

Virtue and Salvation

6/11/12

In an earlier essay (“On Sin and Redemption, Again,” *Catholic Questions*), we identified two states of sin. We recognized that sin is objectively a behavior that violates or disobeys the Law of God. God commands or enjoins us against one sort of behavior, and we act in a way other than what is commanded or enjoined. In doing so, we dismiss the Will of God and prefer instead to act according to our own will or desire.

We called this kind of behavior *active sin*. That is, this concept of sin points to the sinful action, whether that action occurs in the exterior, physical world (actions such as murder, adultery, theft, lying, and so on) or in the interior, psycho/spiritual world (actions such as idolatry, covetousness, revenge, and so on.)

We also recognized that sinful actions have a subjective dimension. Sinful actions not only dismiss or disobey the Will of God; they also result in certain interior spiritual conditions. One such condition is a felt separation from God, the source of well-being. This sense of separation—of spiritual illness—is often accompanied by feelings of regret, sorrow, remorse, misery, guilt, hopelessness and the like. Or on the other hand, the sinful action may produce in the sinner a sense of freedom or release from the perceived shackles of Divine Ordinance. This sense of liberation may be accompanied by feelings of joy, celebration, pride, self-confidence, or power, as the sinner discovers his center in himself.

These spiritual responses to performing sinful actions are enduring within the spiritual life of the sinner. They are the spiritual state which follows as a consequence of the sinful action. The term used here for this condition of heart is *stative sin*—the state or condition of being “in sin.”

Stative sin is of two sorts, analogous to the two states of active sin described above. In the first case, stative sin is a *recognition* of one’s sin. This recognition is accompanied by a sense of burden—the on-going spiritual and emotional burden of the sin: the basic sense of loss or illness or yearning for restoration of union with God.

In the second case, stative sin is a *rebellion* against the Will of God and a consequent assertion of pride and self-willfulness. This state of rebelliousness endures in the sinner, at least until the sinner is successful in blotting out all recognition of the presence of God in his awareness.

And so, the term *sin* can refer to the sinful action itself (*active sin*) and /or to the resulting spiritual condition of “the burden of sin” (*stative sin*). The chief characteristic of active sin is that, once performed, the sinful action is irrevocable. It cannot be undone. A vicious word cannot be taken back. A dead thing cannot be revived. The universe is changed forever by every active sin.

The chief characteristic of stative sin is that the burden of sin is on-going. One remains in the subjective state of felt separation from God until one finds release from the condition of separation, that is, until one experiences forgiveness and reconciliation. This process of reunion with God involves the conscious recognition of one's sin, and then contrition—consciousness of having broken one's peaceful relationship with God by one's sin, and the desire to re-establish it.

In addition, this process of contrition must be preceded by an action of grace. God must instill in the sinner's spirit the desire and the energy or the motive force to repent his sin and undergo contrition. As Psalm 118 puts it, God must reach his hand down from heaven and pull the sinner from the mighty waters of ensnarement in sin (that is, stative sin.) The sinner is helpless to rescue himself from his separation from God. This action of grace on God's part is called *redemption* or *salvation*. (Like the term *sin*, the term *salvation* itself has two meanings. There is *active salvation*, which we have just described, and then there is the resultant on-going condition of union with God which we might call *stative salvation*, on the analogy with active and stative sin.)

We must make clear that this action of grace is not a decision on God's part to grant forgiveness to the sinner. The continual extension or donation of forgiveness is the *nature* of God ("God is love" 1 Jn.) God forgives us by his nature. He cannot do otherwise. And so, the action of grace which is called *redemption* or *active salvation* is not an offering of forgiveness. God continuously offers us forgiveness. Rather, the redemptive action of grace is an offer of release from stative sin. It is an offer of release from the burden of one's sin.

We can re-examine these ideas from another viewpoint. The sinful action has already been done. It cannot be revoked. The universe has absorbed the sinful action, has been conditioned by it, and has moved on. The objective consequences of the sinful action play out according to the law of cause and effect.

Redemption, then, has nothing to do with nullifying or erasing active sin. Rather, redemption targets stative sin. It offers release from the burden of sin and restoration of the peaceful and harmonious relationship between the sinner and God.

When the Scriptures speak of our being "saved from sin," then, it is this release of the sinner by God from the burden of sin and the restoration of Divine fellowship which is being referred to. In the Christian context, when it is said that Christ freed us from our sins by his sacrificial death, this concept of redemption is intended. Christ freed us from the burden of stative sin.

However, this concept of *salvation* has an additional meaning—a meaning beyond the repair of the damage on the spiritual plane done by sin. *Salvation* extends beyond redemption, beyond reconciliation and the re-establishment of harmonious order. *Salvation*—to be *saved* from sin, or, again, to be *freed* from sin—also involves an action of divine grace which forestalls sin—an action of "sin prevention." Salvation includes the offer of the power to resist performing the sinful action in the first place. God offers us the way of goodness. He offers us the way of *virtue*.

When we examine our interior selves, we discover that this virtue of avoiding sin does not come from our own will. We find there in the center of ourselves a region of chaotic profusion,

out of which arise our emotions, our memories, our feelings, our thoughts, our words, our understandings, all the tugs and pulls of the unidentifiable forces that bring about the person that we are.

Our understanding of what is good and peaceful, not only for ourselves but also for others as well, also arises from the depths of this “lake” of chaotic profusion. That is, our knowledge of the Will of God arises from these murky waters. At the same time, our desires to serve ourselves and to please ourselves—often in violation of the Divine Will—also arise from this “lake.” The origins of all these desires and promptings are unascertainable. We cannot identify what or where they spring from. They simply arise from these chaotic depths.

When we are immersed in the play of these forces which arise from unknown places and contend with one another on the periphery of our consciousness, we sense that we have little control over how we behave under their influence. In other words, we are helpless to avoid sin.

But on some occasions, in the midst of this turmoil, a pale light shines. We find within our spirits a small nudge in the direction of goodness, or common sense, or reflection on the impact of our actions on others, or the desire to please God. This little nudge, this pale dimness, is *virtue*—a gift which does not seem to arise from the “lake” but rather to suffuse our consciousness. In other words, virtue seems not to come from within us, but rather, to fill us from outside ourselves, as our awareness does.

If we accept this gift and use its power to conform ourselves to the Divine Will, two results occur. First, we avoid sinning on that occasion. Virtue—a gift that flows from salvation, that is, from a healthy and fruitful relationship with God—“saves us from sin.” It does this by empowering us, when we accept the empowerment, to resist the urge to choose to sin. Virtue emboldens us to turn away from sin and to maintain an open relationship with God. It strengthens us to transcend fear and to maintain a single-minded focus of our awareness on Divinity. Our acceptance of this gift of virtue, and our use of it when the desire to sin arises, “saves” us from sinning in the first place.

The second result builds on the first. Virtue not only strengthens us to resist sin; it also empowers us to shed goodness into the world, like a dandelion puff sheds airborne seeds. We find that on future occasions of the desire to sin, if we continue to accept and use this gift, the virtue compounds itself. The force for good within us increases. The virtue strengthens itself. The light of goodness grows within us. This light—the light of God—continues to fill us more and more strongly the more we use it through time, until it seeps out of us from our seams as *holiness*: the clear light of God’s goodness offering clarity in the world of darkness and sin.

Salvation, then, “saves us from sin” in two ways. It relieves us of *stative sin*, the burden of guilt which we bear because of the sinful actions we have previously performed. And our healthy interaction with God, which is the essence of salvation, offers us the gift of *virtue*, by which we are empowered to fend off the sinful actions which we are moved from within to perform.

In short, the salvation which God offers us “saves us from sin” because it cleanses us from the effects on us of our past sins, and it offers us the strength to resist sinning in the future.