

IX. LAW AND SIN

CHRIST summarized the duty of man in the two phrases—"Love God" "Love thy neighbour as thyself." We cannot have the Supernatural Life if we do not love God and our neighbour. But love must express itself in act, and Our Lord left us not only the summarization, but also a great body of detailed rules concerning things to be done as an expression of the twofold love and things to be avoided as contrary to it. These, then, are the laws established by God for the guidance of man's actions. The means by which men can learn what the laws are, and certain practical problems to which they give rise, will be examined in the next two chapters.

CONSCIENCE

Now many will think that this is precisely what conscience is for. And it is absolutely true that a man must in all circumstances follow his conscience. But an investigation of conscience will show that by itself it is not sufficient—that man has not within himself an infallible teacher as to what is right and what is wrong. Conscience is not a faculty or permanent part of man. It is loose speaking to say "I have something on my conscience." It would

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be more accurate to say "I have something on my soul." There is the same difference between conscience and soul as there is between a punch and a fist. The punch is an action of the fist, a thing the fist does. Similarly the conscience is an action of the soul, a thing the soul does. Precisely defined, conscience is the practical moral judgment of the intellect—the intellect being simply the soul itself considered in its activity of knowing things.

Whenever I am asked a question, the answer is a judgment of my intellect. Now the intellect makes many judgments, and conscience only differs from the others by its special scope. If I answer the question "Did Richard III murder the princes in the Tower?" my answer is a judgment of my intellect; but it is purely a historical judgment, not a moral one; therefore it is not my conscience. If the question is changed to "Ought Richard III to have murdered the princes?"—my answer is again a judgment of my intellect, and this time it is a moral judgment, a judgment on right and wrong. But it is not my conscience, for it is not a *practical* moral judgment, that is to say it is not concerned with what it would be right for me to do here and now. But if the question is again changed to "Ought I to murder the man next door whose manners are so maddening?"—the answer is not only a judgment of my intellect and a moral one, but also a practical one.

In other words, conscience is the answer given by my soul when I am faced with a question "What

ought I to do, what would it be right for me to do, in this particular matter?"

Yet, you say, is that not a sufficient guide? Unfortunately no. For conscience is a judgment of my intellect and therefore like any other such judgment it can be wrong. Conscience is not universally infallible. It is often firm and definite in its answer: but an answer may be firm and definite, and yet wrong. By what does the soul judge, if it has no teacher outside itself? By what standard does it decide what is right? The answer is that the law of God is imprinted on man's nature and by that he judges. In other words, God's laws for men are not something totally outside his nature: they correspond to something God has already placed *in* his nature. But in the course of ages, man's nature has grown distorted in all sorts of ways and any distortion in man's nature will mean a distortion in the thing imprinted on it. The moon, falling on a perfectly still lake, will give a perfect image of itself; but let the lake be ever so little ruffled, and the image will be broken up into small pieces: let the lake be really ruffled, and the image will be no more than broken sparkles of light scattered here and there. It is still from the moon that these sparkles come, but no one looking at them could form a picture of the lovely luminous globe of the moon itself. Thus, even where the distortion is greatest, no man's nature is without some trace of God's law still imprinted; but it is not always easy to read. If we could take the

general consensus of the conscience of the race as a whole, it would probably be found to be in accord with the greater part of the natural moral law. But the individual conscience, though probably also in major accord, is apt to show startling variations, from country to country and from man to man.

Thus, even on matters which simply concern the right use of man's *nature*, conscience, lacking information from without, can give contradictory answers. But on the most important questions of all—those which are concerned with man's Supernatural Destiny—the unaided conscience gives no answer at all. On the question "Ought I to divorce my wife?"—conscience, apart from God's teaching, gives different men different answers. But on the question "Ought I to be baptized?"—conscience, apart from God's teaching, gives no man any answer.

If, then, there is no teacher capable of giving us God's law, we are left with nothing but this internal judgment of our own, which on the most obvious questions is *capable* of being wrong and on the most important questions can only be silent. A man *must* follow his conscience, the judgment of his intellect as to what is right and wrong. But the very supremacy of conscience renders it vital that conscience should be instructed.

Consider man's position. There is in him no internal faculty that tells him with either certainty or completeness, in every situation that can arise,

what things are right and what wrong. Yet without such knowledge how can he so act as to reach his goal? The task of achieving the end for which one is created is like any other task: it must be done in the right way. Certain actions will help the achievement, certain will hinder it. We can only know if we are told. God who made us has told us: His Church which enunciates His truths likewise enunciates His laws. Nor is conscience thereby annulled: conscience is the practical moral judgment of the intellect. Now the intellect which knows that the Church is giving God's law will naturally judge that it is right. The Catholic who unquestioningly accepts the moral law as taught by the Church is following his conscience unswervingly.

SIN

The Catholic therefore knows the law of right action. But knowledge is not enough. A man may know and yet disobey. Such disobedience is sin. Sin is, quite simply, breaking God's law. And in that lies its enormity.

The breach of God's law may be a small thing or a great. It may be a failing in a comparatively trifle—silly and weakening to the soul; or it may be a definite rejection of God. The first sort—venial sin—is still sin, yet it will not break the friendship that exists between the soul and God: it will not therefore damn a man's soul. The second sort we call mortal: having committed such a sin, to die without repent-

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ance means eternal damnation.* We shall return to that.

The essence of sin's gravity, as I have said, lies simply in its breaking of God's law. It is blank ingratitude to God; to whom all men owe so much—to whom Christians know that they owe so immeasurably more than the rest of man.

It is incredible stupidity: rebellion against God is one of the most ludicrous things in the world. For whether we are obedient or rebellious we are at every moment totally in the hands of God. He made us of nothing; by His almighty power He keeps us above the surface of our native nothingness. Without His concurrence, we could not act at all, we could not even defy Him. The sinner, as it were, stands up in the hand of God, sustained in being by that all-powerful hand, defying God, but in his very defiance using the power which God has lent him and which God could at any moment withdraw from him.

LAW AND FREEDOM

This fact that the essence of sin is offence against the law of God sometimes—in fact most often—mis-

* The distinction between mortal and venial sin is very important. Between two breaches of law there may not only be a difference of degree, but actually a difference of kind. Consider the law of the land. A man may break it by not taking out a dog-licence. Or he may break it by fighting against his country in war. It is not simply that one breach of the law is more serious than the other. The two breaches are totally different in their nature. So with the law of God. There are breaches of His law which do not involve rejection and rebellion, others which do.

leads the sinner as to the true nature of sin. He imagines himself in a small field, bounded by a fence put there to prevent him from breaking out of the field to sample the rich possibilities of life outside. Here, he says, am I: a being full of the possibilities of development, yet my development is checked at every turn by some absurd law. This view arises from a failure to understand the nature of God's laws. His laws are no mere whims, like the laws of some stupid despot. They are, on the contrary, the expression by God of His own knowledge of man's nature and destiny. He knows the kind of being man is, for He made him. And for the same reason He knows what man is made for. God's laws, then, are a precise statement of how this particular kind of being may avoid destruction and reach his particular goal. The man who makes an engine is not limiting your freedom when he tells you not to run it beyond a certain speed. He knows that if you do you will smash the engine. And if you should plead that your nature demands more speed, that you feel stifled by such slow running—he may very well grow impatient. He knows what speed is right for the engine, for he made it.

God's laws then are best thought of as "maker's instructions," directions for the right use of ourselves. His prohibitions warn us of wrong ways of using ourselves or our neighbours. Earlier I used the simile of a razor to illustrate the point that to misuse a thing was to destroy it. Emancipate the razor from its

old humdrum task of removing hair from the face—defy the maker's statement that razors are only meant for shaving—use your razor for chopping wood and you will have a piece of twisted metal, fit only for the scrap-heap. God's law is not something altogether apart from us: the knowledge of it may have to come from outside, but the law itself is, in a special sense, inside us. For it is a statement of the way we are made. And any action against it is therefore an action against our own nature and is consequently destructive.

The act of running counter to God's law is sometimes justified on the ground of "self-expression." It certainly is not an expression of the self, for God, who made the self, has declared that such action is contrary to its nature. And a man who commits sin—any sin—is to that extent less of a man, just as a motor car, whose engine has been used in violation of its maker's instructions, is less of a motor car. To return to the argument of an earlier chapter—freedom results only from doing what one ought. The connection between law and freedom is absolute.

Yet we sin. Our will is so made that it can choose only what appears to us as good. But two different and contradictory things may both appear to us as good from different points of view: to abstain from meat on Friday is good because God's Church demands it: to eat meat on Friday is good because

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our body is very fond of meat. Between these two goods the will can choose. Its tendency, since the Fall, is to choose the more immediate, what we may call the nearer good—the one we like! To take a matter of more importance. If a married man falls in love with a woman who is not his wife, then two mutually exclusive courses of action will both seem to him, from different angles, good. To remain faithful to his own wife will seem good because God has forbidden adultery: to be faithless to her will seem good because his lower nature would find pleasure in the sin. Again the will must choose. And its tendency, against which it must struggle, is likely to be in the direction of the lower pleasure. Temptation—however tremendous—is not sin. It is not even venial sin. But for the will to yield to it, to choose the sin—even if it never proceeds to action—that is sin—as offence against God and a contradiction of one's own nature.

VOCATION

What has been said so far in this chapter concerns law as an expression of God's general will for all men equally. But there is likewise a will of God for each individual, what is called his vocation. Shall a man be a priest or a layman? If a priest, shall he be a secular priest or a member of a religious community? These questions are momentous. Within the priesthood there is almost every variety of way

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of serving God, opening for every type of character to proceed to its fullest development. If he is to be a layman, in which of the various ways of life open to him will he best serve God's purpose for him? To take one crucial question—shall he marry or not? Marriage, God teaches, is a high and holy state: normally men and women are called to it, for it is the race's duty to carry itself on. But though it is the race's duty, it is not the duty of every individual. Celibacy, chosen for God's sake (not mere celibacy, be it noted, but a celibacy definitely dedicated to God) is a higher and holier state still. It is part of the rule of life for priests. But, exceptionally, it may be God's will for a particular man or woman living in the world.

Now there is no organ in the Church for the expression of this vocation, no official to whom one may go for an official answer. It is the most intimate of matters between God and each soul. Nor is there any one way in which God guides all souls. In some cases, circumstances arise when the sense of vocation seems to point one way and circumstances another. In all such matters, there is possibility of self-deception, and the individual prays for clear guidance and takes the advice of experienced men.

In every case, of course, the individual vocation must be completely in accord with God's law for all men, and the existence of this general moral law is a strong aid to the clear perception of God's will for the individual.

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Discussion Aids

In what way did Christ summarize man's duties? Did He leave us the detailed working out of this summarization?

Conscience

Give a precise definition of conscience. What is the intellect in this case? Distinguish between a historical judgment of the intellect, a moral judgment of the intellect and a *practical* moral judgment of the intellect. Which one is conscience? May a judgment of the intellect be wrong? Is conscience universally infallible? If not, by what standard does it judge what is right? Are God's laws for man totally outside his nature? How does the distortion that has come into man's nature affect the law of God imprinted in his nature? Give an illustration from physical nature. Explain how God's teaching is necessary to conscience. Must a man follow his conscience? Must that conscience be instructed? Where shall conscience find proper instruction?

DISCUSSION OUTLINE FOR A MAP OF LIFE

Sin

Does a properly instructed conscience never give way to sin? What is sin? Distinguish carefully between mortal and venial sin. Which one involves rejection and rebellion? Discuss at length the enormity and the stupidity of sin.

Law and Freedom

How is many a sinner misled as to the true nature of sin? Are God's laws despotic regulations? What precisely are they? Illustrate from the use of an engine or a razor blade. What do we mean by calling God's laws "Maker's instructions"? Is God's law a thing apart from us? Why is action against it, action against our own nature and therefore destructive? What is to be said of running counter to God's law on the ground of "self-expression"? Repeat the law of freedom. Why, then, do we sin? Is temptation sin? Explain.

Vocation

In addition to God's general will for all mankind is there a will of God for each individual? What is it called? How may one know one's vocation? Discuss.

Practice: Meditate on the folly (in addition to the enormity) of sin, considering that we are nothing and God is everything.