

# DEGREES OF MORAL IRRESPONSIBILITY: MORTAL SIN

BRIAN LEWIS

**S**IN, OR MORAL irresponsibility as failure to respond to the good of persons and ultimately to God, for the most part involves harm to human persons in themselves, in society or in their environment. God is offended because human persons made in his image are harmed (Lewis, 'Sin as Failure to be Fully Responsible', *Compass* 2013, Issue 3, pp. 14-18). The question was asked in that article whether too exclusive a focus on sin as offence against God while taking too little account of the relational dimension of harm to others has led to failure to recognise the reality and extent of sin today?

When the further issue of the degree of seriousness of sin is raised, a similar question could be asked: Do some people see serious sin where none really exists? Is it possible to feel guilty of grave offences that one has not in fact committed?

Clearly not all sin is equally serious, because lack of responsibility can range from some minor fault to an action that is gravely harmful to persons. The degree of seriousness of sin depends on the harm one intends to do and in fact does to human persons in themselves and in their relationships. This can range from a passing hurt to a completely irresponsible act that is totally dehumanizing and totally destructive of a human relationship.

## *Mortal and Venial Sin*

The Christian tradition recognizes this progression in the seriousness of sin in its distinction, implicit in fact although not explicit in name in the New Testament, between mortal and

venial sin. The names 'mortal' and 'venial' were in common use certainly by the time of St. Augustine, but the New Testament already distinguished the reality of so-called daily sins to which all are subject from those serious sins that exclude the person who commits them from the Kingdom of God, such as leading an immoral life, idolatry, adultery, pederasty, avarice and so on (1Cor 6:9f), and which also lead to exclusion from the community (1Cor 5:1-13).

Traditionally sin has been termed 'mortal' or 'death-dealing' when it is so serious as to destroy the new life of grace that Christ won for us upon the cross, a destruction that will, unless repented of, result in the loss of that divine life for ever. An irresponsible act (or omission) that does not destroy this life of grace is called reparable or venial sin. St. Thomas Aquinas compares sin in this respect to bodily diseases, many of which are curable, whereas some are incurable and hence lethal or mortal. So sins that are of themselves curable are called venial, whereas sins are called mortal since they are incurable of themselves and can be healed only by God restoring the life of grace (*S. Theol.* I-II, 88,1).

These distinctions do not go to the heart of the matter. St. Thomas tried to put his finger on the real basis of the distinction by discussing sin in the full sense as a turning away from God (*S. Theol.* I-II, 77,8). This turning away from God is not, however, a pure rejection. It is rather the result of a turning towards a substitute god, namely some created reality. This occurs in mortal sin. In venial sin, however, there is no turning away from God by

substituting some created thing; there is only an unwarranted grasping of creature comfort, a using of created reality in a way that cannot be referred to God. For this reason venial sin cannot be considered sin in the full meaning of the word. It is called sin only analogically.

According to St. Thomas, the basic difference between mortal and venial sin lies in the presence or absence of a turning away from God. God is of course not encountered, at least for the most part, directly. We encounter God through our fellows and our world. It is possible for us to refuse the obedience of faith in God by not recognizing or accepting our dependence on God for salvation. But we can also do this by being so enclosed in our own self-sufficiency as to refuse the claim God makes on us through our brothers and sisters in need. So turning away from God is not limited to destroying faith radically by a formal rejection of the truth of faith. What we destroy in turning away from God is love, whose primary act is love of our neighbour. What is sinful before God is in general that which conflicts with human wellbeing.

The notion of moral irresponsibility as refusal of creative response helps to illustrate the point. Mortal sin is death-dealing at root in regard to relationships, in terms of refusal to respond to the truth of living together in love. If this refusal reaches the point of being totally destructive of persons, personal life and personal relationships, it may well be called mortal sin.

The penitential practice of the early Church supports this perspective. Sin was seen as a community illness, for which penance was a community effort and reconciliation a community event, particularly in the Eucharistic celebration. When by the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century a form of public penance developed, it was intended only for those members of the Church who had gravely harmed the community and relationships within the community by apostasy, murder or adultery. It was not required that lesser sins be submitted to public penance, since they were not seen as posing such a threat



*Brian Lewis was formerly a lecturer in moral theology. Now retired, he maintains an interest in writing on ethical issues of contemporary concern.*

to community peace and harmony. The analogy with human friendship perhaps makes the point simply. Just as not every offence ends a friendship, so not every sin overturns friendship with God.

### ***Conditions for Mortal Sin***

#### **1. Involvement of the person**

In our moral tradition it has long been customary to set down three conditions for committing mortal sin: grave matter, full knowledge and full consent. The latter two conditions regarding knowledge and free consent refer to the involvement of the acting person in the action (omission) and are by far the most important consideration. Sin is the action of a person. Matter cannot sin. Only a person can do so.

The guilt of moral irresponsibility or sin is incurred only when one consciously and freely involves the self in the action. We often do things in a state of distraction. We cause hurt to others without realizing what we are doing and without being at all involved in it. No doubt we should be more sensitive to the feelings of people about us, but at times this is simply beyond us. This may be a cause for concern but it is not a moral issue. Acts done inadvertently are not moral actions in any sense, and therefore they are not sinful. To be human or moral our actions must be the conscious and free seeking of some objective. Even here, as will be discussed shortly, there are degrees of personal engagement in what we do or fail to do.

Some of the choices we make are superfi-

cial and do not engage us in our depth as persons, but there are decisions in life, such as the choice to marry a certain person, when the decision made is central to the direction of our life and the person we thus commit ourselves to be. There are critical decisions in life which structure our personality and link together in a meaningful pattern the various choices we subsequently make. The behavioural sciences have analyzed these critical decisions and processes in terms like 'the crises of life', 'stages of development' and 'the search for meaning'. We need to take account of these ideas and incorporate them into our attempts to reflect on the moral life and failures in it.

St. Thomas thought that on reaching the age of discretion a person makes a fundamental decision which determines her/his stance for or against the Truth and the Good, and implicitly at least for or against God. The decision for good, made with the aid of God's grace, is the commitment of the person to love. The decision for evil, which is of course not sought as such but perceived under the guise of good, is mortal sin, because one fails to do what is in her/his power to do (*S.Theol.* I-II, 89,6).

The behavioural sciences today make us wary about identifying the moment of moral maturity with the age of discretion (as St. Thomas did). Some perhaps never become morally mature and in the case of those who do there are probably many peripheral good or bad choices that lead up to the self-determining commitment to good or evil, a commitment for or against God. But it cannot be doubted that moral maturity demands a commitment(s) that gives meaning, consistency and direction to a person's life, that integrates not only one's choices but also one's attitudes, desires, expectations and aspirations.

All this boils down to saying that in the choices we make we determine the sort of person we become. Having freedom, we can commit ourselves to be either loving or self-centred persons. If the commitment is to the former it will be morally good and for God. If

the commitment is to the self as the be-all and end-all of existence it will be morally bad and in religious terms mortal sin, separating the person from God and from the true human fulfillment planned for us by God.

A free self-determination that involves launching oneself on such a path, a very deep and free decision for evil, is difficult to contemplate, no doubt because we find it next to impossible to plumb the depths of human sin and evil, but, whether and to what extent such a terrible thing in fact occurs, our Christian tradition at least warns us of its frightening possibility and of its implications for a person's life and destiny. Mortal sin is not something that happens to a person by accident nor is it something we 'fall into'.

We are not suggesting that everything a person committed to good chooses to do is loving. Many acts of selfishness, impatience, meanness, sloth, may be anything but loving, but one may not invest much of oneself in them or at least not engage the self in such a way as to overturn one's basic commitment. Faults of this kind are traditionally called venial sins. Nor is it suggested that everything a person inordinately committed to self does is bad. There may be many acts of quite unselfish behaviour that will not so involve the person as to change his/her fundamental self-determination or general direction of life.

It is worth noting that the awareness obviously required for us to determine ourselves in a particular direction is not the speculative knowledge about the rightness or wrongness of some acts, such as we might get from a teacher or a catechism, but our personal realization of the morality of the whole issue. This kind of awareness is called *evaluative* knowledge. It has particular relevance for the part the matter of an act might play in the difference between mortal and venial sin. What is important is less the objective assessment of the gravity of an action and more the perception that one has of this. If I do not perceive an action as serious, I am not likely to make any sort of fundamental commitment in doing

it. It would be a minor moral act, a venial sin.

The self-determination or personal commitment of which we have been talking must not be seen as definitive or irreformable. It can be changed, for good or ill.

The Church has taken seriously the Lord's call to repentance or change of heart and in season and out of season has preached the need for conversion. Conversion is most importantly religious in character, implying a turning to God revealed in Jesus, but it carries with it a demand for a change of moral direction as well.

Although in the history of the Church conversion in the sense of moral conversion seems to have sometimes occurred suddenly in one great spiritual and emotional surge, one would expect it to occur gradually over time and to include many lesser counter-thrusts against a life of sin before reaching the stage of a definitive commitment to God. In similar fashion a person committed to the good is not confirmed in this for all time. Theoretically it is possible for this to be changed in one act of self-disposal towards evil, where one is fully aware of what one is committing oneself to and yet freely does so (*Reconciliation and Penance*, 1984, n.223). However, it is much more likely that a person will set out on a gradual trajectory that will eventually lead to a final change of commitment. One does not easily set aside in a radical way one's habitual moral attitudes, patterns of existence and practice.

A comparison often made in this context is with marriage breakdown. A relationship of this kind does not terminate all of a sudden or out of the blue. It occurs over time and involves a gradual falling out of love, accompanied no doubt by a developing pattern of bickering, infidelities of varying kinds and degrees, disillusionment and other alienations. There will normally come a point of decision where one or both partners must face either reconciliation or breakup, a choice to try again or formalize the growing rift.

So a person committed to the good, to liv-

ing together with others in truth and love, will not in the normal course of events commit a mortal sin in one uncharacteristic act. A preparation for this will be laid down by a succession of moral faults which blur the conscience and lead to an increasing focus on the self as the centre and criterion of moral choice. As St. Thomas puts it, 'While grace is lost by a mortal sin, yet grace is not usually lost so easily; a person in the state of grace does not find it quite so easy to turn from God because his whole orientation is towards him' (*De Veritate*, 27, 1 ad 1).

## 2. Gravity of Matter

In past times the conditions for mortal sin were in practice reduced to the gravity of the matter of sin. Although the level of involvement of the person has never been completely overlooked, it must be said that in the past, for historical reasons that need not concern us here, too much emphasis tended to be placed on the first condition for mortal sin, namely grave matter. Lists of sins regarded as mortally sinful were drawn up by moralists and some of these found their way into Church documents, even *Gaudium et Spes* (nn.27, 51, 79-80). Such lists have their value, particularly from a juridical point of view, but they may give a false impression about sin and are certainly an over-simplification.

In a pluralistic society such as ours there is considerable divergence of opinion about what is to be considered morally evil, especially in the areas of personal morality. Older moralists realized that sometimes people do the wrong thing out of ignorance and in good faith but they considered this the exception rather than the rule. Such a viewpoint was based on the idea that there is a moral order that is basically stable and readily recognizable by all, at least in broad outline. There was for them a presumption in favour of wrongdoing being sin in the proper sense of the word. Today we cannot be so sure. The old certainties have gone and disagreement about quite fundamental moral issues, for example, abor-

tion, euthanasia or same-sex relations, for instance, is a fact of everyday experience.

Whatever about this, the categorization of actions as mortally sinful without examination of the attitudes and stances whence they derive leaves the inner meaning of sin as refusal of creative response to basic human values unresolved. Anger, for instance, may be due to a fit of passion, the result of an impulsive temperament, the habitual pattern of discourtesy towards people, or the conscious refusal to be loving towards one's neighbour. A much deeper analysis of the way in which our actions affect our relationship with others and so with God is required, rather than a mere external labelling of actions. As already pointed out, matter does not sin. The decisive issue is the engagement of the self in the action.

However, the matter or object of the action is still important. It can be a sign or an indication of the depth of personal involvement. If the matter is slight it is not likely that we would be very much involved in it. If on the other hand it is serious and perceived as such the more likely it is that a person would be deeply involved in it.

We have to keep in mind that because of the limitations on human freedom it is not possible to be sure whether or not anyone has in fact committed mortal sin. We cannot be sure even in our own case. The most we can expect to have is some sort of presumption.

A person who finds him/herself regularly committing sin in a serious matter may well presume that such a pattern of moral life argues to a determination of the self against the good and therefore implicitly against God. The frequency of the sin could hardly occur without a change in one's basic commitment to the good. On the other hand, there would be a counter-presumption in the case of one who is genuinely sorry for the sin committed and who continues to struggle against its recurrence

(Häring, *Free and Faithful*, 1981, 215).

A second situation in which a presumption of mortal sin might be made concerns the matter of the sin, even when there is no recurrent pattern. If the matter is grave one might well presume that one's self-determination to evil is involved. If it is slight a presumption might reasonably be made that this is not so. Hence even in a particular act a presumption about the gravity of one's personal involvement, and so of the gravity of the sin, is possible.

Clearly then, although in theory grave matter is not an indispensable requirement for mortal sin, its presence or absence is generally in practice a sign of mortal sin. The Church is of course quite justified in drawing up lists of mortal sins and using them in her preaching and teaching, since behaviour of this kind is likely to engage people in self-centredness and evil in a very radical way and so to be mortally sinful.

To sum up, in the last analysis it is not a listing of grave matters that is important but the degree of personal involvement in one's acts. If the personal involvement in a conscious and free choice is so deep as to constitute the determination of the self towards evil, one incurs the guilt of mortal sin. If, however, one's involvement in the action is not at this deep level one does not commit mortal sin, even if the matter is grave. Even when moral disvalues, maybe serious ones, are in question, it is possible not to be engaged at any deep personal level, because of psychological or similar factors (*Veritatis Splendor*; 1993, n.70).

A clear understanding of this distinction will rule out the temptation some people have to see grave sin everywhere. The indispensable yardstick in determining guilt regarding the harm one has done to persons, and so the offence against God, the sin, must always be the degree of personal involvement in the action (omission), not the gravity of the matter.

#### REFERENCES

Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, Vol.1, 1978, New York: Seabury Press  
 Brian Lewis, 'Sin as Failure to be Fully Responsible', *Compass* 2013, Issue 3, pp.14-18.

Report of the International Theological Commission, 'Penance and Reconciliation', in *Origins*, January 12, 1984, Vol.13, n.31.