

# ROMAN CATHOLICISM

## In the Light of Scripture

by

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### CHAPTER NINE

#### SIN

ACCORDING TO ROMAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY sins are of two kinds: mortal and venial.

Mortal sins make the offender an enemy of God, and condemn him to the penalty of hell fire. Venial sins on the contrary, do not make a man an enemy of God, nor do they involve him in eternal damnation. As the name venial indicates, they are pardonable. Mortal sins can only be absolved by the priest after confession and the performance of prescribed penances. Venial sins do not require confession as a thing of necessity, though it is recommended as being laudable and safe.

*There is no absolute necessity to go to confession, except in cases of grave sin, but it is a laudable and customary practice to do so, as a safer preparation for Communion, and also to confess all sins that the soul is conscious of, without drawing a hard and fast distinction between graver and lighter sins. What the Catholic Church Is and What It Teaches, p. 24; Catholic Truth Society.*

It may not be a very difficult task for the devout Catholic who makes frequent confession to remember all the conscious sins and failures of a short period of time, but for the average man who only goes to confessional more occasionally, it is obviously impossible, and he must as it were himself take stock of the past, select those sins which he thinks may be mortal, and confess them to the priest, leaving what he considers to be the more trifling and therefore venial sins to be dealt with by the easier way of prayers, fasting, good works, etc., or else suffer for them in purgatory.

But where does the boundary between mortal and venial sin lie? He needs guidance, and Rome provides it.

*Three things are required to make a mortal sin: 1, grave matter; 2, full knowledge; 3, full consent*

*1. Grave matter. The sinful thought, word, deed, or omission must be of grave importance, e.g., injury of our neighbor's character in a serious matter, stealing a large sum, or a small sum from a poor man.*

*2. Full knowledge. Not done by mistake or before we knew clearly what we were about. The mind must realize the sinfulness of the act at the time it was done.*

*3. Full consent. The will must deliberately agree to the temptation, whether of thought, word, or deed. If there was not full knowledge or consent, but hesitation in rejecting the temptation, the sin was venial; the soul was injured, but not killed.—What Catholics Believe, p. 14; Catholic Truth Society.*

On the surface this seems to be fairly clear—but is it? The definitions are sadly indefinite to one who really wants to know how he stands in the matter of his sins. What constitutes a “serious matter”? I have my ideas, and you have yours, but we have to do with God. His standards and not ours are what count. What is a “large amount,” large enough to make a mortal sin that will send me to Hell? What is “a poor man” and how much may I steal from him without having to go to Hell? What is “full knowledge”?

The Apostle Paul in his unconverted days had cruelly persecuted the church, shutting up many of the saints in prison, and when they were to be put to death, giving his voice against them. Worse even than that, perhaps, he had compelled some of them to deny their Lord and to blaspheme His name. But he told Agrippa, “**I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth**” (Acts 26:9). He certainly did not have “full knowledge.” Indeed, in I Timothy 1:13 he says, “**I did it ignorantly in unbelief.**” Yet he does not call his sin venial, but calls himself “**the chief of sinners**” (I Timothy 1:15).

What about the first sin recorded in the Bible, and indeed the first sin committed by human kind? Was the fruit wrongfully taken from the God of all the earth intrinsically equivalent to “a large sum, or a small sum from a poor man”? Was there full knowledge? In I Timothy 2:14, we read, “**the woman being deceived was in the transgression.**” Was there full consent without hesitation? No. There was attempted resistance at first, though it was soon overborne by the tempter. He assured her the sin would not be mortal, but God’s Word stood, “**In the day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die**” (Genesis 2:17).

It was not the triviality or otherwise of the outward trappings which were the true measure of the sin, but the fact of disobedience and turning away from God.

One man may be like him who came to Jesus “**full of leprosy,**” a terrible and loathsome sight, another may have but a small area of flesh insensible to touch, but the disease is the same, and its outworking is death in both cases. So with sin. “**Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death**” (James 1:15).

Conscience is no sure guide by which to judge ourselves, for the effect of sin is to deaden the voice of conscience. David asked, “**Who can understand his errors?**” (Psalm 19:12).

Solomon his son, famous among men of all time for his wisdom, said: “**He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool**” (Proverbs 28:26).

God, speaking by the mouth of Jeremiah, says: “**The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?**” And then He answers His own question: “**I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins [motives], even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings**” (Jeremiah 17:9, 10).

In the Old Testament (Ezekiel 18:20) we read, “**The soul that sinneth, it shall die.**” The New Testament, with its fuller revelation of the love of God in Christ, does not whittle down or modify that solemn statement, but confirms it with something equally stern and uncompromising: “**The wages of sin is death**” (Romans 6:23). There is no qualifying adjective. It does not say, “the wages of mortal sin is death,” for death is the wages of all sin.

But thank God for the Gospel!

**But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us** (Romans 5:8).

**The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin (I John 1:7).**

**If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (I John 1:9).**

What no priestly absolution or accumulated merit can accomplish, Christ our Saviour does for us by His precious blood.

**~ end of chapter 9 ~**

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