

THE REALITY OF SIN: A THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL CRITIQUE

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MODERN CATECHETICAL writing usually presents sin as a refusal of love for God. Sin, we are told, means "saying no to God" in the voluntary heedlessness of a human action; it is a failing, freely and responsibly, in the duty of personal love for God. Sin is in the heart of a man and disrupts the personal communion he must live with God in every action.

This essay will offer a critical assessment of this point of view. Theologically, it will argue that it is insufficiently realistic, insufficiently historical, and insufficiently communitarian to convey the insights of the biblical revelation on sin. Pastorally, it will argue that it is useful, and even necessary, to describe what happens when most ordinary people say that they "sin," since in these things the full biblical malice of sin is not normally achieved. In this we shall show that the modern catechetical point of view is insufficiently alert to the biblical sources of revelation on the reality of sin, and that it is insufficiently alert to modern pastoral psychology on the reality of sin. At the same time we shall show that it has instinctively stressed authentic values and can retain its usefulness.

THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

Insufficiently Realistic

Biblical thought about sin is dominated by the horizon of covenant.¹ Sin is, at root, a violation and a rupture of covenant with the living God. Modern thought about sin is dominated by the horizon of "the human act" (usually taken to mean "each particular human act"). Sin is a refusal of love in and through a detailed human action. This

¹ Cf. R. Koch, *Grâce et liberté humaine: Réflexion théologique sur Génèse I-XI* (Paris, 1967); S. Lyonnet, "Péché: Dans le judaïsme, Dans le Nouveau Testament, Péché originel," *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplément 7* (Paris, 1966) 480-567; L. Hartmann, "Sin," *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible* (New York, 1963) cols. 2218-32; P. Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin* (London, 1965).

is why modern thought is insufficiently realistic to convey the biblical realism of sin.

In covenant, God enters freely into a bonded relationship with His people; He becomes literally "their" God and they become literally "His" people. We have, in our modern attitudes, an a priori idea of God as sufficient to Himself, and then gratuitously entering into relations with others. The biblical writers would not have thought much of such a "God." For them, there was no such thing as "a God"; there was only "a God *of*" some people; for them, it would not have been worth God's while being "God" if He were not the "God *of*" Israel. Israel is not just a people (already fully constituted) which then, further, accidentally happens to be the people of God; Israel is only a people to the extent that is the "people *of*" God. This is the value of covenant: it makes God God; and it makes Israel the people of God.

Sin is the violation of this covenant. Its result is that Israel is no longer the people of God; Israel, in effect, is wiped out in its real meaning. Its result is that God is no longer God, since He is no longer the God of Israel; God, in effect, is wiped out in His real meaning. The mystery of sin stands at the opposite pole from the mystery of covenant, which it destroys. The direct opposite to the concept of sin in Scripture is the concept of God. The malice of sin includes a terrible realism not usually read into the simple formula "saying no to God."

The New Testament is the eschatologically final covenant between God and the redeemed world in the crucified and risen Jesus, in the mystery of the Church, the new people of God. It is the absolutely indefectible outpouring of God's love in covenant. God's covenant bond with the Church cannot be broken. It can, however, be broken by particular persons, in so far as they refuse to allow it to hold sway in their own lives; for it is in them that the Church seeks its own fulness. When a person, in the New Testament era, commits sin, he excludes the new covenant bond from his personal life, and in his whole personality and bearing he ruptures the new covenant in so far as it pertains to him. He ceases to exist as a "man in Christ" and he makes the "God of our Lord Jesus Christ" cease to exist for him; it is as though neither of them, the partners of this final bond of love, ever

existed. He indeed says "no" to God, but in a much more realistic sense than is usually read into the formula.

In the parable of Luke 15 (wrongly titled "The Prodigal Son," more correctly called "The Mistaken Elder Brother") we see a Pharisean concept of sin contrasted with this authentic covenant concept. The mistaken elder brother tells his father: "Look, all these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed your orders, yet you never offered me so much as a kid to celebrate with my friends." For him, avoiding sin means observing public order, not being wanted by the police, keeping regular observance. It is an external matter. The repenting prodigal tells his father: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son." For him, sin does not mean the squandering of his inheritance, the evil life he has led with women, the days of his shame in the land of his wandering; for him, sin means the violation of the bond that unites him to his father, as son—the violation of the covenant of sonship, of his personal relations to his father and the family. The other matters are merely the effects and the symptoms of this fundamental malaise. When the father receives the prodigal in forgiveness, he rejoices that he has returned to sonship—not that he has come home safe and well, as the servants mistakenly tell the mistaken elder brother. The language of the newly-risen son is full of tender respect for his father, in the restored bond of covenant, and contrasts with the disrespect of the language of the elder brother, who lives and works on the family property in the spirit of a mercenary. Indeed, at the end of the story the father truly has only one son: the forgiven prodigal, restored to covenant life. The lesson, on the meaning of sin in the New Testament, is obvious, and it is a much more realistic lesson than that usually given by the formula "saying no to God."

In 1 John we learn two contrasting principles: "He who is born of God cannot sin," and "He who commits sin is of the Evil One." As long as we are actually being engendered in God's love as His son in Christ, as long as we are actually living in that filial bond of covenant with our Father, then we cannot sin at all. Covenant and violation of covenant do not stand together. The practical secret of living without sin is a perpetual awareness of this living covenant in our hearts. Yet,

if we do sin, this covenant is broken, and a new one is set up with our new "god," the personified power of the Evil One. The significance of our sin is not simply that of an evil act, in which we have said "no" to God; it is the establishment of a total personality-involving relationship with our new god, with the Evil One.

Paul told the Galatians: "I live, now not I, but it is the Christ that lives in me" (2:20). Yet he told the Romans: "If I sin, it is not so much I that sin, as the power of sin that dwells in me" (7:20). Here, graphically, is covenant, and broken covenant; covenant, and its substitution by covenant with evil. This is the realism of Scripture concerning sin. Is it sufficiently conveyed in the current formulas of catechetics?

Insufficiently Historical

Biblical thought about sin is dominated by the theme of the Sin of the world.² We should write it with a capital: the Sin, the Sinfulness, of the world. Modern thought about sin is dominated by the idea of the "human act" in which "sin" happens. St. Paul would have called that a "transgression," he would not have called it "Sin." Sin is a deeper thing, a powerful virus of evil which has a history of its own, on the cosmic plane.

The Sin of the world is a virus of evil which entered the world as a personified force through original sin and dynamically unfolds itself and tightens its grip on humanity and on the world in an escalating fashion down the ages of history. It is the hidden power which multiplies transgressions in the history of mankind. They are merely its symptoms; it is greater and deeper than all of them. It forms human history into what we might call "perdition history" (to coin the opposite of "salvation history").

This is the viewpoint of the Yahwist in Genesis, the viewpoint of Paul to the Romans. It is the viewpoint of biblical wisdom. It treats a subject too much neglected in modern moral theology of "transgressions."

In the coming of Christ, and in His rejection and crucifixion, this virus of evil in perdition history reached its climax once and for all. The Pasch of Christ is not simply the high point of salvation history,

² Cf. Schoonenberg, *op. cit.*; A. Dubarle, *The Biblical Doctrine of Original Sin* (New York, 1965).

as we have been taught so well in recent times. On the first Good Friday Pilate the Gentile joined the clamoring Jews before him in rejecting Christ; it was truly the second fall, when the cosmos, prompted and ruled by the sin within it, broke its covenant with Love. It was the cosmic rupture of the covenant God held out to the cosmos in His given Son. At this point the virus of evil became absolutely visible: it played out its strength in public for all to see. And in the same moment it was forever vanquished in the mystery of Christ's resurrection. "*Mors et vita duello conflixere mirando,*" as the paschal sequence tells us.

The present time, after the Resurrection, as we await the Parousia, is indeed the end-time of both salvation and perdition history. The Lamb of God has blotted out the Sin of the world in principle, but His victory is still being realized, still being achieved in struggle, as the history of this end-time unfolds. In this present history two mighty forces are in conflict, and their power is now fully at work: the force of the Sin of the world, and the force of the risen Lord of the world. It is Christ who remains the victor, but we still live in a time of historical struggle when He is still achieving His victory in us. We need to fear sin's power in our world now, as we need to revere more deeply Christ's power to conquer it now.

St. Paul called those who live justly in Christ at present "those who are being saved"—in a continuous present tense. He equally called those who allow the virus of sin to have its play in their lives "those who are being damned"—again in a continuous present tense: they are being brought now, historically, into final perdition.

In Scripture, then, our present history is a drama where Christ's dawning Easter victory must ascend to the full light of day in our lives. And for some it is a tragedy, in that in them this light is overpowered by their darkness.

The Sin that is in the world now is not primarily the small matter of "saying no to God" in a bad act, but the great matter of the historical power that has already struggled to crucify Christ and that struggles now, as a beaten but still violent force, to claim men for the Evil One. It is legitimate to suggest that the historical realism of this meaning of Sin is not sufficiently brought out in current formulas.

Insufficiently Communitarian

Biblical thought considers the situation in which we live our lives in the human community to be tainted by the Sin of the world.³ Here it finds the concrete power of Sin. Modern thought looks rather to the individual, and seeks the fruits and the sources of sin in him, in isolation.

Because of the active presence of Sin, the human person is not able, in the present world, to enter into the dialogue of love-relationships with other human persons, and so is unable through them to enter into the dialogue of love-relationship with God. It is said—in a clumsy phrase which brings out the point—that our present situation is one in which horizontal and vertical dialogue are impossible: we cannot relate as we ought and as we would with others and with God. The world—the atmosphere, the spiritual climate, the milieu, the human situation—in which we live our own personal history is truly infected by the Sin “of the world.”⁴ This means that true community life is impossible unless sin is overcome and blotted out. The gift of God in Christ, redemption itself, consists in the new openness to community that men have together in God’s “people,” where they are “together” and God is “with” them.

When transgressions, or sinful acts, occur, much of the root cause to which they ought to be imputed lies in the tainted situation of men, in the milieu in which personal relationships in community are obstructed. The power of sin is *around* us, as a circumscribing influence, as well as in our hearts.

Once again the present approaches, portraying sin as a refusal of love for God, look to be too individual to suggest such community values, and so fall short of the full reality of sin.

PASTORAL CRITIQUE

A New Problem

We have shown that the current description of sin (“saying no to God”) does not contain the full biblical reality of Sin. In doing so, we

³ Cf. Schoonenberg, *op. cit.*; K. Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises* (New York, 1965); L. Monden, *Sin, Liberty, and Law* (New York, 1965).

⁴ Cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) nos. 1–22.

have actually suggested more: we have suggested that what ordinary people do when they say they "commit sin" does not contain the full biblical reality of Sin. We are faced, then, with a dual problem: that of identifying the ways in which the biblical reality of Sin can be found in the lives of ordinary people, and that of identifying what happens when ordinary people say they "commit sin."

In our modern attitudes we look directly to the human act—literally to "the" human act. We take it for granted that in each and every human act the full reality of sin is possible. Human life is the sum total of all our human acts, some of them good, some of them sinful. But it seems, at least *prima facie*, impossible to find the biblical reality of Sin in any ordinary human act.

It would seem, again *prima facie*, that the biblical reality of Sin could be found in its fulness not in any particular act but in the whole mystery of a human *life*. This new kind of Sin is not something that can be done in half a minute or half an hour. It takes a whole lifetime, including death, to commit this kind of Sin. Only then could there be, in an absolute sense, a final covenant rupture with the God of New Testament grace; only then could there be a definitive expression of the historical virus of evil in the personal life of a particular man.

It is our intention to examine "human life" as the proper subject of the biblical reality of Sin. There are difficulties in doing so. We are too used to considering human life as a series of roughly univalent human acts. We are not used to considering the value of human life itself as one unit of meaning, and then going back and situating each "human act" into its horizon.

A Point of View

Our point of view can be expressed as follows: (1) Sin means the absolute and permanent violation of covenant relationship with God. It is a total and final position of man, in his freedom, before God. (2) This can only happen at the very deep level in which man is present to himself wholly as a person, fully master of his freedom, fully face to face with the God of covenant. (3) This cannot happen in an ordinary, isolated act, but only in the projected course of a human lifetime, climaxing in the personal position taken in death. It is not a matter of

“falling into sin” haphazardly, but of being, in one’s life and inner personality, a “sinner,” a man who is “unto-sin-death,” and who thus enters death.⁵

In any realistic assessment of man’s life in relation to biblical values, it can only be *at death* that the mystery of iniquity called Sin in Scripture is truly and fully present. In practice, this means that much of the inherited Catholic horror of “mortal sin” really finds its object in the sin of final impenitence. In this first principle, what are we to make of so called “sins,” called “mortal” and “venial” in accepted language, that happen during life?

An Analysis

Beyond the consummating death-experience, there will be situations during *life* when, relatively, a person will be aware of himself as a person, and will be master of his freedom, and will encounter the presence of the God of covenant inviting him to communion, and will take a position. These are times when the center of personality is exposed fully, as it is at that moment of its development and maturity in personal history. Given that particular stage of his particular vocational pathway to death, the person is opened up and presented to his own consciousness completely, so that he has to act with all his personal resources and commit himself as a person. He is really unveiled in his inner selfhood at that stage of his growth, and called upon to take a position that shows what he then is in a complete way. The situation must in some way be a foretaste of death, and the awareness of the person must anticipate in some way the complete awareness he will have in dying.

In such a situation it is possible to have a genuine self-realization of the person against the God of covenant he then knows. It is possible to have a violation of covenant proportioned to the stage of maturity and of personal awareness he has then reached. If that happens, it is Sin—

⁵ Some dependence is therefore acknowledged in this study on the theories of the “horizon of the human spirit” (K. Rahner and others) and of the “final option” in the experience of dying (L. Boros and others). This dependence is not absolute; it is rather practical and pastoral. We believe that even for those who may not follow in these paths theologically, many helps are there to see more deeply into their own system of thought and to reduce it to useful pastoral conclusions. For an excellent blend of both viewpoints and presentation of the meaning of sin—to which we owe much—see J. Fuchs, “Sin and Conversion,” *Theology Digest* 14 (1966) 292–301.

not in the total sense which can only take place in death, but in a true relative sense; for the person, as he exists and lives in the hands of his own counsel there and then, violates the covenant as it stands before him there and then. This, of course, cannot happen every day, and it will not happen in the same way and the same degree in different persons, but situations do occur when in a relative, progressing personal awareness the covenant bond with God can be violated. In such a situation what really happens?

Sometimes the sin-act then performed will entrain, dynamically and infallibly (prescinding from the redeeming grace of Christ), a further course of personal life in a sin-state which leads to death-in-sin and the final Sin. This sinner, through his option, has become truly a "sinner" in his personality and will continue to act as such, even in the final option of death. It seems to me most natural to use the word "mortal" to describe such a sin, because its whole virus is to entrain the person of the sinner unto sin-death. This, of course, is to use the word "mortal" in a much stricter sense than is current.⁶

In the same situation we have described, another sin-attitude is possible. There can be a true selfish realization of the person against God, a true rupture of covenant with Him, *without* it entraining this consequent sin-dynamism and *without* it affecting the whole personality as sinful henceforth unto death. In this case the climate, the atmosphere, the ambient, the spiritual "air" in which the person is immersed, the overshadowing presence of Christ and of Love inhibit the inner character of the position that has been taken from assuming its true proportions in that person and in his future life. It is indeed question of a very radical self-position against God, and indeed question of violation of covenant with God, but without the involvement of a life drive as a result, so that covenant life is envisaged and even expected for the future.

We do not intend here the case of a so-called "immediate" conversion after a full-blooded act of "mortal" sin, such as we described in the preceding case. The restrictive influence of the Christian ambient,

⁶ In "mortal" sin in this sense, there is an actual bringing-on of the consequent life-drive to death-in-sin, an actual coloring of the personality, so that the man will, by force of the "mortal" sin, continue in this state henceforth, prescinding from the grace of Christ. In such a state it is not intended necessarily that the induced death-in-sin actually does occur; the saving grace of Christ may intervene.

to which the person clings despite his present act, is psychologically experienced by the person, is known to him in the act of his sin, and in that act he is somehow favorable to it. He wants to take a very radical position against God right now, and he does, but at the same time he does not want to be that kind of person for good and all. He stands back from involving himself as a person in the drive to sin-death which such an act really does lead to by its own intrinsic implication.⁷

No ordinary person, in the critical moment of decision to sin or not, would express his attitudes in such language; yet we think that such language does express his real mentality at that moment. We believe that many theologians, following our argument, would instinctively apply to this case the usual term "mortal sin." We prefer to call it "serious," not "mortal," sin. It is not mortal in the sense in which we used the word previously: it is not death-dealing to the future personal project of life. Indeed, we have proceeded *per sic et non* in dividing sin, in the situation under discussion, into "mortal" and "serious."⁸

We submit that the distinction proposed is not merely notional but real.⁹ It is true that personal "mortal" sins (in our sense) occur: St.

⁷ In "serious" sin, the induction of a life-curve unto death-in-sin does not happen, even at the actual time the sin is committed. It does not happen precisely because of the influence of the supernatural ambient at that instant.

⁸ The case will be raised of a man who has not sinned "mortally" (that is, has not made this determined anti-God choice) but now sins "seriously," that is, here and now makes this particular choice of a serious sin—suppose that he is killed suddenly, in an auto accident, would he be saved? We would hope so. Modern insight into the mystery of death stresses that in dying the whole personality is exposed in its very center, and that man then enters a situation in which he is totally aware as a person of the implications of covenant in his life. He can see then what he really is, and he will respond accordingly. *Qualis unusquisque est, talis finis videtur ei*. But the position he has taken in merely "serious" sin, and the character he has assumed by committing it, do not really tell what he is in the deepest center of his personality. They are rather false symptoms of it. Precisely because his sin was "only" "serious" and not "mortal," we would hope that he preserves a real state of personality which, when unveiled to him in his final decision, would lead him to repentance and to God. Salvation should not be thought the matter of chance which another approach might make it, but rather the mystery of a personal and human encounter with God over a whole life climaxing in death.

⁹ Would our "serious" sin be mortal in the classic sense that it is death-dealing to the entitative habit of sanctifying grace in the soul and the virtue of charity? If it is, then there is still an "overshadowing" of the person by the influence of the grace-ambient in which he is, and through which his sin is not "mortal" in our sense. We agree that in the accepted patterns of approach, in the current categories of classification, it is more probable

Paul had no trouble identifying them in his reading of the Old Testament and in his observations on the pagan world in which he lived—at least to the extent that any man may judge. But in the present development of culture and of spiritual awareness and of sensitivity to moral values in modern man, particularly in a Christian country and in a more or less moral environment of life, we hesitate to think that in every act which ordinary people would spontaneously classify as seriously sinful the dynamic virus of truly “mortal” (in our sense) sin is found. We think that modern men do indeed at times commit “mortal” sins, but that very often their sins are merely “serious.”¹⁰

In the same situation we are discussing, a third case is possible. We may be dealing with a merely apparent, not a real, self-realization against God, with a merely apparent, not a real, violation of the covenant bond. It is the case of an occurrence which is judged to be objectively serious, but whose grave moral and theological significance has not impinged on the personal sensitivity of the man involved in it. He does not personally react in the situation as if such grave values were implied. His assent in conscience to the gravity of the situation is not “real.” This can happen even when he knows that something is forbidden to him, even “seriously,” by what he calls “the Church,” and when he goes ahead and does it all the same. His full personality as he stands in covenant before God is not uncovered in his own presence, the center of his freedom is not called into play in a covenant-breaking situation.

In this case, of course, we are dealing with something which is neither “mortal” nor “serious” sin; we shall have to call it “subjectively nonserious.” The fact that it appears to be like serious sin from

that the habits in question would be lost. But we would wish for a new classification of the traditional data in the light of more modern insights into the psychology of the human person in his life commitments. This is beyond the scope of the present essay.

¹⁰ The distinction we propose between “mortal” and “serious” sin does not seem to be identical with the classic distinction between sin *ex malitia* and sin *ex infirmitate*. It seems that either “passion” or “malice” can be the dominant factor in the creation of the crisis situation of what we call “mortal” sin. It seems, on the other hand, that in the actual commitment of “mortal” sin a certain “malice” is always present. Perhaps we have not looked sufficiently at the total situation, but rather isolated the two “acts”—sin from weakness and sin from malice—without relating them to one another dynamically. It is interesting to compare our proposals with the insightful remarks made many years ago by Ch.-V. Héris on this point, in the collection *L'Enfer* (Paris, 1950).

an external standpoint comes from the limitation of insight that restricts all external discernment of personal conscience. It is not forbidden to think that in the mercy of God such a case happens not infrequently in the lives of ordinary people.

Apart from the situation of relative but fully-personal involvement in a covenant crisis, there are other situations in human life when the person is partly aware of his mystery as a person, and is called upon to deploy his personal freedom in a way that partly shows his deeper attitudes. The whole self, the center of personality, is not engaged as such. And yet the person is using a certain freedom in deploying a *particular act* in a particular direction at this moment, without however involving the basic orientation of his whole self to God. We may call it a "peripheral" awareness of person, a lesser and passing level of personal manifestation and action. We have then actual personal guidance and control of the act, but not a realization of the person, the self, as such. Covenant bonds are not radically in question. In such a situation what can happen?

The person can truly deploy his act against objective moral norms. It could be, sometimes, with a personally free awareness and allowance of the contributory role of that particular deployment towards a seriously compromising situation ultimately involving the totality of the person. There is a certain real engagement of the person here, and he takes on a certain character as a certain type of man—a certain type of "sinner," if it be legitimate, as it is, to extend the use of that word to these inferior cases. We could never call him a "sinner" in the strong and direct sense in which we used the term above, in the case of the "mortal" sinner. But there is a certain personal entering-into the sin situation in this case, a certain personal permitting it to color at least the fringe areas of one's personality and personal freedom. The epithet, in an understood sense, is sufficiently justified.

This is what we will call "venial" sin, for want of a better word. "Venial" is the usual word to cover these minor cases, and this is the full-blooded case of such sin.

On the other hand, the case could occur in which the person might deploy his peripheral freedom in the situation we now have in mind, and do so *without* any personal permissiveness of a pattern which might lead to a covenant crisis in the proper sense. In other words,

there would not be the full-bloodedness of what we have just called "venial" sin. The inner character and significance of the deed that is done, and the position that is taken, are inhibited from the very outset from assuming their true and proportioned structures and orientations. It is really a question of a very superficial taking of position, without much import for the life pattern of the person. *Peccatum levissimum, sed peccatum in quodam sensu*. We would like to call it "light" sin—not even "venial" in our terminology.¹¹

It is almost impossible to give concrete examples of these distinctions in general and in the abstract. We are dealing with the problem of formal subjective guilt, with "sinning," which is always particular and concrete. We would need to get down into the concrete situation and conscience of a particular person, his own assessment of values, his life horizon, his awareness of his personal freedom, and see exactly what *he* was doing in a definite instance. From this angle every sin ever committed is absolutely unique. We would submit nonetheless that the distinctions we have offered at this level are not simply notional but real: people do act, do sin, in these ways.¹²

As we concluded above, so we must conclude here that a third case is possible in the situation we describe. It is something that might look like a "venial" sin or a "light" sin, but would not really be so at all. It is only an *apparent* control-deployment of an act against objective moral norms, subjectively and formally there being no imputation of sin at all.

We think here of a case where the objective morality of an occurrence is lightly wrong, but its moral significance does not impinge on the control-reactivity of the person. It does not get "through" to him,

¹¹ The distinction we propose between "venial" and "light" sin is not identical in concept with that made between "deliberate" and "semideliberate" venial sin. Deliberation is not the formal point of our distinction, admittedly in a different frame of reference. Often the deliberate-semideliberate distinction is taken to be one of intensity in conceptual awareness and aroused interest in the situation as felt by the person explicitly—to that extent it is of little relevance to our discussion. We concede, however, that a greater real intensity in the person is found in "venial" sin than in "light" sin—to this extent the two distinctions might overlap in the concrete.

¹² This may throw light on the concrete approach to the problem of "imperfections": concretely they will often reduce either to venial-light sin or to acts of the virtue of prudence. In the latter case they are not "imperfections" but the pathway of a unique person in virtue.

he does not react to it, it does not mean anything to him. The fact that he acts one way or the other has in the concrete no proper meaning as an expression of his personality.

We think also of a case of mere violation of culturally-accepted behavior patterns which perhaps are often spoken of as "moral" standards and are said to involve "sin," but in which nonetheless there is no true enshrining of objective moral law. They are mere general standards of behavior and not moral standards at all; nor do they appear to the person as such. The violation of such standards is not in itself sin.

To this total analysis of the two situations and the various cases within each of them we must add the position of a person who does not and cannot grow into the maturity of personal freedom and its expression, and this not because of any personal fault or because of past deeds, but simply because of the moral insensitivity of the human community and environment in which he lives. Cramped by it, he is simply unable to live positively his covenant relations with God in personal love. There is something objectively wrong with the situation but, in relation to the acts we consider, there is no question of imputability to the particular person. This brings out once again that Sin is a much greater and more communitarian mystery than the mystery of a "bad human act."

It is indeed a terrible distortion when grown, adult people (lay, clerical, or religious) fret their lives away about minor details that at most are "light" sins, and never grow personally to live and love and use their freedom positively in service of God and others. It is not only a serious pastoral problem; it is a grave distortion of right moral outlook.¹³

¹³ Here we might add a word on the relative unimportance of one or other sinful act in a past human life now truly lived in covenant with God. Looking at the matter post-factum, we can divine that in the providence of God many persons would not be put in a situation where they would really love Him with a wholehearted covenant commitment except as a rising out of a real failure in their past history. A spirituality that would particularly rejoice and take pride in having never blotted one's copybook in some respects is not particularly Christian or particularly humble. If in fact such grace has been granted, it is a great gift of God's mercy; if it has not, to one who now loves it is not a matter of great agitation. Many people do not sufficiently evaluate that "horror of all sin" which they instinctively possess.

Summary and Schema

The following schema may express what has been suggested concerning the variant incidence of formal sin in human life:

- 1) In the whole course of life consummated in the death-experience:

Sin

- 2) In situations of relative but truly personal awareness during life:
 A) in authentic self-realization against God:
 a. entraining a sin-course unto sin-death:

Mortal Sin

- b. not entraining a sin-course unto sin-death:

Serious Sin

- B) in merely apparent self-realization against God:

Subjectively Nonserious (Sin)

- 3) In situations of peripheral awareness during life:
 A) in authentic control-deployment of an act, against due norms:
 a. with a permissive attitude to the possibility of a crisis situation:

Venial Sin

- b. without a permissive attitude to the possibility of a crisis situation:

Light Sin

- B) in merely apparent control-deployment of an act, against due norms:

Subjectively No Imputation of Sin

Our suggestions, thus seen in the schema, depend on the following tenets:

- 1) Sin (in the biblical sense) can happen only in the framework of *human life* in its totality, not in the framework of any single human act.

2) Human life in its totality is the mystery of man's personal *awareness* and loving commitment to the God of covenant in love; it is a growing mystery, consummated only in the *death-experience*.

3) During life, the final awareness of covenant values is prepared for by *moments of relative awareness* in the person's spirit; they are, as it were, the preradiance of the final encounter with God.

4) Situations of such relative awareness are two in kind: *truly personal*, when the person, at a given stage of his growth, is exposed and called upon to show *himself* fully in reaction to the situation, and *peripheral*, when the person merely deploys an *act* without implicating the heart of his inner self.

5) In all such situations the person can be involved in two different ways: by *entering*, or not, into the *train of life* naturally set up by the deed performed (in this the influence of *ambient* on the person's psychology is paramount).

6) There is the ever-present human danger of interpreting the *merely apparent* position of the person for a *real* one.

Perhaps the original questions could be reformulated in the light of our answer. Perhaps we have really asked and sought to answer: What is the meaning of human life in relation to the biblical mystery of Sin?

ASSESSMENT

Diagnosis

In a concrete case, diagnosis of the various strata of sin is difficult and, from the point of view of a confessor, often in the last analysis impossible. Usually the confessor is presented with (a) material normally judged to be grave, (b) a certain conceptual perception of this normal standard by the person, and (c) a conceptualization by the person of what seems to him to be the "state of free choice and full consent" required for serious sin in confession. There still *could* be a large gap between these points and a real personal assent to a truly grave crisis situation in sin. In the language of the average penitent, "he knew it was wrong and he did it, he consented to it." That is all the confessor is told. It is about as much external evidence as he will get.

We do not think that there is any metaphysical link between the case described and "mortal" or even "serious" sin. We do not think judgments of this nature are mechanical; we think they must respect

the mystery of each human person. We agree, however, that for the most part, a confessor, when presented with the case described in ordinary circumstances, would normally proceed as if he were dealing with either "mortal" or "serious" sin and not with "venial" or "light" sin. This is, at the most, a working practical assumption, to be tested against the personality and moral sensitivity of the man, if and as known to the confessor.

But then how could the confessor pick the difference between "mortal" and "serious"? It is an even more delicate matter, and the best evidence to work on is a knowledge of the personal attitudes of this particular man. We would go as far as to suggest that the differences in the concrete, from the point of view of formal guilt, between "mortal" sin, "serious" sin, and even "full-blooded venial" sin are probably not the same in different personalities, with different gifts of personal awareness, different backgrounds and environments, different patterns of life and different vocations. In this sense we concur with the suggestion of some recent authors that the ultimate difference between mortal and venial sin lies in the imperfection of the act, i.e., the subjective involvement in the action.¹⁴

We need to recall that there is a shade called "gray" between "black" and "white." In some way, deep down, the person himself knows what he does; but if he does, he is not always able to express it to others, or even to be clear in his own thoughts about it. We concur again with a recent suggestion that he cannot possess absolute certainty of his mortal sinfulness, any more than he can possess absolute certainty of his state of justification; and we think that the signs by which he might come to a reasonable assurance, in peace, on the latter point are much easier to discern than the signs that might lead to a reasonable conclusion on the former.¹⁵

In the sacrament of penance the final judgment on these things does not matter very much. At least it does not matter nearly as much as a past age of moral theology thought. The main point is not a matter of neat accountancy, with columns clearly marked black and red. The

¹⁴ Cf. B. Häring, *The Law of Christ* 1 (Westminster, Md., 1961) 363. Cf. Charles E. Curran, "Masturbation and Objectively Grave Matter: An Exploratory Discussion," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 21 (1966) 95-112, at p. 100.

¹⁵ Cf. J. Fuchs, *art. cit.*, p. 294.

main point is that here and now the person is sorry for whatever sinfulness has entered his personality in his deeds, and is humbly using the present grace as a source of new life. Then, whatever the exact classification of what he did, it is all working unto good for the person who is now caught up once again in the love of God. The confessor need not be anxious, if externals of the past are presented as they ought to be, if the present is indicative of humble love, and the prognosis is for new life in Christ and the Church.¹⁶

Formation

Persons must be formed for life and love in God. A positive formation to the grandeur of personal awareness, in covenant with the living God, is of itself the best way to assure the absence of sin.¹⁷ This formation aims (1) to help people grow as free persons and to live; (2) to deliver them from slavery to false behavior patterns without true moral and personal significance (some are in need of a messianic deliverance); (3) to educate them to be sensitive to true moral significance in every situation and in every action; (4) to free them from superficiality on the level where "venial" and "light" sins can happen; (5) to insert them deeply into the ambient of divine love, given to them in Christ through the Church and penetrating the deep recesses of their being; (6) to deepen the intensity of their commitment in love to their own personal vocation in life; (7) positively to help them create situations in which their basic love-gift to God is exercised and deepened; (8) positively to give them a sense of mission to help others to such a mature and sinless personal love.

The living of covenant in this way and the violation of covenant do not go together. "He who is born of God cannot sin."

¹⁶ The question will be asked in the light of our suggestions: Are "serious" sins (not "mortal") to be accounted as necessary matter for the sacrament of penance? The *prima facie* answer is affirmative: this is the sense in which the usual legal formula has traditionally been taken. One would desire a re-examination of the position of the Council of Trent in the light of our categorization—and not simply of the conciliar statements, but of the sources from which they were formed. One would also acknowledge the relation of this question to the problems of justification and the classification raised by our discussion.

¹⁷ One practical point: we would wish preachers to abstain from the dictum "such and such a thing is always a mortal sin." It is much preferable to say "it is always seriously wrong." A renewed examen of conscience for the Christian is urgent, with emphasis on personal attitudes.

Catechetics

We introduced this study with a reference to the common catechetical theme presenting sin as "saying no to God." We saw that sin means much more than this; and we saw that this "much more" is not found, fully at least, in what ordinary people do when they say they "commit sin." We have come full circle. We are back to our starting point. We see now the value in the catechetical formula. The formula, it seems to us, is sufficiently personal, sufficiently flexible, and sufficiently meaningful to be very useful in conveying to the ordinary person a sense of what he does in the ordinary things he calls his sins. To this extent we feel it deserves retention. But if taken alone and as the chief message concerning the meaning of sin, the formula is inadequate. We need to give people a broader horizon of the mystery of iniquity; we need to form them to view their lives (and their vocation) as a whole, to be lived in the presence of the covenant God in growing personal awareness and response. Only in this background can the formula perform its limited but useful role.

This is but a tentative. It desires to underscore the importance of the problem of developing a theology of sin in real accord with biblical revelation and with the experience of contemporary man.