

DOCTRINAL SECTION

IS SELF-ABUSE GRIEVOUSLY SINFUL?

• PEDRO LUMBRERAS, O. P.

To commit a grievous sin against natural law three things must be considered: grave matter, full knowledge, and perfect consent.

Full knowledge supposes that a man has sound judgment and is aware of the grave malice of an act. It means he knows this act is incompatible with the ultimate end, either because it is indecent, or because it is strictly forbidden, or because it is vulgarly against good customs.

But it does not set precisely that he should be aware of the whole malice of the act, or that he is offending God if he does it; or that he would be sinning against this virtue rather than against another. Neither does it require precisely an actual knowledge in the moment of doing the act. Virtual knowledge suffices. Virtual knowledge is acquired when foreseeing the future absence of knowledge the cause was placed without justifiable reason.

Lastly, neither does it require precisely a clear and distinct knowledge. It suffices that there lurks a suspicion with foundation about the gravity of the act, or that there is a doubt that the act may be a mortal sin. For then there is an awareness of the danger of sinning grievously.

Perfect consent includes, besides full knowledge, a free will having a dominion over its acts. It is therefore capable of resisting innate or acquired tendencies and internal or external incitements of sin.

Therefore, a man who is unconscious or semi-conscious or a pathological case with slight or no dominion over his acts, cannot be guilty grievously of self-abuse. But these cases are obviously not ordinary, so we omit them here.

"Reason, according to St. Thomas, directs human acts in accordance with a two-fold knowledge, universal and particular: because in conferring about what is to be done, it employs a syllogism, the conclusion of which is an act of judgment or of choice or an operation. Now actions are about singulars: wherefore, the conclusion of a practical syllogism is a singular proposition. But a singular proposition does not follow from a universal proposition except through the medium of a particular proposition." (*I-II*, 76, 1.)

Thus, in the face of a temptation of fornication for example, we ask ourselves: "Shall I do it or avoid it? Evidently we seek what is good and avoid what is evil: but pleasure or delight is among the good, and sin among evil. To make a reply, reason considers the act in question under one of these formalities. For example: Sin must be avoided, but this act is sinful; therefore, I must avoid this act. On the other hand, reason may proceed thus: Delight must be enjoyed, but this act is delightful; therefore I must do it.

The effect of a double cause can be impeded by suppressing one of these two. If the major premise or universal proposition is missing or if the minor particular proposition is absent, then the mentioned consequence will not take place.

Now, the knowledge of a universal proposition may be absent habitually through inadvertence. However, since the human acts which reason directs, are singular—human acts which should be executed or omitted here and now and in these circumstances and which should presently be considered good or evil,—the mere absence of awareness or advertence suffices to impede the mentioned conclusion.

This inadvertence is brought about by lack of consideration, because we don't pay attention, or we don't reflect; or by something incompatible with this consideration, which hinders us from paying attention or from reflecting. In the first case, we don't compare the two terms: fornication and sin; in the second, the comparison disturbs us. In both cases, the result is that reason does not judge or conclude that this act should be avoided; without which therefore, it may judge or conclude that the act should be performed.

As regards ignorance of the universal proposition or as in this case, of the natural law, St. Thomas insisted that, if the most general precepts, being self evident and not demanding discourse, cannot be ignored or forgotten by any man with the use of reason, the other secondary precepts necessarily linked to the first principles, already suppose a discourse or reasoning, which is not a universal patrimony; although some, by reason of their being proximate or immediate conclusions come to the knowledge of man with marked facility. Other precepts however, which are remote or mediate conclusions demand attention and study to which not all men can possibly dedicate themselves. (*I-II*, 94, 46).

Among the precepts which come to man's notice with the least effort, St. Thomas includes the ten commandments which "as they were given for all men, so they are offered for the appraisal of all, as pertaining to natural reason. (*II-II* 56, 1).

But every precept involves an idea of something which should be performed or omitted, the concept of an obligation or a debt; and these precepts deal with those acts whose commission or omission is more manifestly an obligation. (*II-II*, 122, a.1 ad 1).

Now, St. Tomas reminds us that the reason of obligation due to a precept appears more clearly in justice which deals with our relationship with others. Consequently, in that which pertains to others, it is evident that man is obliged to give what is due to them. (*Ibidem*). Hence, the precepts of the Ten Commandments are exclusively precepts of justice. As in the Mosaic law, adultery was so prohibited inasmuch as it appropriates what belongs to another: an illicit relation with the wife of another. (*Ibid.*, q. 170, a.1).

But simple fornication was not forbidden in this law, because it supposes the mutual consent of two persons who are free and it appears at first glance that man is master of his own self and is free to do what he pleases. (*Ibid.*, q. 122, a.1.). The malice, therefore, of a simple fornication is not discovered at first glance.

If in spite of the fact that robbery is against justice, there were yet some people who believed in its lawfulness. It should not be surprising then that a man in certain period of his life may ignore of the unlawfulness of fornication. (*ibid.*, q. 122, a.1).

While, in this case or other similar cases, the knowledge of universal proposition is hindered by bad training, or hindered by the environment in which one lives or by other causes, the absence of actual consideration of a particular proposition finds its inculpability in antecedent passion. (To this passion, which is previous to the movement of the rational appetite and incites what moves in the identical direction or towards what it has for its object, it is easy to reduce those habits called involuntary, the tendencies due to one's temperament, and including the dynamic unconscious so much used by certain modern writers.)

Even knowing that fornication is evil or sinful, yet the passion can drag us to judge this fornication as something for our own good.

Concerning this aspect, Cardinal Cajetan (*Commentary to I-II*, 77, 1.) reminds us that the animal appetite goes primarily after what is convenient to a composite and at a pace that by natural appetite every faculty follows its own convenience.

Hence, when a passion is strongly incited, it is not only the sensitive appetite that is impressed or moved, but the whole man is changed and diversely disposed to what he was before: And disposed thus: what was not convenient to him before, is convenient to him now.

Finding it convenient in these circumstances, the estimative power or particular reason judges its convenience to him effectively. And this judgment is ratified by the universal reason which, in dealing with singular cases, gives much importance to the estimative or cogitative power.

It is useless to argue with one embroiled in a fight to death, that justice will overtake him, that he will be put in prison, that he will probably die at

the hands of an executioner. In vain is the wife's supplication at his feet, expressing the children's sad plight: poverty, ostracism, and the infamy which will be the future of the family.

The savage call of vengeance must be deflected by a stronger force; so that the soothing voice of prudence can dominate the man.

Passion hinders the act, e.g. of fornication from being considered by reason in its aspect as sin; thus, it disturbs reason from arriving at the right conclusion: namely; this act must be avoided.

While that consideration or comparison of the act with sin hinders him temporarily from making a sinful act, it at the same time, induces him to consider the act as delightful. And when delight, which is the good of man, overcome by passion, gains over reason, it suggests another universal proposition fitted to a man disposed thus. And reason makes this syllogism: What is delightful should be sought. But this act is delightful therefore...

And so, reason imitates a judge who listens carefully with avidity, to what one party claims; but listens weakly and negligently to the arguments of the other then pronounces his sentence when in reality he ought to have given a sentence based on given proofs and allegations.

Through an impartial consideration, reason would have judged thus: this act, though delightful, should be avoided. Instead, it precipitates a solution: this act, though sinful, should be performed.

It was the will which detained reason in the almost exclusive consideration of delight; then sent it to its rash judgement: And finally the will pushed reason to its proper choice; when it should have denied the choice, or at least postponed it. It should have imposed upon reason a calmer examination of the case.

Over provoking the inadvertence of intelligence, passion weakens the energy or resistance of the will.

"Since all the soul's powers are rooted in the one essence of the soul, it follows of necessity that, when the power is intent in its act, another power becomes remiss or is even altogether impeded in its act, both because all energy is weakened through being divided, so that, on the contrary, thought being centered on one thing, it is less able to be directed to several. And because, in the operations of the soul, a certain attention is required, if this be closely fixed in one thing, less attention is given to another. In this way, by a kind of distraction, when the movement of the sensitive appetite is enforced with respect to any passion whatever, the proper movement of the rational appetite or will must of necessity become remiss and altogether impeded." (I-II, 77, 1).

In short, the powers of the soul are limited, so the more powers there are utilized by passion, the less there remain at the service of the will.

However, as long as there remains the use of reason which allows a man to notice the malice of an act, then a certain freedom exists.

The question now is whether the weakening of the will as well as that of the advertence provoked by Passion, affects knowledge and consent which are necessary with respect to sin.

St. Thomas answers the query when after showing the influence of passion over the will and the intelligence, he asks if passion excuses from sin or at least from grievous sin.

He answers the first: "A passion is sometimes so strong as to take away, the use of reason altogether, as in the case of those who are madly in love or angry... Sometimes, however, the passion is not such as to take away the use of reason altogether, and then reason can drive the passion away, turning to other thoughts, or it can prevent it from having its full effect since the members are not put to work, except by the consent of reason. Wherefore such a passion does not excuse from sin altogether." (*I-II, 77, a. 7*).

To the second he offers an analogous answer: "Mortal sin consists in turning away from our last end which is God; which turning away pertains to the deliberating reason, whose function is also to direct towards the end. Therefore that which is contrary to the last end can happen not to be a mortal sin, only when the deliberating reason is unable to come to the rescue which is the case in sudden movements.

"Now when anyone proceeds from passion to a sinful act or to a deliberate consent, this does not happen suddenly; and so the deliberating reason can come to the rescue here, since it can drive the passion away or at least prevent it from having its effect; wherefore if it does not come to the rescue; there is mortal sin; and it is thus, as we see that many murders and adulteries are committed through passion." (*I-II, 77, a8*). It is evident to St. Thomas that as long as reason is capable of deliberating before arriving at the performance of the sinful act provoked by passion, the will sins grievously by not resisting the passion, although the non-resistance is due to failure of deliberation. The will finds itself in the place of a superior judge, who, conscious of the unjust sentence given by a subaltern judge, still confirms it and does not stop its execution.

Against the tendency of a few who like to limit grievous sin to the ordinary perverse attitude of a sinner, and do not see gravity in an isolated sin motivated by passion but only in a more or less firm habit of sin, we have the traditional definition of sin as an inordinate act. We also have the common doctrine which states that sinful acts and not the depraved habits are the necessary matter of the sacrament of Penance.

Likewise, we have the classical distinction given by Aristotle (cfr. St. Thomas, *In 7 Ethicorum*, lect. 7) between incontinent and immoderate sin-

ners. The habitual disposition of the former is to resist inordinate passions. If they succumb once or more times it happens momentarily. Hence repentance is easy and almost immediate to them. Hence when St. Peter denied Christ, he did not apostatize from Christ. Neither did the merchant board the boat with that idea, when forced by the storm, he threw his merchandise overboard. But "in fear the will consents to the act though not for its own sake, but to avoid the evil which is feared. This satisfies the condition of a voluntary act, since the voluntary is not only what we wish for its own end, but also what we wish for the sake of something else as an end." (II-II, 6, 6 ad 1).

In the same way, in the case of another circumstances, a man in the height of passion does what he may not like to do when not under its influence. Yet, passion makes him like to do it.

After giving the preceding explanations, it is easy to give a solution to the problem expressed by the title of this article.

In the first place, the designated act: "Self-abuse," also called voluntary pollution, masturbation, onanism, and solitary vice, is considered objectively as a grievous sin. This is one of the points in which Catholic theologians agree.

And figuring among the errors condemned by Pope Innocent V is this statement: Self abuse is not prohibited by natural law. Hence, if it is not forbidden by God, then it should be good to do it frequently, and in some cases obligatory. (Denz. 1199).

Likewise on August 2, 1929, The Holy Office answered in the negative the question whether masturbation procured directly to obtain sperm by means of which the contagious disease blemorrhagia may be detected and possibly cured. (Denz. 1199).

Pope Pius XI in his encyclical: "*On Christian Marriage*" said: "By natural and divine law, the use of the generative faculty is allowed only to married couples and within the just bounds of Matrimony." (Denz. 2230).

That lust admits of no parvity in matter, is a principle universally accepted in Catholic Theology.

Now, we proceed to another question. Does self-abuse cease to be sinful or grievously sinful due to imperfection or lack of knowledge or of consent?

First, total ignorance of its malice is possible. Because, if men could be ignorant of the Ten Commandments, conclusions close to the first principles of natural law at least for certain period of time, the more he can be when some very particular circumstances intervene. Some example, are the malice of stealing to help the poor, the malice of homicide in mercy killing to relieve the dying of intense pain, the malice of perjury to save an innocent man

from death. There are other precepts of the natural law, proximate or remote conclusions such as the prohibition of fornication, analogous to onanism which man could easily and persistently be ignorant of.

This total ignorance is due to negative causes, such as when a man has not reasoned out to heap it upon himself; or when he has not received necessary instructions to expel it by means of an opposite knowledge.

This ignorance is also due to positive causes in many occasions, such as prejudices either personal, collective or historical; social or domestic atmosphere, passions, visions, customs and evil persuasions, mentioned by St. Thomas. (*Summa Theologica, I-II, 94, 4 & 6*)

These evil persuasions are becoming rampant today in magazines, books and newspapers which defend in disguised or clear arguments, the lawfulness or even the necessity of self-abuse to relieve or satisfy one's self.

It is evident then that when this total and invincible ignorance exists, there is no ground for talking of sin or at least of mortal sin. Because, there the malice or grave malice of self-abuse is involuntary.

Where such total ignorance is absent, can we say: Passion suffices to impede awareness and consent necessary for an act to be a grievous sin?

Pius XII answers: We reject as erroneous the assertion of those who regard lapses as inevitable in adolescence, and therefore as not worthy of serious notice, as though they were not grave faults, because, they as a general rule destroy the freedom needed for an act to be morally imputable." (*AAS, 44, 1952, page 275*).

As expressly stated, it deals of general rules, not of ordinary happenings. No one doubts that in some cases the impetus of passion can be so strong as to deprive a man of the use of reason.

The Holy Father spoke of adolescence in which, according to some statistics, self-abuse is the most ordinary occurrence all over the world.

How about Masturbation from the time of the use of reason up to puberty?

First, note that during this period the sexual instinct is not ordinarily well developed. If in some cases, it is effectively so, there is room for mitigation of responsibility. But by this, it does not mean these acts are just venial sins even if provoked by passion because they are not always venial, nor with such frequency as among pubescent.

In fact the Church considers them as gifted with sufficient freedom as to allow them to make private vows and even to ask for baptism, which in many cases means changing their religion.

And since they are obliged to go to confession at least once a year, this pre-supposes that they are capable of grievous sins.

I like to end this article with the brief observation of a serene and well thought study of the most recent writings of the topic in question.

"The results of our investigation into the problem of the imputability of acts of masturbation seem to leave little doubt that the normal male engaged in such activity cannot ordinarily be excused from the stigma of serious formal sin. This general rule, we believe, holds true for all stages of development in which these acts occur. To be sure, there is a graduation of guilt to be observed according as the individual progresses in intellectual and moral maturity. It is true that the child and early adolescent cannot, as a rule, be held equally responsible for these acts on the same level with the late adolescent and adult. Ordinarily, however, this graduation of guilt will mean a lesser degree of mortal sin rather than a reduction of guilt to the point of venial sin. At all stages, such factors as ignorance, passion, habit, the dynamic unconscious, or abnormal psychic conditions will occasionally reach such proportions as to prevent the *full advertence* and *perfect consent* required for serious subjective sin, but these instances cannot be regarded as representing the ordinary situation. The more usual effect of these factors will be to reduce personal responsibility, without, however destroying the minimum advertence and consent required for mortal sin." (Kosnik, *The Imputability of Acts of Masturbation among Males*. Rome, 1961, p. 103).

CORRIGENDUM

INTRODUCTION on Index and page 478 of the
July 1969 issue should read INSTRUCTION.