

Considering Culpability

JUNE 28, 2017 BY [DR. RALPH MARTIN, STD](#)

Why an Article on this Topic?

It all began with a statement made by a student in a class I was teaching for our License in Sacred Theology (STL) Program at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. I was conducting a seminar on the stages of spiritual growth for a class made up entirely of priests. When we were working on the concept of what the Scripture says about sins that will exclude us from entering the kingdom – mortal sins – one of the priests spoke up in class and said something quite remarkable, both for its honesty and for its implications for understanding some truths about culpability.

He said to his fellow priests: “Let’s face it, sometimes we use the three conditions that are necessary to commit a mortal sin as a way to rationalize a choice we actually make to sin. We deceive ourselves into thinking that the gravely wrong action that we are doing isn’t being done with sufficient reflection or full consent of the will but we are actually freely choosing to do it although with less than full consciousness. Although sufficient reflection and full consent can happen in an instant we often try to cover over our truly free choice to do a bad action with rationalization and self-justification.”

And of course the controversy around the proper interpretation of *Amoris Laetitia* has put the question of objective wrongdoing accompanied by a lack of personal culpability front and center. As Pope Francis put it:

Hence it can no longer simply be said that all those in any irregular situations are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace. More is involved here than mere ignorance of the rule. A subject may know full well the rule, yet have great difficulty in understanding its inherent values, or be in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to act differently and decide otherwise without further sin. (AL §301)

This statement has led some bishops, Cardinals and bishops’ conferences to suggest that as an outcome of pastoral counseling couples who have divorced and remarried without submitting their first marriage situation to the judgment of the church to see if they qualify for an annulment may be given permission to “follow their conscience,” if they feel at peace about receiving communion despite their irregular situation. Other bishops, Cardinals and bishops conferences have concluded that these interpretations are not in harmony with the teaching of the Church or the teaching of Pope Francis’ immediate predecessors.

While the focus of properly weighing “mitigating circumstances” has been almost exclusively directed to the situation of the divorced and remarried it has been noted by various commentators that this principle can also be applied to other irregular situations such as same sex relationships.

This possibility has recently been explicitly affirmed in an interview that Cardinal Cupich of Chicago gave that appeared in *The Chicago Tribune*. He made the logical point that if the objective wrong but subjective lack of culpability principle could be broadly applied to the case of the divorced and remarried it must of course also be applicable to other irregular situations such as same sex

relationships. “You can’t have one particular approach for a certain group of people and not for everybody. Everyone has the ability to form their conscience well.”¹

It is not my intention in this article to directly address the issues as they are presented in *Amoris Laetitia* and the ensuing contradictory interpretations of it, but rather to focus on the comment of my priest student cited above. This is not to deny that my conclusions may have some relevance to the current debate on the proper interpretation and pastoral application of AL. I believe they do. One of the main points I will be making is that particularly in matters of sexual morality, deception and self-deception are easy to fall into, and this propensity needs to be taken into serious account in judging our own culpability in a particular matter or in guiding others in assessing their own culpability. Another point I will make is that even in cases of invincible ignorance or severely diminished culpability and whatever the gravely wrong sins that are being committed may be, the pastoral response needs to be not primarily focused on determining culpability but calling to a full life in Christ, to repentance and faith and life in the Holy Spirit. Even in cases where there may be no culpability, the gravely wrong actions that may have inculpably been committed, nevertheless, need to be turned away from and replaced with a holy way of life.

What Does the Church Teach?

There is a widespread presumption in the general atmosphere of the church today that the conditions necessary to commit a truly culpable mortal sin are so stringent that such sins must be very rare. For that reason my priest-student, in a flash of illumination, felt the need to call out himself and his fellow priests as willing participants in self-deception regarding their culpability and that of others. In this essay, then, we will first examine what the Church actually teaches about the reality of mortal sin, as represented by the teaching of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and then consider what light can be thrown on this teaching through the examination of a few of the most relevant Scriptures. Our goal is to identify some truths that can be helpful in our own lives and in our pastoral responsibilities. We find the Church’s teaching on mortal sin – which sums up the moral reflection of the Church through the centuries—in her *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1857-61 [hereafter, CCC]. I will also occasionally offer some preliminary commentary in relationship to the example of my priest-student given at the beginning of this essay. I will also put in bold type statements of the CCC that are little known or commented on.

CCC §1857 For a *sin* to be *mortal*, three conditions must together be met: “Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.”

CCC §1858 *Grave matter* is specified by the Ten Commandments, corresponding to the answer of Jesus to the rich young man: “Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and your mother.” The gravity of sins is more or less great: murder is graver than theft. One must also take into account who is wronged: violence against parents is in itself graver than violence against a stranger. (CCC §2072; 2214)

CCC §1859 Mortal sin requires *full knowledge* and *complete consent*. It presupposes knowledge of the sinful character of the act, of its opposition to God's law. **It also implies a consent sufficiently deliberate to be a personal choice. Feigned ignorance and hardness of heart do not diminish, but rather increase, the voluntary character of a sin.** (CCC §1734)

The gravely wrong actions that my priest-student was referring to were actions that included full knowledge of the gravity of the sin but because of what appears to be “self-deception” denied that a “sufficiently deliberate personal choice” had been made. The example given by this priest would seem then to be a case of “feigned ignorance” that actually worsens the gravity of the sin. We will examine “feigned ignorance” later on in this essay. We will also see clearly that Scripture provides many cases where the hardness of heart that results in the rejection of Jesus’ teaching is clearly thought to be culpable.

Culpability

CCC §1860 goes on to state that:

Unintentional ignorance can diminish or even remove the imputability of a grave offense. **But no one is deemed to be ignorant of the principles of the moral law, which are written in the conscience of every man.** The promptings of feelings and passions can also diminish the voluntary and free character of the offense, as can external pressures or pathological disorders. Sin committed through malice, by deliberate choice of evil, is the gravest. (CCC §1735; 1767)

First let me acknowledge that there are clearly cases of inculpable ignorance regarding the commission of grave sins. For example, I have talked to young people who were shocked to discover that masturbation was considered to be a grave sin—so accepted has this become in our culture. I have also talked to married couples who were shocked to discover that contraception was considered to be a grave sin—so commonly accepted in our culture, and so little spoken of in our churches, has this become. And who can fully comprehend the horror of children who are exposed to grave forms of evil and even drawn into them at a very young age who certainly have very diminished culpability if any at all. It becomes understandable why some moral theologians have sometimes counseled that such apparently inculpable ignorance should not be disturbed by informing such people of the truth. I will argue later in this essay that this is not really a merciful approach to dealing with situations like this.

Also, it is important to note that “no one is deemed to be ignorant of the principles of the moral law which are written in the conscience of every man.” While the implications of the moral law for masturbation and contraception may not be immediately apparent to many, nevertheless the “grave matter” specified by the 10 commandments is held by the Church—and Scripture—to be given by God to every human conscience. We will examine briefly the foundation of this teaching in Romans 1 and 2. The CCC further addresses the question of culpable ignorance:

CCC §1791 This ignorance can often be imputed to personal responsibility. This is the case when a man “takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin.” (*Gaudium et Spes* §16) In such cases, the person is culpable for the evil he commits.

In my contact with many Catholics in many dioceses I have been astounded to discover how widespread disdain for Church teaching and the teaching of Scripture has become in the name of “being an adult and making my own decisions about what seems right to me” and how little concern is evidenced to “find out what is true and good.” After giving talks on some of the more challenging aspects of the teachings of Jesus I frequently hear such comments as these: “My Jesus would never say that!” or “That isn’t what I’ve heard Pope Francis says!” or “I’m supposed to follow my own conscience, and I feel fine about what I’m doing, and besides the Church has to change with the times!” I believe that such approaches cloak a troublesome lack of fear of the Lord, regard for the person of Jesus Christ, lack of a sincere desire to find the truth and submit to it, and foolish presumption about virtually universal salvation for everyone.

The second instance in which ignorance does not excuse is an ignorance that is the result of the habit of committing sin. Many people when they first commit an act of adultery, for instance, or who steal to support a drug habit, know perfectly well that they are sinning but over time, begin to be indifferent to the concept of sin and can even come to justify their actions. Their sinful habit has almost obscured their consciences. Since the obscuring is a result of their own sinful choices, their ignorance does not excuse them from culpability.

What the Catechism Teaches about Mortal Sin

CCC §1861 Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself. It results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God’s forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ’s kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back. However, although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God. (CCC §1742; 1033).²

Since only God can really know the conscience of a person and their degree of culpability, and since self-deception and hardness of heart and feigned ignorance are quite common, it would be foolish for anyone entrusted with the pastoral care of such persons to presume inculpability—just as it would be foolish to presume culpability. After a time of “pastoral accompaniment” we may or may not have some idea of the degree of culpability, but in every case when people are committing objectively gravely wrong acts they are harming themselves—and others if the acts involve others—and very well could be endangering their eternal salvation. This is why I am suggesting that the focus of our pastoral care should not be on determining culpability but calling people to turn away from their gravely sinful (even if not subjectively culpable) actions. I say this with the understanding that from time to time it is

important, particularly in the confessional to make some determination of culpability in order to discern appropriate penances or to assuage false guilt and scrupulosity.

It seems good here to underline the two important principles enunciated by this article of the CCC. First of all, the sins explicitly listed in Scripture of being of such gravity to exclude persons who commit them from the kingdom of God if they don't repent (and the adumbrations of these sins as discerned by the Church in the natural law and its subsequent moral reflection), are to be clearly understood and used as a criterion for judging the objective rightness or wrongness of our own and others' actions. But secondly, again based on the witness of Scripture and church teaching, only God in the last analysis can truly judge the degree of personal culpability involved in a particular person's actions, and determine the implications for the eternal consequences in question here. So, Pope Francis' famous declaration "Whom am I to judge?" is absolutely true as it pertains to ascertaining personal culpability, as it seems he intended, but absolutely untrue if used as it seems he clearly wasn't intending, to cast any doubt on the objective rightness or wrongness of particular actions. The case in question that was the subject matter of this famous quote seemed to be the case of someone who in his past perhaps had engaged in homosexual activity but who was now trying to live a morally good life. Pope Francis' statement was not intended to say that the previous homosexual acts were not gravely wrong and did not require full repentance along with a firm purpose to never commit them again.

Can There be a "sufficiently deliberate personal choice" Made on a Deeper Level than Full Consciousness?

Let's now look more deeply into what a "sufficiently deliberate personal choice" (a phrase we encountered in section 1859 of the Catechism) might actually look like. In my research into the teaching of Vatican II on *Lumen Gentium* 16 on how it may be possible for people who have not had a chance to hear the Gospel to assent nevertheless to the saving grace of Christ without even knowing his name, I discovered some interesting reflections on the capacity of human beings to make real personal assents – or rejections – to a light given by God, on a deeper than conscious level.³ These assents and rejections certainly seem to be reasonably described as "sufficiently deliberate to be a personal choice."

The Council itself does not precisely clarify how an assent to the saving grace of God without the explicit hearing of the Gospel can happen, but there is an interesting body of theological reflection that attempts to throw light on the question of how exactly it might be possible for someone who is inculpably ignorant⁴ of the Gospel to actually come to supernatural faith and charity without the "propositional clarity" of positive revelation. Karl Rahner points to the probability of there being more dimensions to human consciousness than we have traditionally understood.

There must be more dimensions to human consciousness in its knowing and free decision making, more foreground and background, more data, verbalized or not, accepted or repressed, than traditional theology has explicitly recognized.⁵

Two other thinkers, Jean-Guy Pagé⁷ and Charles Journet cite Jacques Maritain as one who has contributed to their understanding of how this might be possible. Journet posits two kinds of “lights” that come to human beings from God. One is “prophetic light” that illumines things that we must perceive for our salvation. The other is “sanctifying light” that calls us to assent to what is illumined in the prophetic light.⁷ Journet extensively quotes Maritain⁸ on how this process may possibly take place in a “pre-conceptual” manner among those who do not know the Gospel. Maritain himself bases his reflections on the teaching of St. Thomas (ST Ia-IIae, q. 89, a. 6) concerning the theological significance of the first human act of an unbaptized child.⁹ Maritain’s point, following Thomas, is that contained in that first moral act—if it is an act that chooses the good—there may be an embryonic or rudimentary response to a prophetic and sanctifying light given by God that may actually involve a supernatural faith that is salvific, although quite vulnerable and perhaps unstable if it does not come to consciousness.

With this pre-conceptual, pre-notional knowledge, through the will, of the “good which brings salvation,” of the “good by which I shall be saved,” we receive the least degree of prophetic light necessary in order that theological faith should be able to come into action and make the understanding, really, actually, supernaturally, assent to the mystery of the God who “exists,” and who “rewards those who try to find him.” [Based on Hebrews 11:6, the two foundational beliefs—*credibilia*—that must be present for salvation.]

But this is a provisional, unstable, dangerous state of faith, a state of childhood; and knowledge of the mysteries of salvation will require that it should leave the shadows, be perfected, reach an adult state, and find its first conceptual expression in the two basic “*credibilia*.”¹⁰

Étienne Hugueny, a French Dominican writing in the first third of the twentieth century, makes an even stronger point about the instability and fragility of such a first moral choice.

The good influences of the environment are unfortunately insufficient to prevent the falls and often the corruption of the will in formation; indeed, few there are who are able to resist the evil influences of the environment in which they are developing. It’s therefore common that the young unbeliever, in a pagan environment, will follow the inclination of his corrupt nature and the evil example of the environment where he lives, when the hour arrives for him to choose his primary orientation to his moral life. Avoiding therefore the call of God, the number of negative infidels [this refers to unbelievers who have not yet made a positive choice against God but are unbelievers because of the environment of unbelief in which they grow up and which they assent to] will grow, who by a first sin against God who presented himself to their reason, have placed an obstacle to interior illumination or to exterior revelation, through which God would have given them the gift of faith, bringing to perfection their first religious idea.¹¹

While the moral teaching of the Church has been built up from Scripture sometimes it takes twists and turns that do not adequately reflect some of the important truths revealed in Scripture. A particular cultural epoch might not be sensitized to perceiving certain truths because of prevailing currents of thoughts. Our contemporary culture has often been characterized as a culture that avoids

accountability by viewing everyone as a victim and holding no one to be really responsible. The culture in which the Church lives at any given time of her journey cannot help but to affect her understanding to some degree. Just as Vatican II spoke of the need to recognize a “hierarchy of truths” without denying the importance of any truth, so too it could be useful to look at Scripture to see if what appears to be the current view on the difficulty of committing a mortal sin adequately reflects the teaching and witness of Scripture.

The Witness of Scripture

The overall sense one gets from the Old Testament is that sin is punished—most often in a way that seems severe—and yet God is always ready to take his people back and show them compassion if they repent. Another recurring theme of the Old Testament is that when human beings culpably sin they have a strong tendency to deny responsibility. The blame shifting in the garden where Eve shifts the blame to the serpent and Adam blames both the woman and the Lord for his participation in the grave sin of disobedience and rebellion is one primary example. God does not accept their excuses or claims of not being culpable and they (and all of humanity) suffer the very painful consequences. Moses is punished for striking the rock twice, an expression of distrust in the word of the Lord, and as a consequence is forbidden to enter the Promised Land. Saul, among other failures, thinks he has a better idea than the Lord and disobeys in keeping some of the spoils of war and loses the kingship. David, specially chosen by the Lord, does great evil by committing adultery and murder and only repents when confronted by Nathan. While David is forgiven because of his sincere repentance and penance, the punishment is nevertheless severe; the death of the child and endless disunity and rebellion in his own household.

The story of Susanna and the unjust judges in the Book of Daniel portrays in striking manner the corruption of conscience that can occur as one sin leads to another. The injustice of the judges’ court rulings, perhaps motivated by greed, forms part of a complex of sins, involving lust and false witness, and leads ultimately to their undoing and their own deaths as punishment for their sins. I will put in bold type parts of the text that are particularly relevant to our considerations:

“They began to lust for her. **They suppressed their consciences; they would not allow their eyes to look to heaven, and did not keep in mind just judgments**” (Dan 13: 8-9). This is clearly portrayed as a culpable giving in to lust and the willful suppression of their knowledge of “just judgments,” with their death as the punishment.

The New Testament tells us that these examples, and many more, are preserved in Scripture for us as a warning:

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. (1 Cor 10: 1-12, RSV)

It is unfortunately common for many people today to dismiss the Old Testament as outmoded in some of its essential moral teaching, when in fact, it is solemnly reaffirmed in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles and faithfully transmitted to this day in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Putting Christ to the test by flagrantly dismissing his teaching in the area of sexual morality is indeed an incredibly foolish thing to do. This is a mocking of God that will inevitably have severe consequences. Sexual morality is punished in two ways, in the wretched consequences in this life—to which people enmeshed in these sins are often blinded—and, if unrepented, in the loss of eternal life.

Make no mistake: God is not mocked, for a person will reap only what he sows, because the one who sows for his flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows for the spirit will reap eternal life from the spirit. Let us not grow tired in doing good, for in due time we shall reap our harvest, if we do not give up. (Gal 6:7-9)

Paul's Letter to the Romans also talks about a culpable suppression of the truth that leads to every kind of disorder with very dire consequences:

The wrath of God is indeed being revealed from heaven against every impiety and wickedness of those who suppress the truth by their wickedness. For what can be known about God is evident to them, because God made it evident to them . . . (Rom 1:18-19)

This is why, Paul continues:

God handed them over to impurity through the lusts of their hearts for the mutual degradation of their bodies. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and revered and worshiped the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. Therefore, God handed them over to degrading passions. Their females exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the males likewise gave up natural relations with females and burned with lust for one another. Males did shameful things with males and thus received in their own persons the due penalty for their perversity. (Rom 1:24-27)

It's important to note how culpability is explicitly attributed to those spoken about in Romans 1. Indeed, what we have here is a relentless indictment of culpability. Similar to the case of Susanna and the elders who gave in to disordered desires and culpably suppressed the truth, Romans 1 asserts that God has revealed himself in some perceptible fashion to every human being and so no one is without

culpability if this revelation is ignored or suppressed or actually rejected in favor of sinful actions. The sign of their rejection of the truth revealed by God and their refusal to worship him is their addiction to immoral behavior, characterized by homosexual activity and the approval in others of these behaviors as well as many other wicked behaviors. Satan, the rebellious one whose very identity is formed by rejecting the authority of God, desires to be worshipped and he is working in our culture to require all to bow down to the purported “goodness” of these wicked behaviors. Those who place themselves above the authority of God and his revelation desperately want to be affirmed in their behavior and won’t rest until they compel everyone to do so. The Roman emperors required this submission of the early Christians from time to time and it produced thousands of Christian martyrs. There is a tremendous pressure on the Church today and all her members and ministers to blur the truth about these matters to avoid a confrontation with a culture that will not rest until they label us “enemies of the state, enemies of equality, haters.”

Romans 1 communicates the relentless indictment of the culpable suppression of the truth, feigned ignorance and hardness of heart that the CCC warns about, and to which the priest-student in my class shockingly called to our attention. Romans 2 likewise declares that people will be judged on the basis of the light that they have been given. It is the clear teaching of the Church throughout the ages, based in Scripture, that light is given to every human being and how they respond to that light determines their eternal destinies. This is a basis for what the Catechism asserts in §1860:

But no one is deemed to be ignorant of the principles of the moral law, which are written in the conscience of every man.

As familiar as this text from Romans may be it is well worth reflecting on carefully as it is relevant to these considerations on culpability.

By your stubbornness and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself for the day of wrath and revelation of the just judgment of God, who will repay everyone according to his works: eternal life to those who seek glory, honor, and immortality through perseverance in good works, but wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness. (Rom 2:5-8)

It is important not to overlook in the texts above the supreme importance of obedience to the light that God gives to everyone, to the witness of conscience, to the universal knowability of the natural law and to the explicit Word of God. While obedience is a virtue that is widely mocked in our culture in the name of a personal freedom that often leads to deep bondage and blindness it is essential for accessing the mercy of God. God’s mercy is profound but it must be gratefully received with faith and responded to with repentance and lived out in obedience to the revelation of God.

Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. (Heb 5:8-9);
Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever disobeys the Son, will not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him. (Jn 3:36);

We are witnesses of these things, as is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him. (Acts 5:32)

I think it is fair to say that the emphasis of the Bible is not on determining culpability or degrees of culpability but on clearly calling everyone to a life of obedience to God. The focus is on teaching and demonstrating that committing grave sin is severely punished both in this life and in the life to come. I would go even further and suggest that the thrust of Scripture in both the OT and New Testament is to presume widespread culpability along with widespread self-deception, and the rationalizing, blame shifting, and justification for such sins, that is the tendency of fallen human beings. Not at all unlike the dynamic that my priest-student was claiming was operative in himself and in his fellow human beings when they deceived themselves into thinking that they weren't really giving a sufficiently deliberate personal assent to the sin. The sobering declaration in the verse above – “wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness” – certainly seems to indicate that “giving in” to selfish, lustful, rebellious desires – risks eternal damnation if not repented from before death. The culpable suppression of the truth and of conscience mentioned in the story of Susanna and in Romans 1 would seem to be an easy enough thing to do when tempted by pride, lust, greed or rebellion – as we frequently are.

Where there is some acknowledgement of lessened culpability in the Scripture the actual texts can sometimes be disconcerting. Think, for example, of how “Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.” (Lk 12:45-48). Jesus makes clear that truly invincible ignorance is excusable but now that God has clearly revealed his will in Jesus those who hear the teaching of Jesus are without excuse: “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin.” (Jn 15:22). And we hear Paul preach to the Athenians how, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31).

But perhaps the supreme moment comes with Jesus himself on the cross recognizing that some of those participating in the crucifixion didn't realize what they were doing. Some may have realized they were participating in an unjust action, but not have realized they were crucifying the Son of God. “And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.’” (Lk 23:34) To what extent they eventually recognized their need for forgiveness and accepted it the Gospel is silent. To what extent they knew they were participating in an unjust execution but didn't know who it was who was being executed the Gospel is silent. God never delights in the death of the evil-doer, always extends forgiveness and mercy, but mercy and forgiveness need to be humbly received in order to do their work of justification and sanctification in the soul of a repentant believer.¹²

Deliberate Unbelief

We sometimes forget that unbelief—not believing the testimony of God Himself in the person of Jesus—Is one of the gravest of sins revealed in the Scriptures. As Fr. Francis Martin puts it:

The root sin of the world is the refusal to believe in Jesus and the place he holds next to the Father as the revelation of the Father. The root sin is to reject the truth.

He then quotes John 3:36:

Whoever believes in the son has eternal life, Whoever disobeys the son will not see life but must endure God's wrath.¹³

Culpable unbelief and the heart's choice to take pleasure in immorality while a continuing theme of Scripture is particularly underlined as the cause for those who will perish in the deception of the last days. Deception and self-deception often work together. The external deception of the evil one and his lies, working directly in the mind and heart of the individual or through the culture of the world, are found to be attractive to the selfish desires of the flesh, and are yielded to with "sufficiently deliberate" personal assent to become culpable self-deception.

It is also clear from the regular warnings of Jesus and the apostles against false teachers and prophets that deception within the thought environment of the Church must be guarded against. At one point Scripture indicates that the "doctrines of demons" will be infiltrated into the Church by "plausible liars." Who can deny that just as in the early church we are again encountering such demonic lies that are leading many to rebel against God and engage in immorality? So many of the points we have already made are repeated again, now in the context of the last days and the final separation of the human race. This is the time when the division will become apparent between those who love God and those who disdain him, when the city of God and the city of man constructed against God will be separated for all eternity.

Augustine's Insights Into Culpability

The CCC notes that there are various factors in a person's life that may reduce culpability. It states in CCC §1860:

The promptings of feelings and passions can also diminish the voluntary and free character of the offense, as can external pressures or pathological disorders.

Even when culpability is greatly lessened in a person's current state of "addiction" though we need to remember the sobering insight of St. Augustine. Augustine acknowledges that by the time he was convinced of the truth of the faith and wanted to live in accordance with it he was actually a slave of sexual sin and not able to get free by his own will-power alone. He was "addicted" in the language of today. Some might say today that because of the habit of sin he was not fully culpable for repeated sinning. Yet in his remarkable honesty and deep perception of the tangled workings of the human soul he points out that he was responsible for getting to the point of addiction or slavery by a repeated number of decisions to sin made over a period of time that were freely chosen. In other words, he was culpable for having gotten to the point of helplessness but now truly was helpless in significant ways.

But over a long period of time and step by step the Lord took his desire for knowing and following him as the foundation for leading him out of his addiction step by step until one day in an infusion of grace he was given the opportunity to step free from his sin, and he did. It is well worth considering at some length his own words. We have seen previously how the CCC §1791 points out how conscience can gradually and culpably be deadened through the repeated decisions to commit sin.

I sighed after such freedom [the freedom of Victorinus to turn away from it all] but was bound not by an iron imposed by anyone else but by the iron of my own choice. The enemy had a grip on my will and so made a chain for me to hold me a prisoner. The consequence of a distorted will is passion. By servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. . . . But I was responsible for the fact that habit had become so embattled against me, for it was with my consent that I came to the place in which I did not wish to be.¹⁴

In this way I understood through my own experience what I had read, how “the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh” (Gal. 5:17). I was split between them, but more of me was in that which I approved in myself than in that which I disapproved. . . . Though at every point you showed that what you were saying was true, yet I, convinced by that truth, had no answer to give you except merely slow and sleepy words: “At once”—“But presently”—“Just a little longer, please.” But “At once, at once” never came to the point of decision, and “Just a little longer, please” went on and on for a long while. . . . The law of sin is the violence of habit by which even the unwilling mind is dragged down and held, as it deserves to be, since by its own choice it slipped into the habit. “Wretched man that I was, who would deliver me from this body of death other than your grace through Jesus Christ our Lord?” (Rom. 7:24-5).¹⁵

Augustine also tells us how God’s grace gratuitously came to him in his genuine helplessness, and describes the means that God used to bring him to the final steps of conversion and liberation.

Lord, my helper and redeemer, I will now tell the story, and confess to your name, of the way in which you delivered me from the chain of sexual desire, by which I was tightly bound, and from the slavery of worldly affairs. I went about my usual routine in a state of mental anxiety.¹⁶ This was the story Ponticianus told. But while he was speaking, Lord, you turned my attention back to myself. . . . And I looked and was appalled. . . . You thrust me before my own eyes so that I should discover my iniquity and hate it. I had known it, but deceived myself, refused to admit it, and pushed it out of my mind. But at that moment the more ardent my affection for those young men of whom I was hearing, who for the soul’s health had given themselves wholly to you for healing, the more was the detestation and hatred I felt for myself in comparison with them. Many years of my life had passed by—about twelve—since in my nineteenth year I had read Cicero’s *Hortensius*, and had been stirred to a zeal for wisdom. . . . But I was an unhappy young man, wretched as at the beginning of my adolescence when I prayed you for chastity and said: “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.” I was afraid

you might hear my prayer quickly, and that you might too rapidly heal me of the disease of lust which I preferred to satisfy rather than suppress.¹⁷

As our class studied Augustine's remarkable analysis of deception and self-deception, of bondage and freedom, we all came to understand with greater clarity what the courageous priest/student articulated about the self-deception that can so often be involved in choosing sin at a deeper than conscious level, but nevertheless truly choosing it. It is time though to draw some conclusions from these reflections that can usefully contribute to a more scripturally adequate "hierarchy of truths" in our thinking and practice concerning serious sin.

Pastoral Conclusions

1. The overall thrust of the Bible is to identify what grave sin is and call us to avoid it or repent of it lest we perish. We need to recover a profounder understanding of the gravity of grave sins – their eternal consequences if not repented of before death – which is sometimes masked by now referring to grave sin as "irregular situations."¹⁸
2. Very few of us are ever in a situation where we actually need to determine the degree of subjective culpability in someone else's soul, or even in our own. When those few occasions may occur – for example, in the case of what appears to be truly inculpable ignorance – the pastoral response needs to be similar. We need to encourage the person to discover the truth and begin to live it as best they can, assisted by grace, the wisdom of the Church, and continuing pastoral care. It must be said though that sometimes when people discover that something they have been doing is gravely wrong they are capable of stopping immediately.
3. The general presumption in Scripture is that those who do gravely wrong things are very often culpable.
4. There is an acknowledgement in Scripture that culpability can be reduced by truly invincible ignorance but the very act of doing something wrong is nevertheless damaging to the human person(s) engaging in such actions and often carries in its wake the natural consequences of disobeying the law of God, as well as a "lighter" punishment mentioned in Lk 12:45-48. Of course, there is a significant difference in the consequences of grave (mortal) and less grave (venial) sin.
5. There is an abundant witness in Scripture to the widespread rejection of the truth and denial of moral responsibility in the response to the preaching and teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. Those who reject the witness of Jesus and the Apostles are most often deemed culpable for their rejection and therefore are said to be on their way to perishing, perdition.
6. There is a massive witness in Scripture to the deviousness of the human heart in justifying itself and denying wrong doing, rationalizing sin, culpably suppressing the truth, "feigning ignorance," "hardness of heart," "preferring the darkness."
7. Doing objectively wrong acts even when personal culpability is lessened because of various factors nevertheless wound the human person and others who may be affected by their sin and truly compassionate pastoral care, preaching and teaching, must focus on leading people to a life of holiness, not in determining personal culpability, or excusing wrong-doing. It is not merciful to "not trouble the consciences" of those doing gravely wrong actions. Gravely wrong actions wound the human person even if they are being done in inculpable ignorance.

The Church as a Field Hospital

But, some may ask, what about Pope Francis' emphasis on the church as a "field hospital for the wounded," and the need to be a "welcoming" Church, a church of mercy, and to "accompany" people in the messy complexity of their lives and relationships? The purpose of a field hospital is to bring

healing and restore the patients to active engagement in the life and mission of the Church, not to confirm them in a wounded state. The purpose of “welcoming” people to the Church is to welcome them to an encounter with the person of Christ, his truth, love, and holiness, and draw them to deep faith, repentance, conversion and to embrace their baptismal identity as “missionary disciples.” As Cardinal Dolan said on one occasion, “Everyone is welcome but not anything goes!”

To accompany people is to help people with compassion and patience to see clearly their own situations in light of the Gospel and to take steps to bring them to true friendship with Christ which essentially includes faithfulness to his teaching in all its dimensions.

It is not merciful to keep from people the truth about Jesus, his teaching, and their own situations. It is not merciful to allow people to deceive themselves or be deceived and not challenge the false wisdom of the world, the flesh and the devil which envelops the culture today.

If we are not calling people to take up their cross and die to the world, the flesh and the allurements of the devil, we are not preaching the true gospel. Those who preach and teach will be held to a higher standard and judged on their fidelity to delivering the “whole counsel of God.”

Only God can judge the culpability of the human heart. Our job is to call people to salvation, to righteousness, to repentance, to a life of holiness and mission. The focus of our ministry needs to be not on determining culpability but leading to holiness. Truly, only God can judge. The time between the first and second comings of Jesus is the time to focus on proclaiming the gracious offer of mercy and forgiveness, won for us at such a price, calling all men and women everywhere to faith, repentance and conversion. Our primary mission is not to determine culpability but to call to repentance. It is important we be about the master’s business.

Endnotes

1. “Cupich: Pope’s move a ‘game changer’ – document on marriage, family gives priests pastoral license.” April 10, 2017, The Chicago Tribune. Also on line at: Cupich: Pope’s document on sex, marriage, family life a ‘game changer’ chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-pope-catholics-divorce-met-20160408-story.html
2. Catholic Church. (2000). *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd Ed., pp. 455–456). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.
3. The following section is taken directly from pp. 51-52 of my book, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).
4. See Stephen Bullivant, “*Sine Culpa?* Vatican II and Inculpable Ignorance,” in *Theological Studies*, vol. 72, no. 1 (March 2011): 70-86, for a recent consideration of how inculpable ignorance may apply to contemporary unbelievers.

5. Karl Rahner, "Forgotten Dogmatic Initiatives of The Second Vatican Council," *TI*, vol. XXII, 9, 99.
6. Jean-Guy Pagé, *Qui Est L'église? Le Peuple De Dieu*, vol. 3 of 3 (Montréal: Les Éditions Bellarmin, 1979), 63-65.
7. Charles Journet, *What is Dogma?* (New York: Hawthorn, 1964), 15.
8. Jacques Maritain, "La Dialectique Immanente du Premier Acte de Liberté," in *Raison et Raisons* (Paris: 1947), 131-156. Also in translation: *The Range of Reason* (New York: Scribner, 1952), 66-85 (cited in Journet, 130, ff).
9. See Thomas O'Meara, "The Presence of Grace Outside Evangelization, Baptism and Church in Thomas Aquinas' Theology," in *That Others may Know and Love—Essays in Honor of Zachary Hayes OFM*, ed. Michael F. Cusato and F. Edward Coughlin (New York: The Franciscan Institute, 1997), 119-124, for a useful discussion of this concept in Aquinas. Riccardo Lombardi, in *The Salvation of the Unbeliever* (London: Burns & Oates, 1956), provides a comprehensive study of the question of what constitutes saving faith and how, in various situations, it might be possible for it to come into existence. Lombardi's work particularly focuses on the theological works in Latin and Italian that explored this question before Vatican II.
10. Journet, 35.
11. Étienne Huguency, "Le scandale édifiant d'une exposition missionnaire," in *Revue Thomiste*, No. 76 (1933): 217-42, and No. 78-79 (1933): 533-67. The citation is on page 562. This treatment of choice on a deeper than conscious level first appeared in an essay of mine, "Doctrinal Clarity for the New Evangelization: The Importance of Lumen Gentium 16" published in the *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly*, v. 23, #3, Fall 2011, pp.9-15.
12. For a treatment of some misunderstandings about the meaning of mercy see my book. *The Urgency of the New Evangelization: Answering the Call* (Huntington, IN: OSV, 2013), 75-95.
13. Francis Martin, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me: The role of the Holy Spirit in the Work of Evangelization," in *The New Evangelization: Overcoming the Obstacles*, ed. Steven Boguslawski and Ralph Martin (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 72-73. See also 74-76.
14. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), bk. VIII, nos. 10-11, p 140.
15. *Ibid.*, bk VIII, nos. 11, 12, pp. 140-141.
16. *Ibid.*, bk VIII, no. 13, p. 141.

17. Ibid., bk VIII, nos. 16,17, pp.144-145.

18. A more casual approach to what is objectively grave sin is linked I believe to a underlying unbelief in what the Word of God and the Church teach about the reality of the final judgment and the reality of heaven and hell. For a thorough analysis of this issue see, Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New*

Evangelization (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).