

Mortal Sin in Context

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Even casual Catholics likely know the two categories of sin: mortal and venial. They may not be able to define the categories accurately, but they surely know the former is more serious than the latter. They know that because the doctrine about sin is one of the first lessons Catholics learn.

What may surprise the readers of this newsletter is my assertion that scrupulous people generally have more in common with casual Catholics than people might believe. They may know more about sin than casual Catholics, but scrupulous people seem to see every sin as a mortal sin. This perception casts their religious faith in a negative light.

The tried-and-true *Baltimore Catechism*, the standard tool for Catholic formation many years ago, defines mortal sin in a common-sense way, attempting to remedy this unfortunate negative circumstance, making clear the difference between mortal and venial sins.

The *Baltimore Catechism* states that three things are needed for a sin to be mortal. First, the thought, desire, word, action, or omission must be seriously wrong or considered seriously wrong; second, the person must be mindful of the serious wrong; third, the person must fully consent to it. Only when all three conditions are met can a sin be classified as mortal, according to the old catechism.

It then explains the consequences of committing a mortal sin: "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."

The newer *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, simplifies the definition. "For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent" (CCC 1857). Unintentional ignorance, the promptings of feelings and





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passions, and external pressures or pathological disorders can diminish the seriousness of the sin (CCC 1860). These elaborations resulted from a greater understanding of psychology. And while hell can be an end result of unforgiven mortal sin, “we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God” (CCC 1861).

In general, scrupulous people, through no fault of their own but perhaps because of a miscalculation, end their research about sin with these definitions. They then apply the principles, but they do so erroneously. Scrupulosity keeps the sufferer from excusing circumstances, ensuring that the catastrophic and most serious application of the definition of sin will be made because it will generate the anxiety that the scrupulosity needs in order to ravage the person’s peacefulness.

The consequences of mortal sin that the *Baltimore Catechism* outlines are frightening and

serious. People with scrupulosity should ask, “How does my supposed responsibility and designation of sin deserve these consequences?” God is just, no doubt. God is merciful, no doubt. And God is not a bully who sets up traps of mortal sin to catch a person unaware and then condemn him or her to an eternity in hell.

So is it possible that an intrusive thought is a mortal sin? Is it possible you could entertain an intrusive thought for a period of time and make it a mortal sin? How about thoughts about normal and God-created human functions, including sexuality. Are these thoughts mortal sins? Can we imagine God rubbing his hands in delight as souls are thrown into hell? That kind of God does not exist, except in the imaginings of the disordered scrupulous mind. That is not God. That is a disorder.

The Church believes and teaches that mortal sins exist, and I believe and teach what the Church believes and teaches. But the Church and I do not believe that mortal sin is casual, accidental, or a moral trap set by God to catch his people. This sin is uncommon and not rampant in the world or in people who suffer from scrupulosity. Scrupulous people who worry constantly about their relationship with God cannot freely consent to the conditions required for mortal sin. That is an absurd contradiction.

I hope that readers who convince themselves that they are guilty of mortal sins might reconsider after they understand the context I have presented. The terrible consequences of mortal sin are serious. Would it not be required for simple justice, let alone for applied mercy and forgiveness from God, that these consequences can only occur when the sin is actually serious and grave? The action must be proportional to the consequences. From start to finish. ⚙

God is just. God is merciful. God also is not a bully who sets up traps of mortal sin to condemn a person to hell.

Becoming Whole Again

In *Confessions*, St. Augustine describes movingly how God made him whole after many years of brokenness. "I find no safe place for myself save in you in whom all my scattered pieces are gathered together," he writes.

His journey to wholeness, he says, started when he withdrew to the quiet place of sweet solitude within his own heart. There he invited God to speak to him. "Whisper words of truth in my heart," he pleaded, "for you alone speak truth. I will leave outside those who do not believe, letting them stir up the dust in their own eyes, while I withdraw to my secret cell and sing to you hymns of love.

"I shall not turn aside until you gather all that I am into that holy place of peace, rescuing me from the world where I am broken and deformed and giving me new form and new strength."

Augustine describes that holy place of peace in his commentary on John's Gospel. It is "that innermost shrine of your deepest self," he tells us, "that place of sweet solitude, that secret dwelling where there is no weariness, where no bitter thoughts enter, where there is no lurking temptation or heavy sorrow."

Looking back on his life, Augustine realized that God had been healing him for a long time. While he had been vainly looking for love in the wrong places, he had been in God's hands.

"You saw me and transformed my ugliness into beauty," he writes. "Like a balm which soothes my pain, your hidden touch healed my self love. And day by day you continued to heal me until the confusion and darkness were cleared from the eye of my soul."

Augustine sees self-love as the main bar to the love that beckons us toward God. He is aware that unless we are healed within, we will

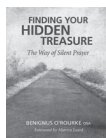


be disabled, lacking the confidence and energy and the inner strength to become our true selves.

Our self-love is the result of our lack of belief in ourselves. Too often we accept other people's opinions of who we are. We compare ourselves with others and see ourselves as failures or as inferior to them.

Augustine would have us give up our futile searching for our identity in the eyes of others and go deep into "the shrine of our deepest selves" to the one who loves us. If we allow the Lord to gather us to himself, to work in us, then the effects on ourselves as well as on others are brought together. Day by day, God heals our brokenness and we, too, become whole again.

So Augustine bids us: "All that is weak in you will not drag you to the grave. But your wholeness will abide, will remain with you before God, who remains strong and abides forever." ✨



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Q. *I struggle with what is permitted and what is forbidden on Sunday. What is servile work? How can I know what I can do and what I cannot do?*

A. Servile work is work performed by a serf. You are not a serf. The designation has lost any applicable meaning in our modern world. Strive for simplicity and balance, including time for the Sunday Eucharist, for family, and tasks around the house that need attention. Don't be too restrictive. That is where the idea of balance is important and necessary.

Q. *My grandson is getting married, but it will not be in a Catholic Church. He does not practice his faith, and his fiancée is not Catholic. May I attend the wedding?*

A. Absolutely and without hesitation. You should support your grandson and his wife-to-be. They are not asking you for any judgment other than your support for the beginning of their married life. This is not a religious statement. It is a relational celebration that is appropriate.



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