, word or action. It is not a mortal sin to tell a childish lie; it is a mortal sin to seriously hurt another’s reputation by a lie. It is not a mortal sin to steal an apple or a nickel; it is a mortal sin to steal a hundred dollars, or to set a building on fire.

Secondly, I must know that the thing I am doing is wrong, seriously wrong. I cannot sin through ignorance. If I did not know that a Catholic is to abstain from eating meat on the Fridays in Lent, then it would not be a sin for me if I ate meat on those days. This presupposes, of course, that my

ignorance is not my own fault. If I purposely tried to avoid learning the truth, for fear that it would interfere with what I wanted to do, then I still would be guilty of the sin.

Finally, I cannot commit a mortal sin unless I freely choose the action or omission which God has forbidden. I cannot be made to commit a sin by force if, for instance, someone physically stronger than I actually forces me to throw a brick through a store window. And I cannot commit a sin by accident, as when I unintentionally bump into someone and knock him down and fracture his skull. Nor can I commit a sin in my sleep, no matter how evil my dream might be.

It is important that we understand these things ourselves. It is important that our children be made to understand them, in proportion to their ability to grasp them. Mortal sin, which means a complete separation from God, is too horrible a thing to be taken lightly; too horrible a thing to use as a weapon in child training; much too horrible a thing to equate with childish thoughtlessness and misbehaviour.

What are the roots of sin?

It is easy to say that this action or that action is sinful. It is not so easy to say that this person or that person has committed a sin. If a man forgets, for example, that it is a holy day of obligation, and misses Mass as a consequence of his forgetfulness, then his sin is an outward sin only. There is no interior intention to do wrong. In such a case we say that the man has committed a material sin, but it has not been a formal sin. There was an evil deed, but no intent. It would be pointless and needless to mention it in confession.

The opposite also is true. A person can commit a sin interiorly without actually doing anything wrong. To use the same example, if a man believes that the day is a feast day of obligation, and wilfully decides to miss Mass for no good reason, then he is guilty of the sin of missing Mass, even though he is mistaken, even though it is not a holy day at all. Or, to give another illustration, if a man steals a large amount of money and later finds out that it was his own money that he took—again he has committed the sin of stealing interiorly, even though there has been no actual theft. In both of these cases we say there has been no material sin, but there has been a formal sin. And of course these sins, both of them, would have to be confessed.

We can see, then, that it is the intention which exists in the mind and will of a person which finally determines the malice of a sin. It is the intention to do what the self wants, rather than what God wants, that constitutes the evil.

That is why I become guilty of a sin the moment I make up my mind that I am going to commit the sin—even though actually I do not get the chance to commit the sin, or even though I later change my mind. If I decide that I am going to lie about a certain matter when asked about it, but as it happens nobody does ask me about it—nevertheless I already have been guilty of the sin of lying, because of my evil intention. If I decide to steal some tools from the shop where I work, but get laid off before I have a chance to take the tools—I already have been guilty, interiorly, of the sin of theft. These would be real sins, sins to be confessed, if the matter were grave.

Even a change of mind cannot wipe out the sin. If a man decides today that he was going to commit fornication tomorrow; and then tomorrow had a change of heart and decided not to—there still would be yesterday's mortal sin upon his soul. Today's good resolution cannot wipe out yesterday's evil intent. We are supposing, of course, that his mind in the first instance was definitely made up. We are not talking here of a person who may be undergoing severe temptation, a person who may

struggle with himself for hours or even days. If such a person finally gains the victory over self and says a definite “no!” to the temptation, he has committed no sin.

On the contrary, he has shown great virtue and has acquired great merit before God. There is no need to feel guilty because temptation has been strong or stubborn; anyone could be good if it were easy to be good. There would be no credit in that. No, the person we have been talking about is the person who positively decides to commit a sin, although a change of mind or lack of opportunity actually prevents him from carrying out his intention.

This is not to say that the outward action doesn’t matter. It would be a mistake to infer that once a person has made up his mind to sin he might as well go through with it. On the contrary, putting the evil intent into practice and really doing the deed does add to the gravity of the sin, does intensify its malice. This is especially true when the outward sin causes harm to another, as by theft; or causes another to commit sin, as in unchaste relations.

And while we are on the subject of “intention,” it may be worthwhile to recall that we cannot change a bad deed into a good or harmless deed simply by having a good purpose in mind. If I steal from a rich man in order to give to a poor man, it still is stealing, it still is a sin. If I tell a lie in order to help a friend out of a tight spot, it still is a lie that I tell and a sin that I commit. If parents make use of contraceptives in order to give their present children more advantages, the guilt of their deed remains. In short, a good purpose can never justify an evil means. God’s will may not be forced and twisted to make it coincide with ours.

Just as sin is, essentially, the opposing of our will to God’s will; so too the practice of virtue consists simply in the wholehearted effort to identify our will with God’s. That is difficult only if we depend upon our own strength, instead of depending upon God’s grace. An old theological axiom puts it this way: “To him who does what in him lies, God’s grace will not be wanting.”

If we do “what in us lies” by regular daily prayer, frequent confession and Holy Communion; by recalling often what a grand thing it is to have God himself dwelling within us, what a glorious thing it is to know that at whatever moment God may call us, we are ready to open our eyes upon him in eternity (even though purgatory may come first); if we keep ourselves occupied with useful work and wholesome play, and avoid the persons and places and things which might put a strain upon our human weakness—then there can be no doubt about our victory.

It helps, too, to know our own weaknesses. How well do you know yourself? Or, to put it negatively, do you know what your outstanding fault is?

You may have several faults; most of us do. But you may be sure that there is someone fault, more prominent than the others, that is your greatest obstacle to spiritual growth. Spiritual writers describe such a fault as one’s “predominant passion.”

First of all, it is well to be clear as to the difference between a fault and a sin. A fault is what we might call “a weak streak” in us, which makes it more easy for us to commit certain kinds of sins, more difficult to practice certain virtues. A fault is a more or less permanent (until we eliminate it) flaw in our character, whereas a sin is a transient act, a “one-shot” affair, which flows from the fault. If we compare sin to a weed, then a fault would be the root from which the weed grows.

We all know that in cultivating a garden it does little good to break the weeds off at the soil line. Unless we dig up the root, the weed will grow again and again. Similarly, certain sins are very likely to keep repeating themselves in our lives unless we get at the root of such sins, the fault from which they spring.

Theologians list for us seven principal faults or character flaws, to one or the other of which almost every actual sin can be traced. These seven human weaknesses are commonly called the “seven capital sins.” The word “capital” in this instance has the significance of outstanding, or most frequent; it is not intended necessarily to mean the biggest or the worst.

What are these seven dominating vices of human nature? The first is pride, which is defined as an inordinate seeking after one’s own honour and excellence. It would take too much space to list all the sins that can stem from pride. Excessive ambition, over-reliance on one’s own spiritual strength, vanity, boastfulness—these are only a few. Or, in contemporary language, “keeping up with the Joneses, social climbing, be the first to own one”—and others of like ilk.

The second capital sin is covetousness, or plain avarice. This is an immoderate desire for temporal goods. Not only do outright sins like stealing and fraud spring from it, but also less acknowledged sins of injustice on the part of employers or employees, sharp business practices, stinginess and indifference to the needs of the poor—to mention only a few specimens.

Next on the list is the vice of lust. It is easy to recognize that the gross sins against chastity have their origin in lust; but it nourishes other sins too. Many acts of dishonesty, injustice and deceit can be traced to lust; loss of faith in one’s religion, or despair of God’s mercy frequently are the fruits of lust.

Then there is anger, the disordered emotional state in which we seek revenge upon others, or rage in unreasonable opposition to persons and things. Murder, quarrelling and profanity are a few of the obvious sins to which anger gives rise. Hatred, malicious gossip, and property damage are some others.

Gluttony is another of the capital sins. It is an intemperate love for food and/or drink. It seems the most ignoble of all the vices; there is something so animal-like about the glutton. Gluttony can result in sinful abuse of one’s health, gross and blasphemous speech, injustice to one’s family or other persons—and a whole host of evils too evident to need enumerating.

Envy is another dominant vice. It takes an honest and a humble person to admit its existence within himself. Envy does not consist in wishing that we were as well off as someone else. That is a perfectly natural feeling, unless it goes to the extreme of covetousness. No, envy is, rather, a sadness of mind that another should be better off than ourselves, as though we ourselves suffered because of another’s good fortune. We wish that we had what he has, instead of his having it. At least we wish that he didn’t have it, so long as we cannot have it too. Envy is the classic “dog-in-the-manger” state of mind. (The dog neither eats the hay in the manger nor lets anyone take it). It leads to hatred, slander, detraction, resentment, sullenness and kindred ills.

Finally there is sloth, or laziness. This is not merely a dislike for work; very few people do like to work. Sloth is rather a surrender to one’s dislike for work. It is a distaste for, and a sluggishness in doing, one’s duty, particularly one’s duty to God. If we are on a low level of attainment in our quest for sanctity, and particularly if we are content with spiritual mediocrity, then almost certainly sloth is the cause. Missing Mass on Sunday, laxity in prayer, neglect of work or family— all of these can result from sloth. These, then, are the seven capital sins: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth. Doubtless we have the laudable habit of examining our conscience before we go to bed at night, and certainly before going to confession. Hereafter it would be profitable to ask ourselves not merely “What sins, and how many,” but “Why?”

Ave Maria Lesson 6 Concluded

