

NOTES

ST. THOMAS ON PERFECT CONTRITION AND VENIAL SIN

A devotional treatise published thirty years ago by Father Henry Semple of Fordham University remains to-day the most extensive study of the ease with which acts of perfect contrition and perfect charity may be made. In it, this conclusion is stressed: "It is a theologically certain truth that the will to commit venial sin does not preclude from the soul acts of perfect love and perfect contrition."¹ The author admits, however, that this truth is new to some readers and may not have been taught in courses of theology attended by some of the clergy.

Among the moralists, Vermeersch teaches the same doctrine, though without dogmatic qualification or proof. "Contrition," he says, "is called perfect from its *motive*, not necessarily from its *extension* or its *intensity*; for it can co-exist with affection for venial sin."² Merkelbach, a staunch Thomist, is one of many others who seem to take this for granted.³ It is true that this practical question is not treated explicitly in most manuals of dogmatic theology; but authors discuss the conditions of perfect contrition in terms which imply their agreement with Vermeersch.

Boyer, for instance, declares that for perfect contrition "the Scriptures and the statements of the Fathers demand only that the penitent have his heart fixed on God and cling to Him as the supreme Good: this means that to avoid any evil or to secure any good he be unwilling to offend Him gravely, and that it displease him to have offended God."⁴ In similar words, Palmieri likewise exacts a hatred of mortal sin alone. Later he takes up the relation of venial sin to perfect contrition, and adds emphatically: "Whoever loves always and never sins, by observing every slight law, does indeed love God with all his heart . . . This, moreover, is the great precept of the Law. Still, its total observance is not necessary under grave penalty, much less for obtaining the remission of sins, nor does Christ in any way teach this."⁵ Evidently these theologians do not consider unrepented venial sin an obstacle to perfect contrition.

¹ H. C. Semple, S.J., *Heaven Open to Souls* (New York: Benziger, 1916), p. 365.

² Vermeersch, *Theologia Moralis* (ed. 3a; Romae: Pont. Universit  Gregoriana, 1933), III, n. 518.

³ Cf. Merkelbach, *Summa Theologiae Moralis* (ed. 3a; Paris: Descl e de Brouwer, 1940), III, n. 460.

⁴ Boyer, *De Sacramento Paenitentiae* (Romae: Apud Aedes Universitatis Gregorianae, 1942), p. 305.

⁵ Palmieri, *De Poenitentia* (Romae: S. C. de Propaganda Fide, 1879), p. 269; cf. p.

Nevertheless, their position is not unchallenged. The author of a recent article holds that true contrition must "banish from man's heart any self-interest that is incompatible with charity—any grievously or venially sinful self-interest."⁶ This cannot mean that venially sinful self-interest is contrary to the habit of charity. But the assertion is made that an act of love of God "does not come up to the level of charity . . . as long as something else is preferred to God, so that God is not really loved above all things. This will be the case as long as any sinful affection, even if it be only venially sinful, is consciously adhered to; for in that case, as reflection will reveal, God is not loved for what He is in Himself—the *Supreme Good*."⁷ This view is the more impressive in that the author's purpose was to show how easy perfect contrition is. It appears as a concession wrung from him by the teaching of St. Thomas, though he fails to quote the latter on this point.

Nowhere does St. Thomas pose our question in set terms. But he employs some expressions which might seem to support this more stringent view. He does say that "contrition should also cover venial sins,"⁸ and that "a man cannot be truly penitent if he repents of one sin and not of another."⁹ Further, venial sin "hinders the use of charity,"¹⁰ and "impedes its act."¹¹ On the words of St. Augustine, "When charity is perfect, inordinate affection is quite destroyed," he comments: "This is said of venial sins, which are contrary, not to the habit, but to the act of charity."¹²

Taken as they stand, such statements could lead us to infer that "St. Thomas would answer that love is 'initial' as long as something . . . only venially sinful, is consciously adhered to."¹³ But if we examine their immediate context, it becomes clear that actually the very opposite is implied. And if then we place this context against the background of St. Thomas' whole doctrine on venial sin, we shall see the reason: attachment to venial sin could only be incompatible with the act of charity if it were likewise incompatible with the habit.

Thus, it is stated in the *Summa* that by perfect contrition "it is impossible

230. Cf. E. Dublanchy, "Charité," *DTC*, II, 2234; P. Bernard, "Contrition: Aspect Dogmatique," *DTC*, III, 1681.

⁶ P. de Letter, S.J., "Perfect Contrition and Perfect Charity," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES*, VII (1946), 522.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 519. Yet Father de Letter lauds Father Semple's book, of which two chapters are devoted to refutation of this unusual doctrine.

⁸ *Suppl.*, q. 2, a. 3 ad 4m.

⁹ *Sum. Theol.*, III, q. 86, a. 3 c.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 44, a. 4 ad 2m.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 89, a. 1 c; *De Car.*, a. 10 ad 1m *in contrarium*.

¹² *Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q. 24, a. 8 ad 2m.

¹³ De Letter, *loc. cit.*

for one sin to be pardoned without another . . . and so, a man cannot be truly penitent if he repents of one sin and not of another; for if one sin were displeasing to him as being against the love of God above all things—the motive necessary for true repentance—it follows that he would repent of all.” But in its context, all this is expressly limited to “mortal sin [which] is due to man’s will turning from God by turning to some mutable good.”¹⁴ Quite otherwise, “one who sins venially turns to creatures so as in no way to be turned from God; for he is not turned to the creature as his last end, but as something in accord with that end . . . Venial sin is not a disorder regarding the last end, which is the object of charity.”¹⁵

Again, that “contrition should also cover venial sins” is said to be necessary, not for the restoration of sanctifying grace, but specifically for the remission of those venial sins. A most significant reason is added: “Venial sin can remain after contrition for mortal sin, but not after contrition for the venial sin.”¹⁶ And this is not said of confession, but precisely of “contrition [as distinct from attrition]: a sorrow for sins, with the intention of confessing and making satisfaction, . . . a sorrow which remits sins.”¹⁷ Now, venial sin survives only if we have a conscious affection for it.¹⁸ And so, when St. Thomas says here that it can survive perfect contrition, he must be saying that such affection is compatible with perfect contrition. In another place, where again there is no question of sacramental absolution, he underlines the same doctrine: “Whoever does not repent of venial sin, but repents of mortal sin, has not the impenitence which excludes remission of sin.”¹⁹ This he sets down as evident from the very nature of venial sin. It may be that Semple and Palmieri had these passages in mind when, from the fact that venial sin does not merit eternal punishment, they concluded that attachment to it is compatible with perfect contrition.

St. Thomas often confirms this early teaching, notably in the discussion with which he closed his work on the *Summa*, before laying down his pen forever. It is well to note at the outset that here St. Thomas has concluded his treatment of penance as a sacrament, and several times reiterates that he is now talking about the act of contrition.²⁰ This act, he tells us, “is sometimes hindered on the part of man, whose movement towards God and detestation of sin is too remiss”; as a result, in rising from mortal sin, the penitent receives less of the grace for which his contrition is the ultimate disposition.²¹ Certainly this remissness cannot mean a failure to detest

¹⁴ *Sum. Theol.*, III, q. 86, a. 2 c; a. 3 c.

¹⁵ *De Malo*, q. 7, a. 2 c.

¹⁶ *Suppl.*, q. 2, a. 3 ad 4m.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, q. 1, a. 1 c; cf. a. 3 c.

¹⁸ Cf. *Sum. Theol.*, III, q. 87, a. 1 c.

¹⁹ *De Malo*, q. 7, a. 10 ad 4m.

²⁰ Cf. *Sum. Theol.*, III, q. 85, a. 1; q. 86, a. 2; q. 89, a. 1 ad 3m.

²¹ *Ibid.*, q. 89, a. 2 ad 2m; a. 2 c; cf. II-II, q. 24, a. 10 ad 3m.

mortal sin. But it requires no forcing of his meaning to see in it an attachment to venial sin; for in almost the same words elsewhere he attributes exactly this effect to unrepented venial sin. "Venial sin can be a reason why less charity is infused initially, insofar as it impedes the act of free will by which man is disposed to receive grace."²² Since this, too, is said of one in mortal sin, and without reference to the sacrament of penance, it seems clear that, to his mind, affection for venial sin lessens the efficacy of perfect contrition but does not exclude it.

This deduction is constantly reinforced in the course of the same discussion. When he distinguishes between penance for mortal and for venial sins, it is for the latter alone that St. Thomas demands "the purpose of taking steps to commit fewer venial sins," whereas "penance for mortal sin requires man to purpose avoiding mortal sins, each and all."²³ Here, if anywhere among the many opportunities he neglects, we should expect him to call for a disaffection from venial sin as well, if he regarded it as essential to perfect contrition. Instead, his last words are an insistence that "the reform of a past life already ruined—a matter of penance for mortal sins" is a thing quite distinct from "the change to a more perfect conduct of life—a matter of penance for venial sins, which are remitted through some fervent act of charity."²⁴

It is important to keep in mind this expression, "a fervent act of charity"; for St. Thomas does indeed maintain that such an act cannot be made so long as we persist in an attachment to venial sin.²⁵ On the one hand, he is much clearer than many of the older theologians, including his master, St. Albert, on the fact that contrition differs from mere attrition in its being perfected by a motive of charity, as the Council of Trent would later teach.²⁶ On the other hand, from first to last he repeats that there are distinct degrees in the perfection of charity, even on earth.²⁷ And—what is important to our inquiry—he insists that the lowest degree which remains true charity will suffice for justification outside the sacrament of penance.²⁸ What we must ask is this: does St. Thomas identify this minimum degree of charity, which is essential to perfect contrition, with that "fervor of charity" which excludes all conscious affection for venial sin? And the answer is, he does not.

²² *De Malo*, q. 7, a. 2 c.

²³ *Sum. Theol.*, III, q. 87, a. 1 ad 1m.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, q. 90, a. 4 c. A similar line of reasoning is suggested by q. 89, a. 1 and its direct reference to q. 86, aa. 4-5.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, q. 87, a. 1; q. 79, a. 4 ad 1m; q. 90, a. 4 c.

²⁶ Cf. *DB*, 898; *Sum. Theol.*, III, q. 86, a. 3 c; *Suppl.*, qq. 1-4; *Quodl. I*, q. 5, a. 9 c.

²⁷ Cf. *Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q. 24, a. 9 c; a. 8 c, ad 3m; q. 44, a. 4 ad 3m; q. 184, a. 2 c; *De Car.*, a. 10 ad 4m; a. 11 c.

²⁸ Cf. *Suppl.*, q. 5, a. 3 c.

Charity, a unique friendship and union of affection with God, "is nothing else than to have God as the last end,"²⁹ to whom all things must be referred. It means that "God is loved as the principle of good"; and all else is loved as sharing in His goodness.³⁰ "It is essential to charity that God be loved above all things and that no creature be preferred to Him in love. Hence, . . . charity in any degree has this specific perfection, that it can resist any temptation so that a man be not led by it into mortal sin—not that he be in no way affected by temptation; for that belongs to the perfection of heaven."³¹ Accordingly, "that a man give his whole heart to God habitually, by neither thinking nor desiring anything contrary to the love of God: this perfection is common to all who have charity."³²

When St. Thomas thus describes the minimum degree of true charity, he is always careful to distinguish it from a charity that is fervent. "There is, however, a certain perfection without which charity can exist; for it pertains to the well-being of charity. This consists in the removal of secular interests, which retard the human affections from progressing freely towards God."³³ It is achieved as "one act of charity makes a man ready to act again in accord with charity; this readiness increasing, a man breaks into an act of more fervent love and strives to advance in charity."³⁴ In another place he adds that, though venial sins are opposed to this fervor, "yet they cannot entirely hinder the act of charity."³⁵ In itself, this seems fairly conclusive testimony in favor of the position taken by Vermeersch, Semple, and most theologians who touch on the subject.

Still, it will be remembered, St. Thomas has said that venial sin hinders the use of charity and even is contrary to the act of charity. Of all that he wrote, these phrases seem to raise the most serious objection to the doctrine which we are attributing to him. But, when we turn to the context in which they appear, we find that it is concerned with the very distinction we have just explored between a minimal and a fervent charity. And there, when he states that venial sins are contrary to the act of charity, St. Thomas immediately adds: "Therefore they are incompatible, not with the perfection of the way, but with that of heaven." He is not at the moment weighing them against such acts of charity as we may make in this life. His problem was: How can charity be perfect "in this world, where it is impossible to live without sin"? And now he solves it by distinguishing

²⁹ *De Car.*, a. 11 ad 3m; cf. *Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q. 44, a. 4 c; q. 23, a. 1 c; q. 27, a. 2 c; *Quodl. I*, q. 4, a. 8 ad 1m.

³⁰ *Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q. 26, a. 4 c.

³¹ *De Car.*, a. 10 ad 4m.

³² *Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q. 24, a. 8 c.

³³ *De Car.*, a. 11 c; cf. *Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q. 184, a. 2 c.

³⁴ *Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q. 24, a. 6 c.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, III, q. 79, a. 4 ad 3m, ad 1m.

a threefold perfection: (1) the charity of heaven, by which "a man's whole heart is always actually borne towards God" and fully freed of inordinate attachments; (2) the charity of the counsels, which is fervent; and (3) the charity of the way, which is habitual.³⁶ In the similar passage to which we have alluded, he mentions the same three grades of charity, and he adds: "Venial sin is not contrary to this latter perfection, because it does not destroy the habit of charity; it does not tend to a contrary object but merely hinders the use of charity."³⁷ That is, it keeps our act of charity from being continuous as it will be in heaven, or continual as it is in those who are fervent.

Venial sin impedes the act of charity, therefore, by pretermission and not by prevention. In clinging to an inordinate affection, we omit some act of love that we would have made in renouncing it, and so we slow down the tendency of charity to heap one act on another and thus to grow in fervor. St. Thomas explains this in reference to the individual virtues. A venial sin of ingratitude, for instance, simply replaces an act of gratitude in which our charity might have expressed itself here and now. Consequently, "it is not contrary to, but outside charity."³⁸ In other words, by venially sinful self-interest "a man's affections are clogged, so that they are slow in tending towards God."³⁹ They lack fervor even while they still tend towards God as the supreme good. St. Thomas grants that "an act of charity is sometimes made with tepidity";⁴⁰ and this seems in fact to be the very effect that he attributes to affection for venial sin.

The article under discussion denies this. "God is not loved for what He is in Himself—the *Supreme Good*," it asserts, so long as something "venially sinful is consciously adhered to." This is hard to square with its concession that the lowest degree of true charity is "a love of vain and dangerous things together with God," and that a love only for good things is a higher degree.⁴¹ Perhaps it will be best then, to restate our problem in this form: As St. Thomas sets forth the nature of venial sin, does this sin constitute a preference of some creature to God, so that He is not loved above all things for His own sake? Or has venial sin some strange power to diffuse our affections without dividing them?

That is exactly what he says it has. "Diffusion of love in one respect does not lessen love in another respect. If a man has many friends, he does

³⁶ *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 24, a. 8; cf. q. 184, a. 2 ad 2m.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, q. 44, a. 4 ad 2m; cf. *De Car.*, a. 10, ad 1m *in contrarium*.

³⁸ *Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q. 107, a. 3 ad 2m; cf. I-II, q. 89, a. 1 c.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, III, q. 87, a. 1 c.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 24, a. 6 c.

⁴¹ De Letter, *op. cit.*, p. 516, where he cites St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, X, 4-5.

not therefore love his wife less," though he would by having many wives. Now, "by venial sin man's love is not diffused to creatures as to his end, the way God is loved; and so love of God is not lessened in habit, but maybe in act."⁴² "In venial sin, man does not cleave to a creature as his last end; hence there is no comparison" with mortal sin, which alone can "separate a soul from the embrace of its heavenly Spouse . . . Properly speaking, venial sin does not cause a stain in the soul," nor, even as a habit, can it be called offense or evil except in a relative sense.⁴³ When "the sinner's will is directed to a thing containing some inordinateness, but not contrary to the love of God and his neighbor—idle words, excessive mirth, and the like—such sins are venial." On the other hand, a sin is mortal by "the very fact that one chooses a thing that is contrary to divine charity; for this proves that one prefers it to the love of God and so loves it more than one loves God."⁴⁴ Any attachment, then, which "is preferred to God, so that God is not really loved above all things,"⁴⁵—as the article in question says—is indeed contrary to the act of charity; but it cannot be, as was there supposed, merely venially sinful.

St. Thomas goes further. Not only is venial sin not a preference of creature to God; of its nature, it implies rather that God is still loved above all things, even above the object of the sin.

Venial sin is called a sin by analogy . . . It is not against the law; for one who sins venially neither does what the law forbids nor omits what the law prescribes. He acts beside the law, through not observing the measure of reason intended by the law . . . He adheres to temporal good, not as enjoying it—he does not make it his end—but as using it, referring it to God not actually but habitually.⁴⁶

St. Thomas subsequently comments on these paragraphs. Venial sin, he explains,

does not affect charity. Charity regards the last end, whereas venial sin is a disorder in things referred to the end. A man's love for the end is no less for his committing an inordinate act in things directed to the end. Thus sick people while they love their health dearly, are at times irregular in keeping to their diet. . . . Now, for offending in a small matter, one does not deserve to be penalized in a great matter; for God does not turn from man more than man turns from Him. And so, one who is out of order in things directed to the end does not deserve to be penalized in charity, by which he is ordered to the last end. . . .

⁴² *De Malo*, q. 7, a. 2 ad 12m.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, q. 88, a. 2 c, ad 1m.

⁴⁶ *Sum. Theol.*, I-II, q. 88, a. 1 ad 1m, ad 3m.

⁴³ *Sum. Theol.*, I-II, q. 89, a. 1.

⁴⁵ *De Letter*, *op. cit.*, p. 519.

There is a self-interest, he continues, which "makes us love God less than we ought to love Him in charity, not by diminishing charity but by destroying it outright . . . This applies not to venial sin but only to mortal sin. The reason is this: what we love in venial sin is loved for God's sake habitually, though not actually."⁴⁷

In demonstrating that this doctrine "is drawn from the purest Scriptural sources," Cardinal Billot—surely a faithful interpreter of St. Thomas—throws still more light on these passages. Every sin, he points out, is a preference of what we desire to what God commands; but only mortal sin is a preference of our will to the uncreated will which is God Himself.

The question is, what sort of precept is imposed. If in fact it is under pain of aversion from God, man has to choose between God and the thing He forbids. He must prefer one to the other, and either refrain from what is forbidden or forsake God and cling to a mutable good as his end. But if the precept is not under pain of aversion from God, man is nowise forced to choose between one end and the other. On the contrary, He can still love God above this very thing to which he is inordinately attached. His act allows of such a frame of mind that, were this thing forbidden as actually against the right order to his true ultimate end, he would not want it but would much rather forego it than lose God's friendship. The same situation occurs in human affairs: not for anything in the world would one offend a friend in a way to cause separation and a breach of friendship, though often enough one does things that really displease the friend. . . . Apply this to the case.⁴⁸

Applying it, we see that in a soul habitually attached to venial sin there need not be any disposition which forbids the act of charity or of perfect contrition. Antecedently to the act of venial sin that one may still intend to commit, it is objectively evident that this sin is venial precisely because it is compatible with a love of God appreciatively supreme. Our attachment to this lesser good, though inordinate, can always be conditioned on God's retaining first place in our affection and esteem. No choice between God and His creatures will be necessary. In the act of venial sin there is room for an implicit affirmation of our ontological orientation to God as our last end. And consequently, one who intends to sin venially can still make this affirmation explicit in an act of charity. On the principles of St. Thomas, then, there is no incompatibility between the act of charity and a conscious affection for venial sin.

It is true, as Cardinal Billot observes, that this does not wholly settle

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 24, a. 10 c, ad 2m.

⁴⁸ Billot, *De Personali et Originali Peccato* (ed. 6a; Romae: Apud Aedes Universitatis Gregorianae, 1931), p. 117 f.

the question. St. Thomas teaches that whatever a man desires he must desire for the sake of the ultimate end, his supreme good. And so, since the object of venial sin cannot be actually referred to God, it might be urged that venial sin does, after all, set up a creature as last end opposed to God. One must still explain psychologically how the human will in this life, unlike that of angels and of risen souls, "while it preserves the order to one determined last end, can choose a thing that is out of line with this end, *purely in virtue of its appetite for good in general.*"⁴⁹ Such an explanation Billot proceeds to outline. But to reproduce his reply to this final objection is beyond the scope of the present article, which is intended merely to show that a vindication of the facility of perfect contrition is not stopped short of its logical conclusions by the authority of St. Thomas.

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⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.