

SIN AND THE GLORY OF GOD

By JEAN-MARIE LE BLOND

THE true meaning of the word *conversion* is a turning back, the turning back towards God; it is the opposite of the term *aversion*, used to describe grave sin, in which, according to the theologians, man turns aside from his final end. It is important to emphasize, however, that man's return to the right road is not the sole feature of conversion. It must be noted that when the convert sets out again towards his true end he is not, as it were, starting from scratch; he has recovered (and this according to the doctrine of the most rigid theologians) his previous merits. Further, he may make his past sin an occasion of progress and the greater glory of God. This doctrine is a paradox. St. Paul nevertheless affirms that 'for those who love God all things work unto good' and St. Augustine completes this saying of the Apostle (if not his thought) by adding 'even sin'. This is the point to which our present considerations lead us.

Such considerations are indispensable to the Christian intent upon living a fervent spiritual life. Faults are inevitable. These must not be allowed to slow up our progress; and yet, unless we are careful, the normal effect even of venial sins, whilst not diminishing grace, is to give the impression of a progressive separation from God, to produce a feeling of unfamiliarity with him, to weaken confidence. It is not as easy as all that to live as a 'christian sinner' – continually turning back.

Let us begin by calling to mind certain truths of elementary philosophy, or even of common sense, on the relation between any one of man's acts and his life as a whole. It is obvious that a single act, a single sin for example, does not involve the totality of man's liberty; only a pure spirit could thus commit itself entirely, definitively, with no return possible, in one single act. With us, actual sin is immediately swept along, in the flux of time, into the past with all our other acts, with all the events that happen to us, to be stowed away among the factors that present themselves to our

freedom of choice, factors before which we must consciously or unconsciously take up an attitude.

It is an error, and one to which contemporary philosophers and psychologists have given much emphasis, to believe that nothing that is past can be changed. Materially speaking, events or acts cannot of course be blotted out: I have killed, or lied, or stolen: the fact will remain. But the significance can be modified: 'Who will decide', writes the French philosopher Sartre, 'whether that mystic crisis of my fifteenth year was merely an accident of puberty, or on the contrary, the first sign of a future conversion? I myself . . . depending whether at the age of twenty or thirty I decide to be converted'.¹ In short, it is wrong to affirm that what is done is over and done with. The fact is that whatever we do is never entirely completed, but continues, till we die, to have its consequences and to be the subject of our interpretation.

It is clear also that past history can never be abolished. It remains in the memory, if not in precise remembrances, at least as acquired experience. All our acts, whether we advert to them or not, mark us, and we go forward in life with a whole bag-full of decisions and lines of conduct which can never be annulled.

These two points should be enough to refute those philosophers who fail to recognise the importance of repentance ('Repentance', wrote Spinoza, 'is no virtue, nor is it according to reason; but whoever repents of his deeds is miserable and powerless twice over')² and to condemn those proverbs that reveal short-sighted human wisdom: 'No use crying over spilt milk', 'Don't be sorry, do better' (*Nicht bereuen, sondern besser machen*).

The Christian, however, cannot stop short at these considerations: he must go beyond to what is the very basis of Christianity, the mystery of the Redemption.

One sometimes hears in sermons – preached with the good intention of inspiring fear and horror of sin – the theme 'Fear God who passes once and never returns'. No doubt this is true, but it is so partial a truth that when formulated without qualification it comes very close to error. If there is one thing that stands out in Sacred History, quite apart from and beyond the most time-honoured symbolic interpretations, it is the fact that God returns; that this history is above all a history of sins and pardons, with God's pardons always outmatching man's sins. It began with the first sin,

¹ *L'Être et le Néant*, p. 580.

² *Ethics*, prop. 54.

which was also the gravest, the most freely committed, and which was followed immediately by the promise of a Saviour. It continued through the history of the Patriarchs, of Moses, David and the whole Jewish people. Still more gloriously it continues in the history of the Church which begins with the pardon of Peter and the choice of an ex-deserter to govern the people of God, and goes on with the election of a former persecutor to enlighten the pagan world and carry the good news to the Gentiles.

Just as sin does not involve the totality of man's freedom, so also, and this is more important, it does not exhaust nor cut short God's goodness. To understand Redemption better let us consider it for the moment as a further step in Creation. The void in which God created was in no way an obstacle to his desire to communicate himself to others, by his very creative act he peopled this void, or rather he constantly peoples it in a continuous creation. Thus God loves us even before we have come into existence, and this love is not only the motive but the very act of creation itself. St. Catherine of Siena – and this is very much the essence of her mysticism – saw herself as one of God's thoughts that had been given expression, a thought of love that became real simply through his having paused over it. She liked to think of herself also as purified in the blood of Christ and at the beginning of her letters she would greet her correspondent 'in the Precious Blood'. To her the Redemption was as actual as the Creation. Just as God loves us when we did not exist, in order that we might come into existence, so also (and this is what is meant by Redemption) 'when sin had made dead men of us He loved us'¹ – he loved us when we were evil so that we might learn goodness. It is therefore completely erroneous to believe that because God hates sin he also hates sinners. On the contrary he continues to love them, to besiege them with his love. It is to this same love that we owe the possibility of conversion.

Conversion is never due to our initiative and, in Redemption as in Creation, it is still God who 'loved us first'.² However, it is true that whereas in Creation our free human nature is not required even to accept God's gift in order to have being (though it must afterwards give its consent to existence, must continuously accept this continuous gift, not only with thankfulness but with adoration), in Redemption there is required of us a more explicit response, an acceptance of salvation, a conscious welcoming of grace.

¹ Eph 2, 5.

² 1 Jn 4, 19.

This is an elementary truth of Christianity which is often neglected, or hidden away in the repository of Faith, preserved but not used. It is, however, an incomplete truth, because, to grasp the mystery of Redemption in all its fullness, we must understand that it is not merely a question of our being restored to a previous state of innocence. Here we touch upon what might be called the paradox of divine love, namely that the Creator's love appears to become redoubled before the obstacle of sin in the creature, and becomes also more manifest.

The Church makes the deacon sing during the Paschal Vigil: 'O happy fault that merited such a Redeemer!' This is no poetic exaggeration, no mere *recitative* put in to suit the music rather than the theological truth. Again, when the Church has the priest say, in the Mass, as he pours a drop of water into the chalice: 'What you wondrously established you have still more wondrously restored', it is no mere pious rhetoric. These liturgical phrases correspond exactly to the formal teaching of Christ himself in the gospel. It is the very iniquity of the false husbandmen that leads the King to send his own son;¹ the lost sheep is not merely brought back to the fold – it is carried back on the shepherd's shoulders; no doubt it has nothing to be proud of, but there it is, up on the shepherd's shoulders. And everyone knows that saying of Christ which at first sight might almost shock us: 'There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine that are justified and have no need of repentance'.²

In the Middle Ages theologians discussed the problem as to whether the Word would have become flesh had there been no sin in the world. No doubt this question about what 'might have happened' was badly posed; but the fact is that, although his salvation means much more than preservation from evil, Christ came and suffered for our sins. In this sense it is therefore true to say that we owe the Incarnation to our sins.

Christians are familiar with this language of the Church and the gospel. They usually understand it easily enough when it deals with God's relations with mankind in general; but often they hesitate to apply it to themselves personally, to believe in practice that these things are said not for everyone but for each one. It is not easy to accept that personal sin may be a soil capable of produ-

¹ Mt 22, 33 ff.

² Lk 15, 7.

cing even more compelling graces and consequently more fervent love of God.

But this can only happen on certain conditions. Sin does not become transformed automatically, by itself, into grace; not only is it, in itself, a rejection of God's love, but also its psychological consequences do not make a return towards God easy. On this point great care is needed in interpreting the writings of certain ascetic theologians – Origen and St. Gregory of Nyssa, for example – on the 'Dialectic of Sin', according to which, whether at the level of mankind as a whole or at the individual level, excessive sins give rise in the sinner to overwhelming disgust, thus disposing him to repentance. Such an evolution is possible (for we always have adequate grace) but not inevitable; and it would be more properly speaking the 'Dialectic of Conversion'. Another dialectic equally possible would be the dialectic of sin which ends not in the negation of sin, but in its being abolished from the conscience. By this we mean that it is normal for the sinner to become less and less aware of his sin, so that he no longer comes to recognise it for what it is.

While it is true that in a delicate and religious conscience sin produces at first a sort of despair, a feeling of dissatisfaction or a revolt against the self, this very despair and this disgust tend to make the person search at all costs for excuses; to make him persuade himself, as did St. Augustine before his conversion, that the sinner was not the self but 'some alien nature that sins in me'.¹ It is not impossible, then, at the price of a modicum of bad faith and a noticeable uneasiness, to smooth away the disquiet. But this brings with it unwillingness to meet God, to think of God; it is an old story going back to the first man who hid after his sin, while God came as usual to walk in Eden.

It is clear that the first condition required for sin to be turned to the glory of God is that we recognise it: that is, that we both see it as a sin and admit that we are its author. 'It is when we confess our sins that he forgives us our sins, ever true to his word, ever dealing right with us, and all our wrong-doing is purged away'.² In order that our sins may be 'purged away' it is necessary to confess and admit responsibility. Of course this is never complete responsibility; there are always extenuating circumstances, and our freedom of choice is always, as modern writers like to put it, 'dependent on the situation'. In sin the initiative is never entirely man's; the

¹ *Confessions*, V, X, 18.

² 1 Jn 1, 9.

normal form that human faults take implies complicity with an evil force that is beyond the individual will. However, once this has been accepted, we must bring home to ourselves the childishness of the attitude expressed in phrases like 'It wasn't me' or 'I didn't do it deliberately'. The adult knows well enough that he is responsible even for what he did not do entirely 'on purpose'. He can see the wood, as it were, by cutting through the trees of excuses and extenuating circumstances and declaring with a healthy simplicity 'It was my fault'. 'Sin is with us: if we deny that, we are cheating ourselves: it means that truth does not dwell in us'.¹ To be cured of sin we have to begin by admitting that we are ill; this is the first condition.

It is, at the same time, the condition for understanding grace and our Saviour. 'I have not come for the just, but for sinners', said Christ.² Whoever considers himself justified feels no need for a Saviour, and the understanding of sin goes hand in hand with the understanding of grace. We therefore have to break down the façade of self-sufficiency that is in each one of us, and place our confidence outside of ourselves. But it is no easy matter to renounce our faith in ourselves and accept salvation of another. It means shifting the whole centre of gravity of our lives, and going beyond our horizons to a hope that is supernatural.

Hope is often confused with physical or mental vitality. This vitality is not unrelated to hope, but it is very different from it. It is fundamentally self-confidence, which is justifiable in human works and undertakings. But the characteristic of theological hope is not only that by it we hope for, we desire God – and this is already far beyond the scope of purely human endeavour – but also the fact that it is from God himself that we hope for God. While Creation requires of us that we consent to existence, Redemption requires a still more explicit consent to salvation, the acceptance of total dependence within the order of salvation. Here, there is no place for 'boasts', as St. Paul put it, no question of an appeal to rights or merits. 'When you crown our merits, it is your own gifts that you crown' wrote St. Augustine, whose words are re-echoed by the Council of Trent. This is not forced or embittered humility, but the simple truth of our relationship with God. The mystics, in a way, have experienced it, but all Christians must believe it with a faith that is both active and personal.

¹ 1 Jn 1, 8.

² Lk 5, 32.

This faith brings joy, the joy of knowing that we are in God's hands and not dependent merely on a human will, which is always frail. It brings security, for 'hope deceiveth not'. It brings insight into the most complete form of abnegation, the renunciation of all self-reliance.

It has long been noted that the term *Confessions* chosen by St. Augustine as the title of his autobiography has two distinct meanings which he constantly intertwines. This ambiguity is of course deliberate, and has a particular significance. The *Confessions* are clearly meant to be a confession of wretchedness, of sins, in which St. Augustine, the theologian of freedom, who had so much difficulty in abandoning the excuses he had borrowed from astrological determinism ('Venus, Saturn and Mars have done this in me'),¹ acknowledges his faults, that is to say, sees them clearly as his own. But these confessions are also, according to the traditional, biblical and liturgical sense (as the 'confession of Peter' for example), a proclamation of God's mercy, a solemn affirmation of the divine strength and love. God the Creator is glorified by the creature acknowledging its creaturehood and its contingency; God the Redeemer is glorified as he who wins the victory over the 'nothingness' of sin. Though the 'heavens and earth sing God's glory', the restoration of creatures bent and soiled by sin honours him still more; this time victory is not over 'nothingness' but over human freedom. In this perspective Christ's declaration about joy in heaven over one sinner's conversion no longer seems paradoxical.

This glory of God is in man, and it is his peace. Nietzsche advises us to digest 'both deeds and misdeeds' just as a strong stomach can digest even the richest food, and we have pointed out that it is not impossible to forget sin and become settled in a false peace. But in spite of everything, rich food is inclined to lie heavily on the stomach, and sins are most often only half-forgotten. This is the origin of many nervous breakdowns, of those very common guilt-complexes; in a word this is the starting-point of the road that leads to what has been called the 'morbid world of obsessive sin' with which so many psychiatrists are justifiably preoccupied.

Sin, in fact, is not meant to be forgotten in this sense: to do so is to lie to ourselves, to block deliberately our conscience, in other words to be only partially conscious. Repentance on the contrary,

¹ *Confessions* IV, III, 4.

which does not forget sins, but returns to them, changes their significance, makes of them thenceforward a source of grace, an occasion for God to manifest his love. Penance is not fundamentally sadness. There are, of course, holy penitents who spent their lives weeping their sins, and St. Jerome has been depicted striking his breast with a stone. This is only one aspect, and perhaps a rather narrow one, of repentance. It is not the only nor the most important one. St. Paul, it has to be admitted, was not a penitent in this manner; he reminds us quite serenely that he had persecuted the Church, and he does not worry about it. He has no doubts about his redemption; he does not judge himself in the light of the Old Testament (from which the words 'love' and 'pardon' have been to a great extent expurgated). 'When sin had made dead men of us, he loved us'. This is his wealth, his peace, his assurance. And when he declares 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?'¹ he means primarily 'Who shall separate us from the love that Christ bears us?' This is the love which forestalls our response to it and which makes us assured of our love for Christ.

Finally let us not imagine that this security would lead to less awareness of or less regret for sin. It is true that fear is put aside. But it is when a child is assured of forgiveness, and is no longer afraid, that he can in a clear-headed way measure the offence against his Father; then he no longer has his back to the wall, he does not have to invent excuses to avoid a too severe punishment, he does not have to defend himself, as in a court of justice, where no one is obliged to testify against himself. The Church has placed a crucifix in the confessional with deliberate meaning, for the crucifix represents both the most painful and the most consoling consequence of sin: it is a lesson on the gravity of sin and a final assurance of Redemption, the supremely convincing proof, occasioned by sin, of God's love. In it the Christian finds demands more compelling than any threat; in it, at the same time, he finds peace.

¹ Rom 8, 35.