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REFLECTIONS ON A FOOTNOTE ON THE SUBJECT OF MASTURBATION: THE QUESTION OF GRAVITY, AND THE MATTER OF CHASTITY

John Joseph Williams



IN THE PRESENTATION OF HIS OWN THOUGHTS A QUARTER OF A CENTURY AGO, Charles Curran alluded to a serious study on the subject that, had it been more widely circulated, or translated for the English-speaking world, would have provided some important complements to American “revisionist” positions on the question of the gravity of masturbation that passed about liberally in the late 1960s, through the 1970s, and beyond.

After chronicling summarily some of the “older teaching” in *Contemporary Problems in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, 1970), Curran exposes the new light:

A more personal approach and better psychological as well as physical knowledge point out that masturbation is ordinarily not that important a matter. There is no blanket gravity that can be assigned to every act of masturbation. Masturbatory activity is generally symptomatic.... Masturbation might be expressive of a deep-seated inversion or just an adolescent growing-up process.⁴¹ Generally speaking I believe masturbation is wrong since it fails to integrate sexuality into the service of love.... This wrongness is not always grave; in fact, more times it is not.... Catholic educators should openly teach that masturbation is not always a grave matter and most times, especially for adolescents, is not that important.... However, the teacher should not leave the adolescent with the impression that there is absolutely nothing wrong with masturbation. (pp. 175-176)

It is curious—perhaps just a “typo”—that footnote forty-one¹ was placed precisely where it was. One would hardly have gleaned that the article—an immensely comprehensive treatise—provided more than some empirical data that either described what masturbation might be “symptomatic” or “expressive” of ... or defined it as “just an adolescent growing-up process.”

Effectively, however, this erudite, allusive study by Albert Plé-French Dominican theologian and psychologist, and founding editor of the *Supplément de la Vie Spirituelle*—did deal with the question of gravity. The apparatus was actually rather classic; but there was something of a “tone” of suggestive experimentation, and certainly that Gallic *esprit*, which must have seemed congenial to those advancing the “new approaches.”

La gravite morale de la masturbation est fort nuancée: elle peut varier, selon chaque cas, du péché mortel (s’il y a consentement libre de l’affectivité intelligente qui s’appelle volonté), au péché véniel (sensualitas), à l’absence de péché (soulagement naturel, pathologie physiologique ou psychique empêchant le jeu du libre arbitre).²

“Advances” popularly attributed to Curran did not go unnoticed in the theological scene of that era: “In what must be regarded as a significant breakthrough in this matter, Charles Curran successfully argued that every act of masturbation of itself need not be considered as constituting a disordination which is always and necessarily grave.”³

Ple’s study, however, dating from 1966 and therefore at least contemporaneous with Curran’s work on the subject, precluded any sensationalism by placing the question immediately in a context that American revisionists—without denying explicitly—seemed un-eager to insist on:

Quelle que soit la gravite morale d’une masturbation, telle qu’elle a ete vecue, je tiens pour etabli qu’elle est un mal moral et psychique. (P. 289)

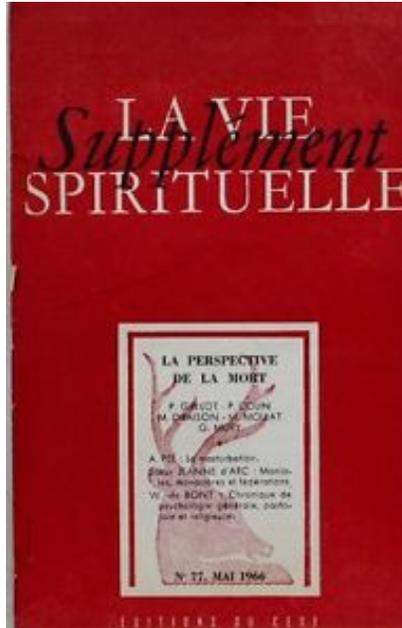
In a word, Ple held it as “established” that masturbation is morally as well as psychically evil, regardless of whatever might mitigate the gravity of this or that particular action. Thus, at the basis of Ple’s position, a “moral vision” is left intact. And the wrongness of masturbation goes beyond the vaguely-defined failure to “integrate sexuality into the service of love.”

Moreover—and this must have appeared almost quaint at the time—Ple advised confessors to raise up among those involved in the habit of masturbation a love of the virtue of chastity (pp. 291–292). Advice of this sort as well as an attractive presentation and validation of the virtue itself became conspicuously absent from a number of popular studies in sexual ethics in those years. Perhaps one reason derived from the discovery, at that time of incipient ecumenical dialogue, that, as Kosnik put it, “for many non-Catholics masturbation constitutes no moral problem whatsoever.”⁴

If there was any appropriation of Ple on the part of Curran, the insights were pragmatic, and altered by their being removed from a context of fine moral discriminations—an unmistakable reverence for purity, an identification of the contrary vice, and a categoric rejection of it.

Although the gravity of masturbation itself was diminished by moralists of the period, something of an older “attitude” kept perduring. Comments by Jacques M. Pohier show the predicament and, for him, the paradox.

Nous avons, a propos de cette faute la [masturbation] un comportement tout a fait different de celui qui nous avians dans les autres domaines, et un comportement que nous aurions ete bien en peine de justifier selon la theologie morale de saint Thomas ... les fautes contre [la chastete etant] en soi moins graves que celles contre les autres vertus...⁵



This completely different comportement-or mindset—that we have toward masturbation—is it all perhaps some residual “Jansenism”?

Pohier may be correct on a detail—about the “faults” against chastity being less grave than certain other kinds of sins. It is true that sins of the flesh are less grievous than spiritual sins, “other things being equal,” etc. (see I-II, Q. 73, Art. 5.) And the seriousness of “uncleanness” (*Immunditia* is the name for masturbation in the *Summa*) is, considered in itself, less grave than bestiality, or sodomy, or the “sin of not observing the right manner of copulation” (II-II, Q. 154, Art. 12, ad 4); but it shares with them characteristics of the “unnatural vice” and that vice is the greatest sin among the species of lust, as the principle of right reason is violated.

Inasmuch as Pohier’s curiosity bears mostly on discovering the “rationale” for a much greater sensitivity to sins of this sort, we would propose that texts in the *Summa Theologica* go rather far in suggesting some convincing solutions. We would offer some observations here, drawn exclusively from the treatise on temperance, and conclude from them that sins against chastity—independently of their gravity—are of such a nature that a “completely different comportement” should not be all that unexpected a phenomenon.

1. The response to “Whether Temperance is the Greatest of the Virtues?” (II-II, Q. 141, Art. 8) is exactly

what one would infer already from Pohier's remarks. Nevertheless, in an "objection" one discovers the makings toward another possible solution. These are not rejected by St. Thomas but rather purified and slightly reorientated: "St. Ambrose says (*De Officiis* I, 43) that what we observe and seek most in temperance is the safeguarding of what is honorable, and the regard for what is beautiful. Now virtue deserves praise for being honorable and beautiful. Therefore. . . ." The reply ad primum nuances the argument, by placing the emphasis upon the "disgrace of the contrary evil." Yet all the same, honor and beauty are especially ascribed to temperance. Classic morality was not indifferent to such considerations.⁶

2. Purity may not be the highest virtue-although St. Thomas gave it the distinct honor of being called, metaphorically, a "general virtue"⁷-but the unhappy effects of lust seem to be in a proportion greater than the degree of actual culpability. The sketch of the traditional "seven daughters" (Q. 153, Art. 5; cf. St. Gregory) puts into perspective the violence done to the reason and to the will by lust. The culpability involved in sins of the flesh may be less grave than in other areas that do not trouble so urgently the penitent; however, as St. Thomas insists, the consequences are multiple and perilous: blindness of mind, thoughtlessness, inconstancy, rashness, self-love, hatred of God, love of the world, and abhorrence or despair of a future world. What an agenda!⁸

3. The sin of our first parents, simply, was not graver than all other sins of men, as regards the species of the sin (163, Art. 3). Yet-who would disagree?-the consequences were uniquely extensive.

4. In Q. 154, Art. 5, "Whether Nocturnal Pollution Is a Mortal Sin," St. Thomas pronounced a position that was regarded, one gathers, as rather "progressive" at the time: No, there is no mortal sin attached to the matter itself ... and no venial sin. Yet in spite of these positions, St. Thomas did not foresee the one experiencing a pollution receiving Holy Communion the next day-"not of necessity, but from a sense of propriety" (III, Q. 80, Art. 7). The non-punitive abstention which he accepted as enjoined was independent of the question of culpability. It would follow that prompt confession of an impure action would not have normally made possible the immediate reception of Communion (cf. notably Q. 80, Art. 7, ad 4). I am not attempting to defend an ancient disciplinary practice here; I merely wish to assert that lack of grave culpability did not "solve" the matter of admis-

sion to the Sacrament.⁹

That Christians and in particular those committed to religious vows might have a delicate conscience in the domain of personal purity could, in fact, derive from an appropriate sensitivity to the revelation that their bodies are temples (Q. 153, Art. 3, ad 2; cf. 1 Cor 6:20): "Through lust a man wrongs God, Who is Supreme Lord of our Body." The moral theology of St. Thomas presumes the particular appeal of the beauty and honor of chastity, and the abhorrence of violations against it, regardless of the degree of gravity.



I would offer some observations on the matter of gravity from a totally different context. St. Thomas, in the "Supplement," takes up the question "Whether the Aureole of Virgins Is the Greatest of All" (Q. 96, Art. 12), and concludes that it is not the greatest. John Calvin saw in this very question a perfect example of the sort of inquiry that manifests a hunger for "empty learning" (cf. *Institutions*, III, 25, 11); seminarians perennially have found in it a subject of much mirth; and contemporary critics of the scholastic method will use the title of this article as the quintessence of the demonstration of its irrelevancy. Do they really imagine that St. Thomas' principal interest lies in determining the material size of the aureoles of virgins in comparison with those of doctors and martyrs? His concern actually bears on identifying the different tests which these three "classes" of saints must endure for the kingdom of God. One can be confident that St. Thomas is not attempting to downgrade virginity by attributing to it an inferior glory. In fact, St. Thomas' analysis is careful and nuanced: "The martyrs' aureole is only *simply* the greatest of all ... Yet nothing hinders the other aureoles from being more excellent in some particular way." What discretion! Similarly, to the question, "Whether Virginity Is the Greatest of Virtues?" (II-II, Q. 152, Art. 5), the simple answer must be negative. The first objection, a text from St. Cyprian, is not allowed to serve as the authority for a positive answer. However, the unique sublimity of the unique glory of virgins is not at all thereby diminished by St. Thomas.

When St. Thomas places virtues, vices, capital sins, and states of life-and even halos-in a gradation,

there is much more involved than fixing things in a hierarchic order of “more” or “less.” And what is “less” is not of negligible importance.

Just as St. Thomas confirms in the Summa the particular correlation between a man’s sense of touch and his intellectual powers, he draws a close connection between lust and the degeneration of the spiritual life. One recalls Pascal’s “thought”: “Il y en a bien qui croient, mais par superstition. Il y en a bien qui ne croient pas, mais par libertinage; peu sont entre deux.” Pere Lacordaire, in one of his conferences at Notre-Dame, developed his argument that “All the evils enter, finally, by this gate of impurity .., toutes les servitudes, toutes les ruines y ont passe.”¹⁰ Lust may be the last of the capital sins considered in itself, but when the “lower powers” are corrupted, the higher powers are both hindered and disordered in their acts (Q. 153, Art. 5). The “mental blindness” begotten by lust has globally upsetting results.¹¹

Although the observation was a recurring one in the literature of the “French Catholic revival,” Georges Bernanos has written perhaps the most persuasively on the effects of impurity upon hope, upon joy, and upon what was for him so cherished, that “esprit d’enfance.” Charles Moeller, in a brilliant commentary on *The Diary of a Country Priest*, in the first of the volumes in the series *Litterature du XXe siecle et christianisme*, insists that Bernanos will not allow the awful evil inherent in youthful lust to be diminished even if the moral gravity is excused. Moreover, the “merciful sadness” with which the Cure judges the impurity of one of the youths in the drama is matched only by an indignation for the adult accomplices in the world that would trivialize its consequences.¹²

Bernanos is at pains to define the ties that profoundly bind aberrant sexuality with the anguish experienced by youth, “le mutisme, l’immuable pierreuse des etres en proie a ce vice.” The demon of lust, as Moeller follows Bernanos, is a mute demon; and all the medical methods which would reduce the sentiment of guilt to some accidental complex³⁹⁹, that would treat it by purely psychological means without rendering an account of the spiritual element involved, are destined to fail.¹³

The cure of Ambricourt says it in his *Diary*:

In a word, I am terrified of lust.

But especially of lust in children.... For I know

it so well. Not that I mean to take it too tragically. On the contrary, I know how patiently it ought always to be dealt with, since the least imprudence in such matters may have the most terrible results. It is so hard to distinguish the deepest wounds from the rest, and even then so dangerous to probe them! Far better, sometimes, leave them alone to heal themselves—a thriving abscess must not be touched. But that does not lessen my hate of this general silent conspiracy, this foregone determination not to see the obvious, that silly, knowing smirk of grown-ups faced with certain distresses which are called trifling merely because they are too inarticulate for adult words. I knew sorrow, also, too early in my life to feel no disgust with the blind injustice we all are guilty of towards children, whose sorrows are so profound and mysterious. Alas, we have learnt by experience that children may come to know despair. And the demon of agony is essentially I think, a demon of lust.¹⁴

The “new approaches” on masturbation in the 60s and 70s seem, in retrospect, more in succession to the older probabilists’ manuals than their authors might have imagined. The American practitioners, by focussing in on the question of gravity, in a somewhat compartmentalized way, consistently betrayed the wealth of speculative moral theology. They appealed generously to the authority of one another, and there was truly a “school of opinion” here. They even rejoined the kind of casuistry exemplified by such an ancient case as whether or not a person who commits adultery in a private oratory is also guilty of sacrilege. Now there is a valid—and somewhat interesting—question here. But the evil of adultery and sacrilege will surely be deflected in the discussion by definitions and considerations of “private oratory” as a circumstance that would mitigate or excuse guilt.

The “agenda” for the section on masturbation in *Human Sexuality*, commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society of America, was itself limited—mostly to gravity, psychological interpretation, and “pastoral reflections” (pp. 219-229). In effect, the preceding generation of practical ethicists had been keen too on identifying *degree of gravity*. Practically, however, the “revisionists” seemed to grow less and less interested in the morality, grave or slight, of individual acts:

Only in the context of one’s state of life can the

expression of human sexuality be evaluated properly. This approach bespeaks the conviction that, morally speaking, attitudes, patterns, and habits that reflect a continuing life-style are far more significant than individual, isolated acts. (p. 102)

It is amazing that perspectives raised just a generation before by Dietrich von Hildebrand in a modern classic on the subject, *In Defense of Purity*, had, by the 1970s, disappeared from the “problematic”:

Every manifestation of sex produces an effect which transcends the physical sphere and, in a fashion quite unlike the other bodily desires, involves the soul deeply in its passion. ...The unique profundity of sex in the physical sphere is sufficiently shown by the simple fact that a man's attitude towards it is of incomparably greater moral significance than his attitude to the other bodily appetites. Surrender to sexual desire for its own sake defiles a man in a way that gluttony, for example, can never do. It wounds him to the core of his being, and he becomes in an absolutely different and novel fashion guilty of sin. Sex can indeed keep silence, but when it speaks it is no mere obiter dictum, but a voice from the depths, the utterance of something central and of the utmost significance. In and with sex, man, in a special sense, gives himself. . . .¹⁵

Much that von Hildebrand systematized had belonged to the “patrimony” of Church thinking. How, in the “new approaches,” did so many considerations get so rapidly lost from view?

Given their ostensible penchant for “personalist” considerations, the contemporary theologians from a quarter of a century ago might have gone far in showing the part of the human body in communicating the spiritual or in revealing-through chastity-the promise of the resurrected body. Questions that could have been stimulating-like the significance of chastity in the modern world, or the fruits of chastity for the individual and the Church-or the experienced relationship of chastity

to charity in the lives of the saints-did not make it to the forefront of the discussion. There was not much about chastity in that contemporary theology that so much influenced a subsequent generation of “religious professionals”-except, peculiarly enough, for one particular “slant” on the subject which Curran alluded to in an observation:

Today when many are espousing the “Playboy philosophy” Catholic teaching must uphold the dignity and importance of human sexuality. However, Catholic teaching must avoid the temptation of over-reacting to laxist, and ultimately inhuman, notions of sexuality.¹⁶

American Catholic sexual ethics did not, to be sure, over-react to laxism in the late 60s and 70s. But it didn't, to put it colloquially, play its cards with a full deck either. James T. McHugh, in a prophetic review roundly critical of *Human Sexuality*, called it “ethical jello.”¹⁷ One teaching, however, that did get taught most rigorously, in fact-in that best-seller does find

something of a “home” in St. Thomas: “Whether Unfeelingness [*insensibilitas*] Is a Vice?” (II-II, Q. 142, Art. 1). In a most selective consideration of chastity, Anthony Kosnik and his collaborators were painfully careful to advance all that was potentially contained in that notion, citing Donald Goergen: “Insensitivity is as unspiritual as is promiscuity.”¹⁸

The “Correctives” in the Vatican's *Declaration on Certain Questions concerning Sexual Ethics* (December 29, 1975) restated the traditional Catholic doctrine that masturbation constitutes a “grave moral disorder”; that considered in itself it is an “intrinsically and seriously disordered act” (Section 9).

The document acknowledged, however, that “on the subject of masturbation modern psychology provides much valid and useful information for formulating a more equitable judgment in moral responsibility and for orienting pastoral action.” Psychology did provide, in that domain, some creditable insights that seem to have been universally received-although ordinary confessors must have had, for centuries, some helpful insights along


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-Dietrich von Hildebrand

these lines, drawn from standard moral theology.¹⁹ And wise and devout laymen, like Bernanos, have had deep perceptions into souls and the effects of childhood lusts in general: “I know how patiently it ought always to be dealt with, since the least imprudence in such matters may have the most terrible results. It is hard to distinguish the deepest wounds from the rest, and even then so dangerous to probe them...”

The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) maintained the text of 1975 on the question of intrinsic gravity,²⁰ and proposed this “pastoral action”:

To form an equitable judgement about the subjects’ moral responsibility and to guide pastoral action, one must take into account the affective maturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety, or other psychological or social factors that lessen or even extenuate

moral culpability (Paragraph 2352).

The Vatican Declaration of 1975 also affirmed that the tradition of the Church has rightly understood masturbation to be condemned in the New Testament when the latter speaks of “impurity,” “unchasteness,” and other vices contrary to chastity and continence.

As for the particular excellence of *chastity*, for a little while it seemed to disappear from the problematic in the “new approaches” to sexuality—at least in any significant emphasis. Pere Ple did not neglect the dynamics of this virtue in 1966 and in his subsequent work, nor the Universal Church as it has picked up with pride again and validated, following the modeling out of Pope John Paul II in many of his discourses, this traditional and cherished term: *chastity*.



NOTES

1A. Ple, O. P., “La Masturbation: Reflections theologiques et pastorales,” *Supplement de la Vie Spirituelle*, 77 (1966), 258-292.

2P. 289. Ple’s own footnote: “Les cas d’irresponsabilite des ‘fous et alienes’ sont souvent signales par saint Thomas; en cc qui concerne les masturbations, voir specialement: *De Malo*, 15, 2, 9m.”

3Anthony Kosnik et al., *Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought* (New York, 1977). Their reference is to Curran, *A New Look at Christian Morality* (Notre Dame, 1968), p. 214. Of course, the Kosnik volume is a veritable mine of information on what had been circulating in theological discussion for a decade.

4Cited in Curran, *New Look*, p. 216.

5 “Les Chretiens devant les problemes poses par la sexualite,” *Supplement de la Vie Spirituelle*, No. 111 (Nov. 1974), 500-501.

6 St. Ambrose relates in the *De officiis ministrorum*—much used in St. Thomas’ articles on modesty—several instances in which he perceived a spiritual characteristic that was communicated through the bodily “carriage” of another. He had, for example, refused to admit into his clergy a man solely because his “exterior” was not sufficiently “composed,” his gestures had something indecent about them, even though the man was otherwise commendable. Another man Ambrose forbade to walk in front of him because his gait had something proud and insolent about it. Though not precisely defined, the body and the movements of these men did not express themselves as sufficiently spiritualized. And without imputing guilt, but without apology, St. Ambrose drew conclusions which he trusted. ‘II-II, Q. 151, Art 2. To study the virtue of chastity, Pere Ple writes in an earlier article in the *Supplement* (Feb. 1956), “it isn’t enough to recall the teachings of St. Thomas such as they figure in the Second Part . . . the theologian sins gravely by omission when, after the analysis of a virtue which is desired by St. Thomas, he does not refer to the synthetic unity of the moral organism altogether” (pp. 9-10).

8Lines of this thinking extended across the centuries into that amazingly inclusive treatise on ascetical and mystical theology, Adolphe Tanqueray’s *The Spiritual Life* (trans. Herman Branderis; Tournai, 1930), which for some thirty years formed North American clerics: “From the point of view of perfection, there is, next to pride, no greater

obstacle to spiritual growth than the vice of impurity. When it is a question of solitary acts or of faults committed with others, it is not long before tyrannical habits are formed which thwart every impulse towards perfection ... Relish for prayer disappears, as does love for austere virtue, while noble and unselfish aspirations vanish. The soul becomes a prey to selfishness ... The balance of the faculties is destroyed ... The will ... rebels against God ... The mind becomes dull and weak ... The imagination gravitates towards lower things ..." (paragraph 875).

9 For other reasons St. Thomas accepts the observance of the preparatory Eucharistic fast from midnight (cf. Q. 80., Art. 8), now obsolete. Catholics who could not communicate by reason of certain circumstances-or in ages of infrequent Communion-realized that they were not consequently deprived of the great Eucharistic graces obtainable through the power of the votum, the pure desire of them (III, Q. 79, Art. 1, ad 1).

10 *Oeuvres Completes*, III (Paris, 1911), p. 64. In matters of chastity, the intellectual cannot be above vigilance. The magnificent "examination of conscience" which Maurice Blondel formulated for his personal use shows a delicate regard for even "occasions" of sensuality that aesthetic considerations might pose for an intellectual (cf. *Carnets Intimes* [Paris, 1950], II).

11 Mental blindness-from lust? The first objection, that it pertains rather to imprudence, is seductive. St. Thomas, leaning on the *Ethics* (vi. 5) answers (ad 1) that intemperance is the chief corruptive of prudence.

12 *Le Silence de Dieu* (Paris, 1954), p. 403. "*La tristesse misericordieuse avec laquelle le cure juge l'impurite de Seraphita n'a d'egale que son indignation pour la niaiserie complice des adultes en la matiere*" (italics mine).

13 *Ibid.*, p. 404. Further, "*S'il est vrai que le pouvoir de donner la vie tient, en l'homme, a la plus intime participation qu'il possede avec Dieu (car Dieu est essentiellement celui qui, par amour, donne la vie) tout ce qui vicie cette vocation, cette puissance d'etre pere, s'attaque a la racine meme de l'etre humain. On ne sortira pas de la*" (pp. 404-405).

14 Translated by Pamela Morris (New York, 1937). Image Books edition (1954), p. 75; Fontana Book edition (1956), p. 85.

15 New York 1935, pp. 13-14. Translation of *Reinheit und Jungfraulichkeit*, (Munich, 1927).

16 New Look, p. 213.

17 *St. Anthony Messenger*, Vol. 85, No. S(Oct., 1977), pp. 12-17.

18 P. 101. The reference is to *Sexual Celibate* (New York, 1974), p. 226.

19 "A sin which is generically mortal can become venial by reason of the imperfection of the act ..." (I-II, Q. 89, Art. 6). See, e.g., "Whether Ignorance Diminishes a Sin" (I-II, Q. 76, Art. 4) or "Whether Sin is Alleviated on Account of a Passion" (I-II, Q. 77, Art. 6). Cf. also Q. 78 on acts "proceeding from habits" and acts committed through "certain malice." There is a wealth of principles for pastoral theology contained in I-II, Q. 73, Art. 10: "Whether the Excellence of the Person Sinning Aggravates the Sin?"

20 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona humana*, paragraph 9: "Both the Magisterium of the Church, in the course of a constant tradition, and the moral sense of the faithful have been in no doubt and have firmly maintained that masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action" (cited in the *Catechism*, paragraph 2352).