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HERESY - AN UNCOMMITTABLE SIN? (REFLECTIONS ON A "LONG - OVERDUE QUESTION".)

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Heresy as a serious sin seems no longer a concern to many Catholic theologians. In fact, a large number seem to believe that such a sin is psychologically impossible. Such an attitude directly contradicts the entire Christian tradition as witnessed by Sacred Scripture, the Fathers, and the Magisterium of the Church.

Fr. Brian Harrison, in a thought provoking essay, examines the current status quaestionis and vindicates the traditional teaching of the Church.

"The one and only principle of hell is 'I am my own'."

- C.S. Lewis

I. THE PROBLEM



IN THIS ARTICLE I WISH TO RAISE A QUESTION WHICH MODEM THEOLOGIANs have tended to shy away from; yet one which seems to me urgently in need of an answer from the Church, in the face of penetrating criticism by men and women of our own day - and indeed, ever since the 'Enlightenment'. The question is this: *how are "sins against the virtue of faith" psychologically possible?* Under this heading we shall include the traditional categories of heresy, apostasy, and infidelity, but without being especially concerned with the distinctions - rather unrealistically precise at times, one suspects - which theologians have elaborated between them. What all of them have in common, ex hypothesi, is a culpable doubt or denial of one or more aspects of Christian revelation. Since it is precisely this idea of blameworthiness in an act of the intellect as such which puzzles, indeed scandalizes, so many of our contemporaries, this is the aspect we shall focus upon in these pages.

In recent decades, Catholic theologians have usually been so preoccupied with showing how disbelief (of whatever degree) can be inculpable, and how salvation 'outside the Church' can therefore be possible, that the other, and darker, side of the coin has been neglected. It might be argued that with our modern advances in psychology, which have helped us to develop more understanding, appreciation and tolerance for the good consciences of non-Catholics, this whole notion of actual and serious sin against faith can be safely shelved as a mere theoretical and speculative possibility, with no practical relevance for the 1980's. But I do not think we can shrug off the witness of Scripture, magisterium, tradition, and the facts of history quite so easily as that. Anyone who has made serious efforts at the evangelization of intelligent unbelievers will be well aware that the Inquisition, and the religious wars of centuries long past, remain a practical pastoral problem in our own day. People are genuinely scandalized at the fact that so many have been denounced, tortured and killed as wicked sinners, on account of their religious beliefs. It is not that

such moderns are necessarily bigoted, being motivated by a malicious desire to stoke fires of prejudice by harping on punitive policies which were abandoned centuries ago by the Church and by Catholic states. They see a real problem in reconciling the idea of a Church which claims to be now, and always to have been in the past, a divinely-guided teacher of morality, with the historical fact of these violations of the most elementary moral sensibilities of practically all modern men. This was the bitterest pill for me to swallow in becoming a Catholic, and I gather the same thing has been true of many celebrated converts, including Newman, Arnold Lunn, and in recent times, Malcolm Muggeridge. I do not suggest, of course, that we have to positively justify the ferocity of past ages; but I do think we have to make these excesses at least understandable. To put it very crudely, I think we will have to be able to meet the Inquisition half-way, so to speak, if we wish to save the Church's credibility as a perennially trustworthy teacher of morality. And I suggest that we will not get half-way, or even past first base, if we are finally compelled to admit that the "sins" of apostasy and heresy, for which so much blood was shed, so many living nightmares endured, are mere bogeys or chimeras; that so far from being the worst of sins, as St. Thomas and mainstream Catholic tradition has held, they are never sins at all, except on the musty pages of scholastic manuals which have no relation to the moral and psychological make-up of real-life human beings. If the sin of heresy is uncommittable, the Church of Rome is probably unbelievable.

Karl Rahner has well expressed the problem as it is seen through the eyes of the "average contemporary European". The typical modern attitude, he observes, is that:

Outside the field of the simple, brute facts of direct sense experience which can be observed anew at any time by experiment, there are only theories and opinions ... nothing else.... In any case (and this is the decisive point), the particular content of such an opinion is of no importance (i.e., of no importance before the judgment seat of God, if there is such a thing) for the absolute 'moral' evaluation of the one who holds this opinion, since

it may be supposed that everyone has formed his opinion with the best will and conscience.... Hence-so they would say- it is obviously absurd to regard someone as a scoundrel simply because he is of a certain, i.e. different opinion.¹

Catholicism, on the contrary, has traditionally affirmed that, at least under certain circumstances, it is extremely wicked to hold certain views. St. Thomas expressed it classically in answering the question, *utrum infidelitas sit maximum peccatorum*:

The essential nature of sinfulness consists in the turning away from God .. . Hence the more it separates a man from God the more serious the sin. Now by disbelief most of all a man departs from God, for he has no true knowledge of God and his false knowledge does not approach God but keeps far away from him.... Clearly then disbelief is greater than the other sins which occur in the perversion of morals.²



In mitigation of this severe doctrine, the Church has always affirmed alongside of it the principle that an opinion contrary to Catholic faith is no sin when it is held humbly and in good conscience. St. Augustine - hardly a 'liberal' in his attitude to sin - expresses the Catholic consensus of all ages on this point:

By no means should we accuse of heresy those who, however false and perverse their opinion may be, defend it with no stubborn animosity, and seek the truth with anxious care, ready to mend their opinion when they have found it.³

The problem for modern man, however, is that this mitigating circumstance would seem to apply in practically all cases. And "modern man" here clearly includes modern Catholics of the most reputable credentials. *The New Catholic Encyclopaedia* tells us:

Formal heresy in the full sense, implying the rejection of a doctrine known certainly to be of faith by one who sees himself as willing to accept the authority of God revealing in other matters, appears somewhat unrealistic and psychologically improbable.⁴

Rahner raises the question as to

how this kind of error can actually exist at all, i.e., how an act of real knowledge can be free in itself and thus can itself come under a moral qualification. For this seems at first sight to be an impossibility: conscious error - one might think - is uncovered, overcome and no longer acceptable error, while unnoticed error as such cannot be so freely accepted that it can make the act of acceptance morally worse.⁵

There is the heart of our dilemma: for a sin to be mortal, there must be clear knowledge of the fact that the action is gravely wrong. This is manifestly possible when it is a question of acts which terminate beyond the intellect itself. The real distinction between intellect and will makes it possible for the two to be out of kilter: pride, passion, greed, and so on, may prompt me to do things which I well know are very wrong. But how is it possible for the intellect to be at odds with itself, in a fully conscious way? If I am to commit a truly damnable sin against the virtue of faith, then I must be clearly aware that a certain opinion, which I freely and persistently adhere to, is contrary to what God himself has revealed as true. This seems tantamount to firmly believing something which I am well aware is false - i.e., which I firmly disbelieve! Now, we all know that many of us are often capable of simultaneously holding beliefs which are per se inconsistent, without ourselves realizing the contradiction. But we may well ask whether a man can possibly hold firmly to two contradictory beliefs, whilst being well aware himself of the contradiction. Unfortunately, we do not have the benefit of Rahner's reflections on this problem, since he no sooner raises the question - admitting that it is "long over-due" - than puts it to one side in order to devote his essay to other aspects of the phenomenon of heresy.⁶

II: TOWARDS A SOLUTION

In what follows I shall present an outline argument for the following thesis: *that the idea of actual grave sin against faith does not in fact involve any impossible paradox, as the objection maintains, and that hence it may be a lot more common than many of our contemporaries care to admit.* I shall argue first very briefly from authority (Scripture and Tradition) in order to establish that the Roman Catholic Church is committed very heavily to the position that sins of infidelity are real and highly dangerous; then I shall try to offer some theological reflections which show the rea-

sonableness of this position, and (hopefully) how it can be made intelligible to men and women of our own era. Finally, some pen-portraits.

A. Scripture

There is no doubt that unbelief of one sort or another is castigated in very severe terms in the New Testament. "False prophets" are predicted who will "deceive" many, leading to "lawlessness" and lack of love (Mt. 24:11-12). Those who having heard the Gospel, in the context of signs vindicating its truth, yet refuse to believe it, will be condemned (Mk. 16:16, Jn. 10:25-28, 5:36). Disbelief indicates "hardness of heart" (In. 12:37-40). Even the disciples are rebuked for incredulity (Mk. 16:14, Jn. 20:29). The Church and its leaders are given a delegated authority to teach, and refusal to accept their teaching is culpable. "He who hears you hears me" (Lk. 10:16). Anyone who "refuses to listen to the community", after being warned, is to be excluded from it (Mt. 18:15-17). Paul denounces those who teach or believe "another Gospel" from the one delivered by himself, even if it should come from "an angel from heaven" (Gal. 1:6-9). Titus is advised that anyone who refuses to accept his teaching "has already lapsed and condemned himself as a sinner" (Tit. 3:11), while John warns believers not even to greet a person who purveys a "different doctrine", because his is a "wicked work" (2 Jn. 10-11). 2 Peter and Jude are largely taken up with vehement condemnations of false teachers who have infiltrated the Church.

Nevertheless, while there is no doubt that Jesus and the Apostles believed and taught very solemnly the real peril of culpable infidelity, they also taught and implied the possibility of what later theology has called merely "negative unbelief" - innocent or excusable lack of faith (Jn. 9:41, Acts 17:30).



B. Tradition

It would be superfluous in an essay of this scope to pile up quotations from the Fathers, Doctors, Popes and Councils regarding the reality, seriousness and full culpability of sins of disbelief. Catholic tradition on this point is notorious; so notorious, in fact, as to create an apologetic problem in modern times, as we saw in Section I. However it is perhaps worthwhile mentioning the

attitude of two recent 'monuments of tradition' which manifest clear continuity with the past on this point: Vatican Council II and the 1983 Code of Canon Law.

The Decree on Missionary Activity reasserts that without faith it is "impossible to please (God)", and that this is why the Church's obligation to preach the Gospel "retains its full force and necessity".⁷ The Constitution on the Church explicitly rejects the idea that disbelief is seldom if ever a grave sin: after explaining that unbelief of various degrees can indeed be inculpable, the Council immediately balances this by asserting that "quite often", or "all too often" (*saepius*) -

deceived by the Evil One, men have become vain in their reasonings, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and served the world rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:21 and 25).⁸

The last clause is of course a classical definition of mortal sin: *aversio a Creatore ad creaturam*. More specifically, the same document refers to heresy and apostasy as deadly sins when it affirms that anyone who would refuse to remain in the Catholic Church, while "knowing that (it) was founded as necessary by God through Christ", could not be saved.⁹

The new Code of Canon Law retains severe penalties for sins against the faith. Heresy and apostasy are defined in exactly the same sense as in the old code, with only insignificant semantic variations.

Dicitur haeresis, pertinax, post receptum baptismum, alicuius veritatis fide divina et catholica credendae denegatio, aut de eadem pertinax dubitatio; apostasia, fidei christianae ex toto repudiatio.¹⁰

Anyone committing these offences incurs automatic (*latae sententiae*) excommunication.¹¹ Indeed, these sins head the list of all offences punishable by the Church, in accordance with the unbroken tradition of their outstanding gravity.

The foregoing evidence from Scripture and Tradition seems to me to establish clearly that the Catholic Church has taught constantly and emphatically - and still teaches - that grave sins against faith are not merely theoretical or speculative possibilities. They are real, and very dangerous. Nobody wages war with relentless zeal

against what he believes is a mere paper tiger. We shall now attempt to show why it is perfectly reasonable to hold (as the Church does) that the tiger has flesh and blood, not to mention fangs.

C. Theological Reflection

It is of interest that those contemporary theologians most anxious to explain away the real danger of sins of disbelief generally do not advert to the logical corollary of their opinion, which is a disturbing one indeed: precisely to the extent that disbelief cannot be a real-life sin, faith, its opposite, cannot be a real-life virtue. Any argument that infidelity can seldom if ever be damnable is ipso facto an argument that faith can seldom if ever be salvific - a proposition so obviously contrary to the Gospel that no Catholic theologian, I suspect, would want to maintain it. The common presupposition of all such arguments is that we are never really very free in giving or withholding our intellectual assent. They assume that whenever we believe or opine, deny or doubt, we do so because, given our own existential situation, we have little or no alternative. Our minds are, as it were, made up for us by factors over which we have practically no control: upbringing, environment, education, and, when it comes to specific questions, the particular evidence accessible to us at any given stage of our lives.

This "modern" assumption is really the objection faced long ago by St. Thomas, in considering "whether to believe is meritorious". It might seem, he says, that belief cannot be meritorious, because:

Anyone assenting to some truth in faith either has a cause sufficiently motivating him or does not. If the first, belief would not be meritorious for him, since he is then no longer free to believe or not to believe. If the second, then belief would be irresponsible - He that is hasty to give credit is light of heart (Ecclesiasticus 19:4) - and so not deserving of reward. In no way, then, is believing meritorious.¹²

Thomas replies as follows to this objection:

One who believes does have a sufficient motive for believing, namely the authority of God's teaching, confirmed by miracles, and - what is greater - the inner inspiration (*instinctus*) of God inviting him to believe. Thus he does not give credit lightly. He does not, however, have a motive sufficient for scientific certitude, and so the quality of merit is not absent from his act.¹³

Here, it seems to me, lies the key to a solution. Once we see how faith can be virtuous, we can readily see how unbelief, in contrast, can be vicious. The evidence that the Catholic Church's message is God's message is strong enough to make assent to it right and reasonable - indeed, obligatory, once it is properly appreciated; but not strong enough to make that assent inevitable, which in turn would make it unfree and therefore morally indifferent.¹⁴

Ultimately, the only thing God wants from us is our love, freely given. If all he had wanted was a love that is not free, he could very easily have created us with the beatific vision - overwhelmed, enraptured, 'swept off our feet' by direct knowledge of the divine glory from the first moment of our existence. Instead, however, he has paid us the compliment of allowing us to have some say in our eternal destiny - a decision which we must make during the brief course of this earthly life. Now, there is room for this freedom only if God adopts a kind of middle course. If he reveals nothing of his love to us in this life, we would never love him in return (especially when we are labouring under the egocentric handicap of original sin); but if he shows himself too clearly, he destroys our freedom. What he must do, then, is unveil himself partially to us, speaking in tones, as it were, which are persuasive - nay, convincing - but not compelling. Since the definitive revelatory event of the Incarnation, this partial self-manifestation has been accomplished both by the preached message - the 'Good News' of his love - associated from time to time with extraordinary and impressive signs of God's divine power; and (more importantly) an inward influence of grace which convicts us of our own sinfulness, and of the holiness and divine trustworthiness of his herald, the Church.

This 'voice' of God is still and small, so that it can be drowned out without too much difficulty; and yet it is deep, commanding and persistent, and thus, hard to drive out permanently and completely. To accept it freely and without reserve - the act of faith - is thus meritorious and salvific, insofar as it is motivated by a trusting, hopeful, open movement of the spirit towards God. Good will fills the 'loophole' which God deliberately leaves in the evidence. "Blessed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed" (Jn. 20:29). But another person, face to face with the same amount of evidence (both external and internal) may fill that same 'loophole' with bad will. If he prefers some lesser good to God, the absolute Good,

he can harden his heart against that inner voice which convicts him of its own divinity, seizing as an excuse the absence of any watertight proof, and thus rationalizing and justifying his denial or scepticism as "conscientious doubt". As St. Teresa of Avila once remarked, heretics can deny some divine truth with the 'top of their heads', while still believing it 'deep in their hearts'.

Indeed, the phenomenon of intellectual 'vice' as such, far from being psychologically impossible, is a common fact of human experience. We can all remember instances of arguments, oral or written, where it is obvious to an impartial bystander that although one party's argument had been beaten decisively, he refused out of pride to change his position, and began evading the point, or clutching at straws and red herrings in order to save face. Perhaps we can remember doing this ourselves on occasion: honest reflection in calm solitude, after the heat of the debate has passed, may show us that at the time we were, so to speak, 'sinning against the light' - obstinately refusing to open our minds to a truth whose evidence was pressing hard upon us.

However, a word of qualification seems necessary at this point. Part of the classical difficulty in explaining how unbelief could be a grave sin can be traced, I suspect, to the overly intellectual understanding of faith which prevailed for a long time before Vatican II. The Church never taught that faith was mere assent to certain propositions, but that particular aspect of faith (admittedly an essential one) was certainly stressed very heavily in the theology that was enshrined at Vatican Council I. But if this purely intellectual aspect is all we advert to, it might be difficult to see how grave guilt could be involved in sins against faith. The kind of intellectual dishonesty which we noted by way of analogy in the preceding paragraph, for instance, would not usually be regarded by a normal, prudent person as being extremely wicked in itself. Stubbornness or pig-headedness in refusing to change a discredited opinion does not usually wound or damage ourselves or others in a serious way, except indirectly, in cases where the false opinion will itself subsequently be used as the excuse for some other evil action.

However, if we speak of faith in the more explicitly personalistic terms of Vatican II, as an act whereby someone "freely commits his entire self to God",¹⁵ this may well help us, and our contemporaries, to understand the gravity of sins against faith, and especially heresy and apostasy, which the Church has traditionally considered

worse than the unbelief of those who have never been Catholics. (As St. Thomas says, “he who fails to keep a promise sins more than he who had never made one”.¹⁶) A better human analogy for our purposes than an impersonal intellectual debate is the analogy which is repeatedly revealed in Scripture itself - that of marriage. Israel and the Church are the ‘brides’ of Yahweh and Christ in the succeeding covenants; and man’s duty to God in both of them is analogous to that of a faithful spouse.

We usually think of marital infidelity in terms of adultery. However, there is another kind, less crude but perhaps just as terrible, which seems to me more closely akin to heresy, insofar as its material object is an act of the intellect - assent to a certain *idea*. I have in mind the kind of infidelity which was immortalized in Shakespeare’s great tragedy *Othello*.

Commentators often say glibly that the great flaw in the ‘Moor of Venice’ is his exaggerated “jealousy”. I think this misses the mark in a subtle but important way. The question of whether a jealous reaction is *inordinate* or not would seem more appropriate only after the fact of adultery (or at least dalliance) has been established. But in this case, Desdemona’s innocence is precisely what gives the drama its special pathos. Thus, the real tragic failure of *Othello*, and the whole epic poignancy of the play, seem to me rather his abandonment of trust in a pure and faithful spouse, on the basis of insufficient, purely circumstantial evidence. The material object of his sin is his free and deliberate (*pertinax*) assent to the proposition that his wife is unfaithful. But its formal object, as with all sin, lies in the defect of will which is made manifest in that assent: the unwarranted betrayal of trust and loyalty. And its blameworthiness is immediately evident when we reflect on the shattering personal blow which it must have inflicted on his loving wife: “You didn’t trust me! You broke your promise of love without even giving me a hearing! You judged me a whore, after my unblemished record of fidelity, on the basis of a handkerchief and the word of a relative stranger!”

If *Othello*’s fault is clearly analogous to that of formal heresy or apostasy, then the disbelief (culpable, *ex hypothesi*) of one who has never made a true Christian commitment could be likened to the lesser, but still highly damaging, wound inflicted by one who spurns a fiancée or fiancée under broadly similar circumstances. Both cases exhibit a similar moral defect: we have someone whom divine grace, supported by an awareness of

at least some of the external ‘motives of credibility’, is strongly prompting to retain (or embrace for the first time) the Catholic Church’s claim to speak with the voice of God himself. But then this supernatural gift of faith (already possessed or in the process of being offered) is rejected, cast off, or pushed away, because of the person’s preference for some created good - his long-accustomed life-style, his friends, intellectual pride, an illicit sexual liaison, the desire to ‘run his own life’, or whatever - rather than God himself.

In this case, the insult offered is far worse than that of refusing to trust a trustworthy human being. All of us, after all, are frail and fallible, and there is at least a possibility that even the best of us may in fact let someone down badly. But consciously refusing to trust the infallible Source of all truth - Truth himself - is a direct act of defiance against infinite goodness, the enormity of which we will never be able to appreciate properly until the Day of Judgment brings to light all that is now veiled in obscurity. The still small voice says, wordlessly but with complete authority, “I am God. Hear my Vicar.” But I reply, “No you’re not, and I won’t.”

The objection will be raised again, however, that this seems psychologically impossible. If I believe that God is telling me something, am I not logically compelled to accept it, since it is obvious that God (if he exists) cannot lie? No, it is perfectly possible to deny it, precisely because the fact that the utterance is divine (as distinct from the divine message which is uttered) also comes to us as *conviction* without *compulsion*. Since it is no more inescapably evident than the other revealed truths, since it as much as they must be accepted on faith rather than on sight, it is always possible for us to tell ourselves (obstinately and in bad faith) that this is not the voice of conscience (i.e., of God) which we hear. Thus we can avoid absurdity. The very first words of the tempter in Eden are intended to seduce mankind into this primordial sin against faith, which must involve a denial or doubt regarding the fact of revelation: “Did God really say ...?” (Gen. 3:1).

Our objector might still continue thus: “Very well, granted that it is possible to sin knowingly against the divine veracity, and that this is in itself a very grave sin. But could such knowledge ever reach that full degree of clarity which must be present in every mortal sin? Doesn’t the fact that the action involves an element of self-deception mean that in practice the gravity must

always be diminished at least to the level of venial sin? Self-deception seems to imply that to some extent we ‘don’t know what we’re doing’.

There is no reason to doubt that in many cases this will be true. Like any sin involving grave matter, sins directly opposed to faith will doubtless be rendered less serious by the absence of full advertence in many concrete cases. Our aim is simply to show that a fully culpable commission of such sins is a real, practical, pastoral possibility - an action that is consonant with what we know empirically about the real-life capacities (or rather, limitations) of fallen human nature. And it seems to me that when we recall the generally accepted principles of moral theology in regard to this requirement of “full advertence” in mortal sin, it is - unfortunately - not too difficult to see how such advertence can be present in sins against faith.

First, we must remember that all grave sin involves an element of absurdity, ‘contrariness’, self-deception: we do that which we know full well is not to be done. Sin is irrational, and it is part of the ‘mystery of iniquity’ that we rational beings can so often sink to a level where we act in a way that goes completely against the grain of our God-given nature. Hence, even though from the vantage-point of a speculative armchair the idea of rejecting a truth which is clearly known to come from God might seem like an absurd sort of action, this in itself is very little guarantee that it seldom if ever happens.

Secondly, moralists recognize that “full advertence” does not necessarily imply a “most perfect” advertence. For that reason the traditional theological term is possibly a misnomer. “Clear awareness” or “sufficient reflection” are probably better, since if we take the words of the first expression strictly, only God himself can “fully” (i.e. perfectly) advert to the true gravity and malice of sin.

This means, for instance, that in order to be sufficient for mortal sin, advertence need not reach the level of a cold, calculating awareness which is explicitly maintained over a considerable period of time.¹⁷ The ‘moment of truth’, in which we see clearly the true nature of our action, may come and go in a flash, pushed almost immediately into the recesses of consciousness by our flattering rationalizations. I would surmise that this is especially probable in the more purely spiritual sins such

as infidelity, where the element of self-deception is accentuated. In cruder faults of greed, anger, lust, cruelty, and so on, the malice is more obvious (because more closely linked to corporeal realities) and therefore not so easy to hide, either from ourselves or our neighbours. Sins against theological faith, on the other hand, carry no direct affront to anyone except God, and can therefore coexist with life-style which may seem outwardly very virtuous and pious. When those around us regard us as good and sincere people, it is wonderfully easy to believe that they must be right!

Another sound and accepted moral principle is that the advertence in mortal sin need not be present while the sin is actually being committed. Grave guilt may well be incurred if the clear realization of serious evil occurs in anticipation of the act: “If do this, I’ll be doing something very wrong.”¹⁸ This is only common sense, because during any immoral action, especially when the will is vehemently engaged, our attention is commonly focused on the perceived good which we are aiming for, rather than on the fact of its disharmony with a greater and overriding good - the moral law.

When we add to these considerations the well-known fact that repeated venial sins against any virtue can gradually dull the moral sense, thus making it easier to lapse into grave sin,¹⁹ it is not at all difficult to see how the full guilt of infidelity can be incurred.



D. The Psychology of Culpable Infidelity

Let us conclude by imagining a couple of examples. Mr. A., a man of the world, respectable in the eyes of his neighbours, not lacking in natural virtues (“as good as the next man”, as he puts it), and even believing in God in a notional kind of way, may yet be totally hardened and politely contemptuous towards those who believe and follow the Christian revelation. Many times he may have been prompted by graces, internal and external, to accept or at least investigate honestly the Gospel message; but he consistently pushes them out of his mind, fastening his attention on the many facile arguments against Christianity, and the Catholic Church, whenever he feels the need to justify his position. Eventually, those occasions are almost forgotten when he briefly felt the

piercing touch of the Holy Spirit, the “two-edged sword” of God’s word which “slips through the place where the soul is divided from the spirit” (Heb. 4:12). Most of his life, it is true, he may not be actually and continually sinning mortally against faith, because there is little or no advertence to the defiance of ultimate Good which characterizes his outlook on life. But he may still be in the state of mortal sin all the while - and this because of his unbelief. The times of grace came, were lost, and his fully culpable disbelief at those moments has never been repented, simply buried. The seed of the Word “fell at the edge of the path, and the birds came and ate it up” (Mk 4:4). His basic problem is that he just does not care very much about truth. He is far too busy with the ‘more important’, ‘practical’ affairs of this world, where his heart is firmly set; and any nagging suspicion that God might be telling him to surrender his inner independence, to reorient all his values, and embrace a religion which has the colossal affrontery to make sweeping and absolute claims on how he should think, and how he should run his life - why, this ‘scruple’ must be put in its place very firmly! If God has something to say, Mr. A. just does not want to hear about it: he sins not just against truth, but against Truth.

Again, we can envisage young Fr. X, newly ordained to the Catholic priesthood, a bright scholar, full of zeal, deeply aware in his heart of his faith-commitment, which includes the most solemn promise of lifelong adherence in trust to the Creed, and to all the defined dogmas of the Catholic faith. He is fully conscious that he is accepting these on God’s authority, and that therefore he has a sacred duty to maintain - yes, let us say it - a permanently closed mind on these matters. He knows that to deliberately open them up for questioning in his own reflection - in the sense of suspending his real assent to them - will be a grave breach of trust in God’s veracity, even if (in an extreme case) he should subsequently encounter what may seem to be insuperable intellectual objections to them. He knows that he must be like a little child, trusting in the divine authority vested in God’s Church, rather than his own rational powers of scholarly investigation. However, as Fr. X’s priestly life and ecclesiastical studies continue, he finds himself immersed in a social ambience of very ‘liberal’ or ‘advanced’ thought. A hundred subtle influences and attitudes - a one-sided emphasis on ‘pluralism’ and ‘free inquiry’ in the Church, a petulant harping on her past mistakes and abuses of authority, the subtle attraction of dallying with ideas frowned on or rejected by the Church’s ordinary teach-

ing authority, a constant atmosphere of polite (or not so polite) disdain for the “preconciliar” outlook of “Roman theology” which still holds sway in high places, an undue readiness to find fault with the Pope and the Vatican in non-essential matters - all this gradually coats the former crystalline sparkle of his childlike faith commitment with a smooth, mellow tarnish. There is no grave sin anywhere, just a relaxed settling-in to an “adult” Catholicism which has lost its shockability, and can “handle” the most radical theological theses, the broadest proposals for ecumenism, “liberation”, or demythologization, in a comfortable, sophisticated way - adverting constantly, of course, to the presumed good faith, the adamant intellectual integrity, of all who propose them.

Some sin there is, however; especially that of pride, which St. Pius X warned is “far more effective” than anything else in “blinding the soul” and leading it into grave error.²⁰ Our priest is acquainted with, but merely smiles at, the words of Pope Pius XII, who rebuked the attitude of certain Catholic philosophers and theologians:

They are eager to emancipate themselves from Authority; and the danger is that they will lose touch, by insensible degrees, with the truth divinely revealed to us, leading others besides themselves into error.²¹

Little by little, Fr. X breathes in the intellectual atmosphere of contemporary Western culture - its worst features along with its best: uneasiness with accounts of the miraculous or the angelic; a generous tolerance towards illicit sexual gratification; heavy emphasis on the “historically-conditioned” nature of all truth, the “findings of scientific scholarship”, the absolute supremacy of the individual conscience, and an “incarnational, this-worldly” spirituality. From time to time he is recalled to his basic faith commitment and renews it inwardly. But although he realizes theoretically that faith is a free virtue, a tender plant which needs nourishment (and regular weeding around its roots) to survive and flourish, he finds it very easy to neglect this, and eventually reaches a point where the desire to be up-to-date exercises a more powerful hold on his imagination and sensibilities than the duty to be orthodox. He takes no care to balance his ‘progressive’ reading matter with more traditional material upholding official magisterial positions: indeed, he would almost prefer to be discovered like Noah, naked and drunk, than to be caught by his clerical friends in the

act of subscribing to the *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* or *Faith & Reason* (or quoting Paschendi and Humani Gen-eris with approval in an academic paper).

Finally, a moment of truth arrives. After hav- ing minimized and relativized the ‘hard sayings’ of Ca- tholicism for year after year, Fr. X realizes consciously where all this is naturally leading: everything is pointing cogently towards the formerly unthinkable - a real, posi- tive doubt or denial of the Church’s infallible power of teaching revealed truth in any meaningful sense - even the articles of the Creed. He finally crosses that inner frontier, admits to himself that he no longer really be- lieves. And although the clear advertence is there, at least for a while, that he is thereby breaking what he knows has been proposed by the Church, and vowed by himself, as a most solemn, divinely-imposed commitment, neces- sary for salvation itself, this now hardly bothers him at all. His faith, so long neglected and untended in the gar- den of the Church, now detaches itself with the gentlest of snaps and falls to earth like an over-ripe plum. There is no trauma experienced at this stage, no real wrestling in conscience, no pang of loss or remorse; just a strange, unfamiliar stillness which is followed soon by a heady sense of liberation - “freed from the incubus of trying to believe” (in the pithy words of Australian poet Geoffrey Lehmann). All the ready and soothing rationalizations quickly crowd in like scented oil to salve and anaesthetize the terrible wound, to bind it up and conceal it from his own sight: reinterpretation of dogma; the demands of the twentieth century; my intellectual honesty.

Perhaps Fr. X now joins the thousands of priests and religious who have openly left not just their voca- tions, in recent decades, but the Catholic Church as such. (Many of his friends have already done so.) Or perhaps he remains on in his priestly ministry, prudently silent or cautious about ‘coming out’ with his new scepticism (or rather, his “growth in faith”, his “intellectual conversion” a la Lonergan, as he prefers to call it) and looking for- ward calmly to the time when ‘Rome’ will finally awaken to the farreaching implications of Vatican II, and admit the valid insights of himself and many others in the van- guard of contemporary Christian scholarship.

Fr. X still prays, preaches, celebrates the sacra- ments, tries to practice justice and love of neighbour. He is respected, even loved, by many of his fellow-priests and parishioners. But his “mature” faith is not the Catho- lic virtue of faith. The supernatural life has been killed in

him, because, in choosing to reject all real revelation (he has now redefined that term as “man’s developing aware- ness of the divine”), he has closed his heart and mind to the true God, and worships an idol of his own fabrica- tion instead. Like Saul, who decided on the religious cult which he thought best, in defiance of what God told him through the prophet, our unhappy priest has forgotten that “obedience is better than sacrifice” (I Sam. 15:22). In fact, no element of obedience, no trace of any inner submission to a doctrinal authority, is now left in his re- ligious outlook at all. Instead of being a believer (in the Catholic and theological sense of that term), he is now a mere philosopher of religion, accepting what seems rea- sonable and explicable to his own intellect in Scripture and Christian tradition, and rejecting (he calls it “demy- thologizing”) the rest.

It is not that he feels self-sufficient, or indepen- dent of God. On the contrary, he still prays-not so fre- quently as before, perhaps - for strength and help in the vicissitudes of life, amidst the demanding, yet reward- ing, challenges of his ministry. But the point is that he has laid down the terms and conditions on which God shall be allowed to enter his life; and as such, his whole stance towards the Almighty is radically warped and ego- centric. He has decided, in a very ‘fundamental option’, to be his own boss; to employ God in his service. But so deep-seated is this choice that he seldom adverts to it now. Only occasionally does a stab of conscience prod this malice out into the light of day for an instant: as for example when that “melancholy bigot” Mrs. Murphy (active in the local chapter of Catholics United for the Faith) comes round after Mass with a nervous and pained expression, pointing out discrepancies between his latest sermon on the Eucharist on the one hand, and *Mysterium Fidei* on the other. For a moment the cloven hoof shows itself; the flash of venom spurts forth from deep down, and is on the tip of his tongue: “Narrow-minded fool! Who do they think they are, these self-appointed witch- hunters! They haven’t a clue about the complexities of modern philosophy and theology, think they know every- thing, and have the temerity to come round waving papal documents at me! At ME, with degrees from Rome and Louvain!!” But Mrs. Murphy doesn’t receive any of this. Fr. X quickly remembers his priestly duty to be patient, compassionate, and yes, Christ-like, with all comers, and treats his little “inquisitor” to a sigh, a smile, and a few gentle words about Vatican II’s call for “pluralism” and “openness”, before excusing himself for more urgent duties.

And so he carries on from day to day behind the self-drawn curtain of his own blindness, the tightly-bandaged, suppurating wound in his spirit now known only to God (and suspected, perhaps, by a few of the more hard-line CUF members).

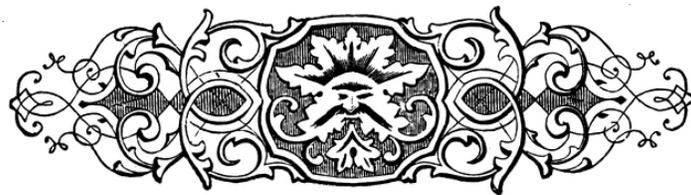
Sin speaks to the sinner
in the depths of his heart;
He so flatters himself in his mind
that he knows not his guilt. (Ps 36:1-2)

It will take a near-miracle of grace now for him to open the curtain, tear off the bandage, and gaze upon the wound once again in the healing light of genuine faith. Otherwise, he is destined to become one of those “many” who approach the judgment-seat of Christ saying “Lord, Lord”, laden with all their prophetic eloquence and the wonderful works they have done in his name, only to hear those unspeakable words: “Depart. I never knew you.” (Mt. 7:24)

The purpose of this paper has certainly not been to encourage a heresy-hunting attitude, in the sense of a pharisaical attitude which judges the consciences of others. Insofar as “heresy” refers to the formal and culpable sin of that name, the only place I think we should hunt for it is within ourselves. A fully-balanced treatment of infidelity would require another article, setting out those valid observations of modern theology and psychology which make it possible to see the brighter side of this

problem, i.e., how the virtue of supernatural faith may often exist in people who exhibit few if any external signs of it, and perhaps might not even lay claim to it themselves.

All I have attempted to do here is draw attention to what seems a serious imbalance in recent theological writing, and to show how gravely culpable sins against faith are both possible and actually dangerous. The fact that infidelity (considered in its formal, not material, aspect) is one of the least obvious of sins is no reason at all to presume its rarity; for its hiddenness can be explained very well as a result of the completely supernatural quality of divine faith, against which it offends. As Bernard Haring observes, “The dreadful malice of this sin is shown in its true light only through revelation ... it destroys the very foundation on which all efforts for salvation rest”.²² The world is scandalized by the intransigence of the Church and her Divine Master towards infidelity; and to give the world its due, we should admit frankly that there is nothing in unaided human nature - in the natural moral reasoning faculties which are our birthright - which can enable us to see how “mere” un-Catholic opinions can be wicked. “The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God” (I Cor. 2:14). Hopefully, by explaining both faith and its opposite more intelligibly to our contemporaries, we may open the road for God’s grace to dispel this ‘natural’ blindness, both in ourselves and others.



NOTES

1Rahner, K. “What Is Heresy?” *Theological Investigations*, Vol. V (tr. K-H. Kruger), Baltimore and London, Helicon Press and Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966, pp. 470-1.

2Aquinas, St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* IIa IIae 10:3.

3Augustine, St. Epist. 43, *Ad Glorium*. PL 33, 160. Quoted, Aquinas, ST IIa IIae 11:2, ad 3.

4*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 6, p. 1069.

5Rahner, op. cit., p. 478.

6Ibid.

7*Ad Gentes*: 7.

8*Lumen Gentium*: 16.

9Ibid.: 14.

10*Codex Iuris Canonici*, Can. 751.

11Ibid., Can. 1364.

12Aquinas, ST IIa IIae 2:9, objection 3.

13Ibid., ad 3.

14Vatican Council I anathematized the proposition that “the assent of Christian faith is not a free act, but is inevitably produced by the arguments of human reason” (DS 3035).

15*Dei Verbum*: 5.

16Aquinas, ST IIa IIae 10:7.

17McHugh, J.A. & Callan, C.J. *Moral Theology: A Complete Course, Vol. 1*, New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1929, p.

59

18Ibid.

19Davis, H. *Moral and Pastoral Theology, Vol. 1*, London, Sheed & Ward, 1936, pp. 225-6.

20Pius X, Pope. *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*: 40.

21Pius XII, Pope. *Humani Generis*: 10.

22Haring, B. *The Law of Christ*, Vol. 2, (tr. E.G. Kaiser), Westminster, New Press, 1967, p. 53.

