

‘There are two ways, the one of life, the other of death’

Before moving on from Catholic teachings on ‘the last things’, it’s good to focus on just what we need to do to avoid hell and reach heaven. As Pope Benedict XVI said: ‘This, and nothing else, is the purpose of the Church: the salvation of souls, one by one.’ (*Address*, 11 May 2007) Often in Church life we expend great energy on less important things, forgetting that the Church should be, as Pope Francis says, a *field hospital* – focused on healing the wounds of those in most desperate spiritual need, accompanying the lost sheep on the path back to God. And there is no more desperate need or dangerous wound than that of the unforgiven sinner at risk of hell.

According to Catholic teaching, only one thing can send us to hell: unforgiven mortal sin. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 1037) So it was a spiritual illness that in recent decades the very expression ‘mortal sin’ – the actual naming of the wound – seemed to become almost ironical for some, and some preachers hesitated to mention it. This omission of the one thing that can lose us heaven is both ridiculous and damaging.

The distinction between mortal and venial sin is already referred to in Scripture. We read in the First Letter of St John: ‘There is sin which is mortal...All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal.’ (*1 Jn* 5:16-17) The tradition and teaching of the Church has related this to other teachings and drawn out its detailed application. The difference between the two levels is that ‘mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God’s law’, whereas ‘venial sin allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it.’ (*Catechism* n. 1855)

Last month we looked at Catholic teaching on justification, which puts the teaching on sin in the positive context of the grace of God, merited by Christ’s Passion and conferred on us especially in Baptism (or restored in Reconciliation). Because most Catholics were baptised as infants, we easily take for granted this whole foundation of Christ’s grace, and we risk reducing Christian life in our minds to trying to merit heavenly reward by our good works and trying to avoid sins that can send us to hell – while grace itself gets overlooked.

Yet given the foundation of grace, it remains true that those in God’s grace do merit heavenly reward by their good works – precisely by the grace and power of Christ himself, who dwells within the justified. And it does remain true that even one mortal sin incurs hell (if not redeemed by repentance and God’s forgiveness).

Scripture says, ‘Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.’ (*James* 2:10) By any mortal sin, we prefer our own will to God’s will in a serious matter, thus rejecting and blocking the influx from God of supernatural charity whereby he is loved above all things. (cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *ST* II-II, 24, 12) We thus drive from our souls both charity and sanctifying grace – gifts absolutely necessary for any human being to reach heaven.

The Council of Trent taught that the grace of justification is lost ‘not only by unbelief, which causes the loss of faith itself, but also by any other mortal sin, even though faith is not lost’. (DS 1544; cf. *1 Cor* 6:9-10) And Pope Benedict XII proclaimed: ‘We define that according to the general disposition of God, the souls of those who die in actual mortal sin go down into hell immediately after death...’ (DS 1002; cf. *Catechism* n. 1035)

The *Catechism*, quoting John Paul II, reiterates the traditional teaching that ‘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” (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* 17).’ (n. 1857) Those second and third conditions are actually reassuring to us: they mean that mortal sin cannot happen ‘by accident’. The *Catechism* explains: ‘...Responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors.’ (n. 1735)

People sometimes imagine only the very worst sins (such as murder) constitute ‘grave matter’. But the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, following traditional teaching, names numerous types of sin as grave – dozens explicitly, others by equivalent words. Various other types of sin are known as grave from other magisterial documents, from the consensus of theologians, or from Scripture itself; and some unfortunately are of fairly common occurrence.

Often those doing these actions would not have full knowledge of their gravity. Yet sometimes we are responsible for our own ignorance by not seeking out the truth with sufficient diligence. Theology distinguishes between ‘invincible ignorance’ (which could not be overcome by any reasonable effort and which therefore excuses us); and ‘vincible ignorance’ (which a reasonable effort could overcome, and for which we are therefore to blame to at least some degree). Worst is ‘affected ignorance’, in which we deliberately avoid finding out the truth so as to be free to commit sin without guilt (or so we delude ourselves). (cf. *Catechism* nn. 1859-60)

In his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (on the foundations of the Church’s moral teaching), John Paul II rejected the theory of ‘fundamental option’, according to which one could supposedly break God’s law in a grave matter, freely and knowingly, and yet somehow remain committed to him (and in his grace) at some deeper level of the soul. Against this, the Pope reaffirmed that our ‘option’ for or against God is truly changed in our free and conscious concrete actions.

The *Catechism* teaches: ‘Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself. It results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God’s forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ’s kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back. However, although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God.’ (n. 1861)

So this is where the risk to salvation lies. But of course we place this in context of its remedy – God’s mercy, the grace flowing from Christ’s Death and Resurrection, especially through the channels of the sacraments of Baptism and Reconciliation. Outside the actual reception of those sacraments, mortal sin can be forgiven if we have perfect contrition – arising from supernatural charity that loves God above all things, and including (at least implicitly) the intention of receiving the respective sacrament as soon as reasonably possible. But by the mercy of God, in actually receiving Baptism or Reconciliation even imperfect contrition suffices – sorrow for sin arising from lesser motives, such as sin’s ugliness or the fear of punishment after death.

Obviously, we avoid mortal sin at all costs in the first place, and do everything to encourage others to do likewise – drawing upon the grace of God received through the sacraments and prayer. But when through human frailty anyone does fall, we are all encouraged by the boundless divine mercy, the merits of our Saviour, and the abundant forgiveness found in the sacraments of mercy. And so, at the end of our lives, we may be found in the grace of God, that makes us worthy to enter his heavenly kingdom.