

NOTES

STEADY DATING AMONG ADOLESCENTS

In recent months the Catholic press has carried several statements referring to the morality of the fad of keeping steady company which has grown up among youngsters in their teens. Most of these statements speak of the practice in terms of occasion of sin. Since the problem is quite practical, it may not be out of place to discuss the morality of frequenting occasions of sin with a view to an ultimate statement on the morality of these so-called juvenile courtships.

An occasion of sin is defined by moralists as a person, place, or thing which leads one into sin. Such occasions may be proximate or remote. A remote occasion is one in which the danger of sinning is slight. Since it would be very difficult to avoid remote occasions of sin, moralists frequently say that one can ignore them. The same is true of proximate occasions of venial sin. But moralists are agreed that the proximate occasion of serious sin must be heeded. The meaning of this occasion, then, must be carefully considered.

Just what constitutes a proximate occasion of sin has been a matter of some discussion among moralists. Some hold that it is a person, place, or thing which will *probably* lead one into sin.¹ Others would maintain that the sin must be *very probable* or *morally certain* before the occasion can be said to be proximate.² To put the matter more concretely, the one group would hold that if a person became intoxicated every other time he went to a tavern, the tavern would become a proximate occasion of sin for him. The second group would maintain that unless he became intoxicated eight or nine times out of ten visits to the tavern, it could not be called a proximate occasion of sin for him.³

Moralists also distinguish between an absolute occasion of sin and a rela-

¹ St. Alphonsus is the leading proponent of this opinion; cf. *Theologia moralis* (Gaudé edition) lib. 6, n. 452.

² Martin of Azpilcueta (Doctor Navarrus) was the first to present this concept of the proximate occasion of sin. He describes it as an "occasio peculiaris . . . qua credit . . . penitens . . . nunquam vel raro se usurum ea sine peccato mortali"; *Manuale confessoriorum*, cap. 3, n. 14.

³ This classification suffers from oversimplification. It would be impossible to represent adequately all the shades of opinion offered by moralists on this subject. Some authors, for instance, hold that the sin must be *more probable* before the occasion becomes more proximate. We must content ourselves here with presenting the two marginal opinions. Anyone making a study of the variety of opinions entertained by moralists on the proximate occasion of sin will readily appreciate the difficulty involved in actually assessing such occasions.

tive or individual occasion. An absolute occasion is one which would be an occasion for the ordinary person, e.g., if two persons of opposite sex were to spend a night alone in a hotel room. Fallen human nature is such that an individual knows without any previous personal experience that such a situation would ordinarily lead to sin. The same would not be true of visiting a tavern. Many people can patronize taverns without getting intoxicated. So the tavern would be classified not as an absolute occasion of sin, but as an occasion for certain individuals. The practical difference between the two is that individual experience is ordinarily required to determine relative occasions of sin. No experience is needed to judge an absolute occasion; a knowledge of fallen human nature suffices.

A final distinction recognizes the difference between a free and a necessary occasion of sin. The free occasion is one which can be easily avoided. A necessary occasion is one which it would be physically impossible, or at least relatively difficult, to avoid. Thus, an engaged couple who found that they were an occasion of sin for each other would be considered in a necessary occasion; there is serious need for their association.

We are now in a position to set down some principles of moral obligation relating to the proximate occasion of sin. All moralists agree that one who freely places himself in a proximate occasion of serious sin commits a serious sin by that fact. The obligation to observe God's law carries with it the obligation to use ordinary means to do so. One who puts himself in a proximate occasion of sin without any need is not using ordinary means to observe this law. In this failure he manifests an implicit will to violate the law and hence is guilty of serious sin.

Although there is general agreement about the principle, the practical application will differ according to the difference of opinion mentioned above. One group of authors will maintain that if a man has sinned frequently in the past, for instance in a tavern, he will be guilty of sin merely by going to the tavern the next time. The other group will say that he will not be guilty of serious sin unless he has sinned almost every time he went to the tavern in the past. Genicot-Salsmans points out, however, that even according to the more lenient opinion, although there may not be a proximate occasion in the individual visit, there will be in the habit.⁴ If a man has sinned

⁴ These authors actually use the example of company-keeping to illustrate this point. The older editions put it this way: "Sic ponamus iuvenem qui *crebro* peccavit cum amasia, *saepe* etiam eam adire quin graviter contra castitatem delinquat; hunc consentiunt omnes sub gravi teneri ad abrumpendam hanc consuetudinem"; 12th ed. (1931) 2, n. 372 (italics added). More recent editions omit the word "crebro" and change "saepe" to "saepius," indicating an obligation to break off the habit even though the lapses are "minus frequentes" than the victories; cf. 17th ed. (1951) 2, n. 357. Vermeersch, however, does not

frequently in the past, although he may not be guilty of sin in visiting the tavern the next time, he will be guilty if he is unwilling to break off the habit.⁵

If the occasion is necessary, all moralists agree that the person is not obliged to leave it or avoid it, at least in the beginning. His obligation is to do everything he reasonably can to make it remote. But even if the situation were such that over a period of time he was not successful in his efforts, and as a result fell frequently, many authors would still not oblige him to give up the occasion. As long as there is some necessity for putting himself in these particular circumstances, his doing so, they argue, is not an indication of his bad will but only of the necessity. In this he differs from the person who freely puts himself in such a situation.

We can now begin to apply the above principles to the problem of keeping company. In the past moralists were very reluctant to allow company-keeping even for those who were planning on marriage. St. Alphonsus, for instance, says that he would allow prospective marriage partners to visit each other only once or twice. His reason: "Raro enim reperi, qui in tali accessu non peccaverit, saltem verbis aut cogitationibus: cum omnes aspectus et colloquia inter huiusmodi sponsos sint incentiva ad peccandum, et moraliter impossibile sit ipsos invicem tractare et stimulos turpes non sentire ad ea quae tempore coniugii inter se futuri erunt."⁶ In another passage he says that of a hundred adolescents scarcely two or three will be found free of mortal sin in these circumstances.⁷

Authors who quote these passages from St. Alphonsus today often do a certain violence to the text and apply them to company-keeping between those who are not contemplating marriage. St. Alphonsus, as is quite clear, was speaking of *sponsi*, that is, those committed to marriage. He saw in these courtships a serious danger and he was obviously opposed to them even though they were a preparation for marriage. Although he does not accuse all young people who carry on these courtships of mortal sin, he holds that it is the rare individual who escapes it.

seem to agree with this position. After discussing various opinions regarding the proximate occasion of sin, he makes the following unqualified statement: "Varietas sententiarum efficit ut gravem obligationem non possimus dicere certam, nisi tantum sit periculum ut praevidenda sit in eo culpa habitualis, seu vere frequentior quam victoria": *Theologia moralis* 3, n. 536. Whatever may be said for these opinions, it is quite clear that some *pattern* of sin either in the past or in prospect is required to make habitual conduct a proximate occasion of sin. A rare sin will not suffice.

⁵ There may well be reason to question the *intention* of a person frequenting a tavern in such circumstances.

⁶ *Theologia moralis*, lib. 6, n. 452.

⁷ *Praxis confessorii*, n. 65.

While I do not feel that this rare pessimistic outlook of St. Alphonsus applies to current premarital associations in this country, there is a certain consistency in it which recommends it over some modern treatises on the subject. Authors who want to maintain the Alphonsian thesis today must reconcile it with an accepted change in social customs. Courtship is not only a normal and accepted prelude to marriage in our society; it is considered an indispensable one. Some authors attempt a reconciliation by retreating from St. Alphonsus' original position regarding *sponsi* and assuming it only in relation to those who keep company without the intention of marriage. For those who have neither the intention nor the prospect of marriage within a reasonable time, "going steady" is *generally* a proximate occasion of sin. Aertnys-Damen maintains this position,⁸ and Francis J. Connell, C.S.S.R., expressed his agreement with it.⁹

I have serious difficulty with this opinion. There are good reasons to believe that those who keep company with the intention of marriage are in greater danger than those who do not have this intention. First of all, couples contemplating marriage are ordinarily older than those who indulge in so-called juvenile courtships. The sex appetite is consequently more developed. Also, these couples are allowed to foster mutual affection during the engagement period and hence are permitted manifestations of affection which stimulate sex desire. This would increase the danger of sin. Finally, the prospect of marriage and the security it gives can actually serve as an inducement to anticipate marital rights. Those who keep company without the intention of marriage enjoy a certain protection precisely for this reason. So I am not sure how strong an argument can be put forward in behalf of the opinion that would limit the general occasion of sin to those who were not contemplating marriage. At first glance, one would be inclined to conclude that company-keeping was less dangerous for them.

Some might wish to urge that the presence of a good reason in the case of premarital courtship will render the occasion remote. While I would admit that the presence of a good reason will render the occasion necessary, I do not think that in this case it will make it remote. The presence of a proportionate reason will at times serve as a distracting element. Thus, for instance, a physician can for therapeutic reasons engage in touches which under other circumstances would be a proximate occasion of sin. The therapeutic purpose is actually a distracting element which neutralizes the stimulating force of these acts. But I do not think the intention of future marriage can be considered distractive in reference to the problem of courtship. As

⁸ *Theologia moralis* 2, n. 523.

⁹ *American Ecclesiastical Review* 132 (1955) 186.

already indicated, this intention may actually accentuate the danger. It is difficult to see, then, how it could make the occasion of sin remote. If juvenile courtships are generally an occasion of sin, there is at least an *a pari* (if not an *a fortiori*) reason for making the same estimate of premarital courtships.

But if premarital courtships are generally a proximate occasion of sin, how can one allow them and at the same time condemn company-keeping among adolescents? Ter Haar attempts to solve this problem by an appeal to the distinction between a free and a necessary occasion of sin.¹⁰ Considering premarital courtship an essential preparation for marriage, he maintains that it is a necessary occasion of sin. While I feel that this is a more consistent opinion, I do not find it altogether satisfactory. If premarital courtship is generally a proximate occasion of sin, it seems to me that there is something wrong with the practice. I can understand how an institution which may be a proximate occasion for certain individuals might be promoted and considered essential to marriage, but I do not see how we can promote and recommend an institution which so stimulates sex desire and ultimately, as St. Alphonsus says, "facit ruere in mille crimina." If St. Alphonsus' estimate is accurate, I do not see how one can abandon or distinguish on his original position. The practice of courtship must be condemned even as a prelude to marriage.

Ultimately, then, the question comes to this: Are courtships today generally a proximate occasion of sin, as St. Alphonsus seemed to feel in his day? If I am not mistaken, with the exception of Ter Haar, moralists do not commit themselves to any estimate of the frequency with which the engagement period must be considered a proximate occasion of sin. In speaking of premarital courtships, they usually say that the association becomes a proximate occasion of sin after the couple have sinned frequently. On the basis of this criterion, an estimate that these courtships are generally a proximate occasion of sin would indicate an extreme pessimism. Such an estimate would be tantamount to an accusation that most couples who enter marriage today are guilty of frequent serious sins in their premarital relations. I would not deny that even frequent serious sin may occur in some courtships. I would be willing to admit that an occasional serious lapse may occur in more. But I find it difficult to admit that the ordinary American Catholic couple keeping company today with a view to marriage is guilty of frequent serious sin. And if it is not true of premarital courtships, where moralists usually admit the danger is greater, I do not see why it should be true of the practice of juvenile company-keeping.

Some authors take a more moderate attitude toward courtships in

¹⁰ *Casus conscientiae* 1, n. 128 ff.

general. Wouters, for instance, maintains that it is not *procreationes ut tales* but *procreationes solitariae* that constitute the proximate occasion of sin.¹¹ Noldin maintains that *familiaritates* are an occasion of sin (for those who do not intend marriage), but he does not commit himself on how often they are a proximate occasion of sin. This will have to be determined, he says, by the frequency of sin in the individual case.¹² Genicot merely says that *amicitiae particulares* are *periculosae*. He makes no commitment on how often they constitute a proximate occasion of sin but says that when youngsters confess sins against chastity with the same person and there is no marriage in sight, they should be told to break off the friendship (since they are in a proximate occasion of sin) *vel saltem ne unquam solus cum sola versentur*.¹³ This again puts the emphasis on the fact that they are alone more than on the fact that they are keeping company.

My own preference is for Genicot's position on this problem. I believe that juvenile steady dating can be dangerous and should be discouraged, since it serves no purpose proportionate to the dangers involved. But I do not hold that it is generally a proximate occasion of sin and therefore generally sinful. First of all, I do not think it is true (for reasons already given). Secondly, if it were true, I think we would have to revise our whole attitude toward company-keeping, even as a preparation for marriage.

The norm for determining when the practice becomes a proximate occasion of sin will be, as Noldin says, the frequency of sin;¹⁴ in other words, the norm moralists use for engaged couples.¹⁵ If in the individual case there has been a certain frequency of sin in the past, the practice of *going steady* has become for this person a proximate occasion of sin. Unless there are prospects of

¹¹ *Manuale theologiae moralis* 2, n. 468.

¹² *Summa theologiae moralis* 3, n. 419.

¹³ *Op. cit.* 1, n. 410; also cf. supra note 4.

¹⁴ Although he does not feel that it will always be necessary, Fr. Connell (cf. supra note 9) agrees that experience with sin will prove an occasion to be proximate. I presume that he would demand some pattern of sin. A rare sin will not make an occasion proximate. Moralists are quite explicit in stating that *frequent* sin will be the norm of a proximate occasion for engaged couples (Aertnys-Damen also uses this norm for engaged couples; cf. *Theologia moralis* 2, n. 522). There is no reason for changing it for those who are not prospective marriage partners.

¹⁵ Vermeersch, *Theologia moralis* 4, n. 25, also uses this norm of *frequent* sin for engaged couples. If this is to be interpreted in the light of the opinion quoted above (cf. supra note 4), the word "frequent" may have to be taken in a relative sense, i.e., in proportion to the victories. Or perhaps, *frequent* sin in the past will warrant a judgment of *more frequent* sin in the future. It is not always clear in what sense authors use the term "frequent" when they are speaking of lapses in comparison with victories. They may mean equally frequent, more frequent, or less frequent. But the term always indicates a *pattern* of sin, not just an occasional lapse.

marriage, the confessor would have to oblige such a penitent to give up the practice. In the absence of such a pattern, while the confessor should certainly discourage going steady, I do not think he can *oblige* the penitent to give it up. As long as the penitent is firmly determined to avoid sin in the future, he is properly disposed and no further obligation can be put on him. In an individual case, where a couple were putting themselves in what would be tantamount to an absolute occasion of sin, e.g., parking in a lonely place for long periods of time, the confessor could impose an obligation not to do so. In a particular case, also, a confessor might conclude from the violence of the temptation or the weakness of the individual that the firm resolve to avoid sin would be insufficient. In this case he could oblige the penitent to give up the practice. But it would be a rare case where in the absence of past sin he could judge the firm purpose to be insufficient because it did not include a resolution to break off the friendship.¹⁶

What can be done from a pastoral standpoint to solve the problem of steady company-keeping? Certainly, every opportunity should be taken to discourage the practice, and in preaching against it the dangers associated with the practice should not be overlooked. But I would like to add a caution here. Although as priests we are rightly more concerned with the moral dangers involved, our concern for these dangers should not blind us to the fact that with the youngsters themselves other motivation may be more effective. First of all, I think it can be said that youngsters in general are not particularly conscious of danger; as a result, it is easy for them to ignore advice prompted by a judgment of danger. Secondly, adults, and particularly celibates, can readily exaggerate dangers in this area. We must be careful not to project adult problems on youngsters. I think we will be on much safer ground and exert a more effective influence if we put the emphasis on positive motivation and the social and psychological advantages of not going steady.

I would like to emphasize here that I have been concerned throughout this discussion chiefly with the internal forum. I can understand how ecclesiastical authorities might consider it advisable in some instances to take certain measures against going steady within their jurisdiction. These authorities are not obliged to wait until a practice becomes a general occasion of sin before they take action. Danger, scandal, etc., would be sufficient reasons to warrant action. It will be up to the prudence of ecclesiastical

¹⁶ Experience with sin would not be necessary if the practice were considered an *absolute* occasion of sin. But I do not know of any author who clearly states that it is an absolute occasion of sin. The strongest statement one finds is that it is *generally* a proximate occasion of sin. The opinion that it is an absolute occasion would be even more open to the objections I have mentioned in the body of this article.

authorities to determine in the local situation if measures should be taken and what measures will best discourage the practice. But I do not think it comes within the competence of school authorities as such to take action against this practice except where the school is coeducational or they are dealing with boarding students. Their authority is limited to the conduct of the students while they are in school. When they leave school, they are the responsibility of their parents. Only where conduct outside the school would do damage to the school itself would school authorities be justified in taking action. They have no responsibility for the personal good of the students (other than the ordinary demands of charity) except while they are in school.

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