

## GAMALIEL

(Questions should be addressed to Gamaliel, c/o the Editor, THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, Hawkesyard Priory, Rugeley, Staffs.)

Q. I am puzzled by the notion of venial sin. It does not cut the sinner off from God, it does not destroy grace or charity in his soul; it does not seem to be sin at all, properly speaking. If a person commits a venial sin deliberately, and dies without repenting of it, the guilt of this sin, apparently, is removed in purgatory; and yet we are told there can be no change in the state of a soul in purgatory. So how can its guilt be removed there? D.C.

A. You have really answered the first part of your difficulty yourself. Venial sin is *not* sin, properly speaking. Or at least the word 'sin' does not mean the same thing exactly in the two phrases 'mortal sin' and 'venial sin'—let alone in the phrase 'original sin'; but that is another question.

Sin is defined by St Thomas as a disordered human act, that is to say as a wilful act which being against the eternal law of God is not directed to the proper end of all good human acts, which is God. Now this definition only really fits mortal sin, which is a disordered act without qualification, because it involves a turning away from God as well as a turning towards something unlawful. The picture is of human life, and therefore human activities, all pointing in and moving along a definite direction, all aimed at God as at a goal or mark. When a person commits a mortal sin it is as though he turns away and drives off in the wrong direction—right off the course. Now what keeps us on course, pointing in the right direction, is charity, the love of God. A mortal sin involves a breach of charity, and so produces what is, as far as *we* are concerned, an irreparable, irretrievable fault, because it destroys the very essence and germ of right order in our lives, which is the love of God. When we commit a mortal sin we throw overboard something we cannot recover for ourselves, which only God can restore to us, by a free act of his grace.

But a venial sin does not involve us in driving off in the wrong direction, off course, away from God. There is no destruction of charity; such a sin is therefore not a disordered act without

qualification, is not indeed sin in the full sense at all. We are still moving in the right direction, but we are having a little engine trouble on the way. We are still aiming at the right end, but we are muffing the means more or less badly. To put it diagrammatically:

Mortal sin—you give up the journey altogether and wander off on your own;

Venial sin—you dilly-dally on the way;

Mortal sin—a radical destruction of *charity*, which only God can restore;

Venial sin—a defect of *prudence*, that we have the means to put right ourselves.

When we come to the second part of your difficulty, the removal of guilt in purgatory, we must again distinguish, for the word 'guilt' in English is used to express more than one thing. In its proper meaning, I think, it is the equivalent of the Latin *reatus*, which means liability to punishment. When the Sanhedrin condemned our Lord, they said, in the Latin Vulgate, *Reus est mortis*, literally 'He is guilty of death', i.e. he is liable to the death penalty. Well, a venial sin incurs the guilt of punishment in this sense (not of eternal punishment, of course), and this guilt is removed in purgatory simply by the infliction of the punishment due. Once you have done your stretch, or received remission, you cease to be liable. I think it is worth noting in passing the distinction between punishment in the strictest sense, which is totally against the will of the punished, and what St Thomas calls 'punishment to make amends', which is voluntary in the sense that it is undertaken spontaneously or at least borne willingly. The punishments of purgatory are in this sense voluntary. And this is the only sort of punishment for which venial sins can incur guilt or liability, because it would be inconsistent with charity and a state of grace (which the venial sinner still enjoys) to rebel against divine punishment.

But the word 'guilt' is also used, more commonly though perhaps less properly, to mean responsibility for the crime rather than liability to the punishment; responsibility, too, in the very strong sense of involving 'a stain on the character', what the Latin calls *macula peccati*, the tarnish of sin. It is guilt in this sense of a stain on the character that is the characteristic state of a soul in mortal sin. It implies a habitual state of sin, which is opposed to

the state of grace. Venial sin then, since it is not opposed to the state of grace, does not incur guilt in this sense at all, and so there is no question of guilt in this sense being removed in purgatory, or of any change in the state of soul. All venial sin does to the cleanness of soul which is the privilege of a state of grace, is to diminish to some extent its actual brilliance or shining, without its being sullied, or incurring a stain on its character.

Finally, a word on *unrepented* venial sin. Since venial sin is not sin in the strict sense at all, but only comparatively so (it is not, like mortal sin, an act *against* God's law but *aside from* God's law, beside the point, irrelevant), it follows that it cannot be repented of in the strict sense. It does not have to be abhorred and detested and renounced as mortal sins do—indeed it is simply incapable of being so regarded. Charity does not have to be restored, since it has not been lost, by a turning back to God, who has not been turned away from. All that is required is that the imprudence involved in a venial sin should be admitted and regretted. I would say that such admission and regret, that is to say the sort of repentance which is proper to a venial sin, is implicit in the state of grace and charity which the venial sinner enjoys, even while he is committing his sin. In the very act of committing his peccadillo the venial sinner is being implicitly sorry for it, in virtue of his still loving God above all things. If this repentance never becomes explicit this side of the grave, it must do so immediately after death, for the soul in purgatory is by definition willingly enduring pains which it recognizes as just, and therefore it must be acknowledging and regretting the peccadilloes that incurred them.

So there is no change in the state of the soul or in the direction of its will in purgatory—only a painful actualization to the full of the habit of charity, the untarnished, guiltless, habit of charity, with which it is clothed already.