

Having explained the law of God and the different Commandments which it includes, we will now consider what constitutes the violation of that law, or sin.

The term sin is used sometimes for the act, sometimes for the state of sin. The act of sin is the transitory action by which God is offended; the state of sin the permanent condition of the soul of him who has offended God. That soul remains guilty, defiled, until the sin be remitted. It is of the act of sin that we are especially to speak.

You have long since been taught, my brethren, that sin is any thought, word, deed, or omission contrary to the law of God. By the law of God is here meant, not only the Commandments of the Decalogue, but every precept which emanates from a legitimate authority, and binds in conscience as the Commandments of God.

Sin is contrary to the law of God: it is therefore a disobedience, a resistance to God and His holy law. Sin is also called a transgression of the divine law, but a voluntary transgression; that is to say, a transgression freely willed, freely accepted by the will. This free acceptance of the will, by which an act is said to be voluntary, constitutes, strictly speaking, sin, which is in its nature an irregularity of the will, a wicked determination. The will, says St. Thomas, is the principle of sin; hence the maxim, the will has sinned, the will must repent.

It follows therefore that three conditions are necessary to constitute a sin; advertence, liberty, and consent.

1. There must be advertence; that is, the mind must be cognizant of the malice of the action. What if this be wanting? then we are said to be inadvertent. Inadvertence exculpates us, for example, when we commit a fault through ignorance or inattention. It would not, however, excuse us from sin, if the cause of our ignorance or inattention is culpable. For example, he who is ignorant of what he is in duty bound to know, and who, by reason of this ignorance, does what is forbidden, is truly guilty before God; likewise he who, neglecting to reflect or to keep a watch over himself, commits through this negligence transgressions of the law is guilty of sin.

2. There must be liberty; that is, the will must be free to do the act or not. We do not commit a formal sin when this liberty is wanting, as is the case when we are sleeping, and as may also happen in a sudden frenzy of passion which disturbs or dethrones for the time being our reason.

3. There must be consent; that is, the free act of the will accepting, directly or indirectly, the forbidden object which is presented to it: an acceptance which does not necessarily imply the formal intention of committing a sin or of offending the Divine Majesty.

If these three conditions, namely, advertence, liberty, and consent, are present when we transgress a law, then the transgression is voluntary, there is sin, and we are culpable.

Alas! who has not sinned ? who must not strike his breast ? We all, my brethren, more or less, have had the misfortune to offend God; let us all, with a humble and contrite heart, ask pardon of Him of our past faults, and the grace of never offending Him in the future.