

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: GRAVE MATTER, LIGHT MATTER, AND FUNDAMENTAL OPTION

A. Introduction

5 As I explained in chapter twenty-six, section D, there is no mortal sin without grave matter. That certain kinds of acts constitute grave matter is established from the Church's teaching, which articulates Christian understanding of this subject developed from and in the light of divine revelation. Still, the question remains: What is the principle of the distinction between grave and light matter? Certainly, every morally evil act in some way violates the first principle of morality--consistent openness to integral human fulfillment in the fulfillment of all things in Christ. Why, then, is not every morally evil act incompatible with charity, which requires that one act in a morally upright way, as I explained in chapter eighteen, section I?

10 The problem can be sharpened if one considers an example. I would like, but do not really need, a morning paper. Checking for change, I discover that I lack the coins necessary to purchase a paper from a vending box. However, I notice that the box is not latched tightly; the preceding customer left a paper partly protruding, which prevented the door from closing. The thought occurs: I could take a paper without paying for it, but that would be wrong. However, the newspaper company will not be seriously hurt if I take the protruding paper and close the box, so that subsequent customers will pay. The wrong is virtually insignificant. I hesitate momentarily, realizing the wrongness of the act, but am inclined to choose to do it anyway. A quick look about assures me there is no one to notice my pilferage. I make my decision. I filch the paper, close the box tightly, and walk away with the paper.

15 In a case like this, one might suppose that I did not reflect sufficiently and consent fully. However, the supposition of the example precisely is that I did. Nor does the fact that I did not explicitly think of the moral evil of injustice as a sin or relate it to faith and charity explain the lightness of the matter; sufficient reflection upon grave matter can occur without reflection upon the specifically religious implications of the evil act, as I explained in chapter twenty-six, section D. One also might suppose that I entertain some thoughts which could justify the act--for example, that I will pay double next time, that on some previous occasion the box has taken my coins without opening, or that the newspaper company overcharges for the papers it sells in vending machines. If I had any such thoughts, there would be a question whether they justified or only rationalized my act. But my supposition is that I had no such thoughts. I freely chose to do an injustice, fully aware that it was such.

20 I am confident Catholic moralists (and the faithful in general) would agree that, despite the sufficient reflection and full consent in this case, the act was not a mortal sin. The matter is light matter; as I reflected before deciding to do it: The wrong is virtually insignificant. Something so insignificant simply cannot prevent one from entering the kingdom of God, separate one from Christ, evict the Spirit, exclude one from full communion in the Church--in short, despite its completeness as a morally evil act, this act cannot be a mortal sin. However, a similarly complete morally evil act of masturbation would be a mortal sin, for this kind of act is grave matter.

25 Why is one sort of moral evil light matter and another sort grave matter? Is there any way to understand the distinction--that is, to understand it in the light of faith--or are we faced here with a mystery? Should we even perhaps agree with some theologians (a minority) who have held that every kind of moral evil of itself would be grave matter, but that God by a merciful fiat simply decrees that many sins people are likely to commit will not count as mortal sins?

30 This last possibility seems most unsatisfactory. It presupposes a legalistic conception of the relationship between moral action and one's share in divine life. If God by fiat can make some moral evils not count as mortal sins, what intrinsic relationship can there be between human life as a whole and fulfillment in Christ? In particular, what intrinsic opposition can there be between acts which do count as mortal sins and remaining in grace--that is, remaining eligible to enter the kingdom, remaining united to Christ, keeping the indwelling Spirit, and continuing to share fully in the communion of the Church (including receiving Holy Communion)?

35 Yet, despite its fundamental unsatisfactoriness, this unacceptable theological position does bring out one important point: The question about grave and light matter is not why some moral evils constitute grave matter, but rather why some do not--that is, why not all do. Charity is love of divine goodness; divine goodness excludes every evil; even a small sin is a real evil; yet, one can have in one's heart simultaneously both this real evil and charity. The problem is to explain this paradoxical détente.

40 In recent years, many Catholic theologians have suggested that the problem should be solved along the following lines. The relational bond of the Christian's soul to God is not constituted (even from our side) by an ordinary act of free choice. One who is in friendship with God is disposed toward Him not simply by one or another particular act, but in one's whole being and life. Such a comprehensive orientation is a fundamental option, which is somehow different from and much deeper than any ordinary choice. Therefore, no ordinary choice as such can reverse one's fundamental option. Venial sins are choices which are at odds with the fundamental option of Christian life, yet they are not profound enough to reverse it. In some cases, venial sins lack sufficient reflection and full consent; they are not even perfect human acts at the level of free choice. In other cases, even though venial sins are perfect as choices, the insignificance of the matter as one particular good among the whole range of particular goods a human person is concerned with prevents the minor bad-willing from turning around the whole thrust of one's willing.

45 On this account, the distinction between grave and light matter is thought (by the proponents of the various theories of fundamental option) not to be as rigid as it was considered to be by Catholic moral theologians until recently. The cuts made by the common teaching of the Church usually are acknowledged, yet it is denied that grave matter, sufficient reflection, and full consent suffice for a really mortal sin--that is, one which changes one's fundamental option.[1] Presumably, to say that a certain kind

of moral evil is grave matter is merely to post a warning: Deliberate choice of this sort of thing can change one's fundamental option. In other words, "grave matter" is like a skull and crossbones on a bottle; it says: This stuff could kill you. But many poisons can be taken occasionally in small doses without having their threatened deadly effect. Likewise, according to the contemporary theories of fundamental option, at least some people sometimes can do--with sufficient reflection and full consent--acts traditionally categorized as grave matter without suffering the specific consequences Catholics believe to follow from mortal sin.[2]

Thus understood, it is clear that fundamental option theories are theories according to which what traditionally would have been considered mortal sins turn out not necessarily to be such. Herein lies the main fascination of theories of this sort. To point this out is not to prejudge these theories. If they are right, we certainly must know this and teach it, since people will be led unnecessarily and dangerously to discouragement about their Christian lives if they mistakenly assume they are committing mortal sins when they really are not.

Fundamental option theories in general are appealing for two other important reasons. First, they do offer some sort of account of the difference between grave and light matter, an account which begins to suggest why some moral evils are compatible with charity and others are not. Second, they focus attention on Christian life considered as a unified and developing whole, rather than on particular choices considered in isolation. The fundamental option theorist looks at life as a movie, rather than as a series of snapshots in an album. This focus seems correct.

As will become clear before the end of this chapter, I think that there is something right in the idea of fundamental option. There is a fundamental option in Christian life, and grave matter is the sort of thing by the doing of which one violates one's fundamental option. However, I will show that the various sorts of theories which have been proposed are defective. The attempt of St. Thomas Aquinas to explain the distinction between grave and light matter seems to me the best effort in classical theology; I will summarize and criticize this attempt. It seems to me suggestive but incomplete. By synthesizing the central insight of proponents of fundamental option with the main thrust of the explanation of St. Thomas, I will try to provide a more adequate--and really satisfying--account of the distinction between grave and light matter.

#### B. An account of fundamental option as basic commitment

In 1960, M. Flick, S.J., and Z. Alszeghy, S.J., published an article on fundamental option which was concerned with a different theological problem, but which has greatly influenced discussion of the topic here under study.[3] I summarize the portions of this article relevant here.

The authors begin by pointing out that everyone seeks self-fulfillment, but also seeks goods which will be realized in others. Thus, to be an end of affective life is not to be the end of the whole affective life. A strong personality has a single, all-embracing end of his or her whole life; for example, the revolutionary or the mother of a family centers virtually everything around one basic interest. Activities which do not contribute are merely incidental, hardly part of life. To have some such fundamental orientation of life is not the exception, but rather the rule; most people have a more or less definite orientation, of one or another sort, which constitutes a form of life for them. It provides an organizing norm to which their particular activities are related.[4]

Psychologically, the fundamental option is prepared by childhood and adolescent experience and matured in the subconscious mind. It need not be expressed in a distinct, explicit act, but can be in a particular, significant deed which is a turning point in an individual's life. Once made, the fundamental option tends to shape every subsequent act; it tends to last through life. Yet it can be reversed. The fundamental option tends to be confirmed as it is made explicit and worked out in particular situations, particularly when it requires difficult acts. However, it can be changed either by a sudden, tragic break in a person's life, or by a gradually maturing process of conversion.[5]

The love of God, Flick and Alszeghy go on to assert, can be such a fundamental option. The love in question is willing God's goodness with charity, not simply to enjoy God for oneself, but to will His goodness for His own glory and its expression in creation. One can love another person genuinely without this love becoming a fundamental option, but such is not the case with God. One either tries to use God or one must subordinate one's whole being and life to Him. To love Him is to dedicate oneself to His will, not merely to direct an act to Him as ultimate goal. This is an act of personal liberty, yet it need not be conceptually distinct from a choice on some particular issue.[6]

The authors claim the authority of St. Thomas for the view that this option must be made by a child at the outset of its moral life. They argue that the self-orientation of the child can be gradually prepared and can be implicit in a decision by which the child accepts God's will, not for some extrinsic reason (such as wishing to please mother) but because of a love which is willing to direct the whole self to God. The child who is not brought up in a religious context also makes a fundamental option for or against God, according to Flick and Alszeghy, but in this case the option is implicit in the acceptance or rejection of moral norms as making an objective and absolute demand to which one must submit. The child who takes the stance that moral demands are merely a set of factual obstacles and restraints to be dealt with realistically--avoided and neutralized and used as one can to suit oneself--takes an immoral stance and opts against God. The child who recognizes and responds to the claim of moral demands to personal reverence and submission implicitly acknowledges in the moral law its divine source and opts for God.[7]

The authors go on to argue that one or the other absolutely fundamental option is inevitable. Either one accepts the glory of God (at least implicitly in accepting moral claims) as one's principle, or one takes one's own interest or that of another creature

with which one identifies oneself as one's highest law. The former option renders one morally good and makes one tend to do what is right in every instance; the latter option, while it leaves one free in each instance to do what is right, guarantees that in some instances one will choose what is morally evil. The habitual option for God is inconsistent with a grave transgression of moral law; such a transgression remains possible, but it would mean changing one's fundamental option. However, Flick and Alszeghy state, the habitual disposition can coexist with acts which do not agree with it.[8]

What sort of acts are these? According to the authors, they are acts which either are not fully deliberate or are not of their nature such as to engage the whole person. They are acts which, even if they do not agree with the prior fundamental option, still "are not of such degree as to alter the prevailing tendency toward it. This is why the fundamental option, of its nature, does not exclude venial sins."[9]

In section D, below, I will comment on several details of the article just summarized. First, however, I deal with the central question it raises.

C. Is it true that everyone has a fundamental option as a basic commitment?

The central thesis of the article just summarized is that everyone who lives a morally significant life has a fundamental option--that is, a basic self-commitment through personal liberty--either for the glory of God or for self-interest. I think that this thesis is not established by the authors and that, in fact, it is false.

First, the sociological and psychological evidence they cite to indicate that people do have some basic interest or fundamental orientation in life is not to the point. A revolutionary might be wholly dedicated to a cause; most people are not like this. The mother of a family can have a single focus for her emotional life; her life centers upon her family. Many people are not like this. More important, both the revolutionary and the mother can be morally upright and oriented toward God; again, both can be vicious people. Since that concerning which sociology and psychology provides evidence can be determined without that with which Flick and Alszeghy are concerned being determined, it is clear that the two things are different, and the existence of the former does not establish or help to clarify the latter.

Second, the authors rightly observe that in making morally good and bad choices a person implicitly takes a stance toward divine goodness, either conforming to God's will or sinning against Him. But they too quickly move from this true premise to the conclusion that everyone in making morally significant choices makes a fundamental option which establishes a single, comprehensive life-orientation. They realize--indeed, they insist repeatedly--that there is no such conscious, discrete choice in many people's lives. However, they think that implicit in good and bad choices is an option for or against moral principles and the source of their authority, and that this implicit option becomes an orientation which affects all subsequent morally significant choices. This position needs to be established, and the authors give no reason for thinking it true.

If it were the case that people understood all the implications of their choices, then it might follow that one's initial, morally good or bad choice would establish one's general stance toward moral norms and their divine source. However, people often do not understand the implications of their choices. Usually a person can genuinely respect and submit to some norms of morality while others are respected as valid claims but violated in practice and still others are rejected as if they were mere factual nuisances. This situation explains why the moral grandeur of saints can impress and appeal to sinners and provide an occasion for the conversion of the latter.

People do implicitly commit themselves to much more than they consciously choose, since a choice determines the person who makes it with respect to certain goods, and it conditions subsequent acts of spontaneous willing with respect to possibilities which involve these goods. Morality as such, however, is not a determinate good. A person can do acts of kindness in a very unselfish way, thus to affirm implicitly the transcendence of the principles of morality to self, yet act with destructive self-indulgence, thus to affirm implicitly a power of absolute self-disposal. One only needs to know well some contemporary young men and women to grasp the truth of this fact: Human persons generally (there are exceptions) are far too ambivalent to support the belief that everyone has a fundamental moral option, which establishes a single, comprehensive life-orientation.

Flick and Alszeghy certainly are correct in thinking that one who loves God with charity has a principle by which the whole of life is oriented toward human fulfillment, as I explained in chapter eighteen, section I. But as I showed in section L of the same chapter, charity is not a human act; rather it is the gift of divine love. In the condition of fallen humankind, a person without charity is in a sad state indeed. Yet there is no positive reality contrary to charity which can organize the life of a sinner as charity animates and organizes the life of a saint. Although fundamental in Christian life, the love of God is not a fundamental option, and so it needs no contrary as any true option does.

Here, I think, is one of the erroneous roots of contemporary fundamental option theories, namely, the supposition that love of charity is a disposition of our freedom rather than a gift poured forth in our hearts by the Spirit. Much of the Christian theological tradition has nourished this error. However, as Vatican II teaches, the true opposition is not between created goods as such and divine goodness, but rather between created goods perverted by sin and divine goodness (cf. GS 37). The latter embraces in perfect harmony the true fulfillment of every creature, and this harmony is destined to be accomplished in the ultimate fulfillment of all things in Christ. Hence, no option between God and creature, between God and self, is necessary. The alternative to love of God is the privation of sin, which is not a unitary principle which can organize anyone's life, and which cannot be chosen for its own sake. One sins not on principle, but for the diverse residual goods one can experience through each different sinful act.

Since there is no real, eligible alternative to the divine goodness which is loved by charity, this disposition toward fulfillment could not in any way be an option. If it were a human act, it would have to be an actuation more basic than an option. It

would have to be something more like the simple volition of human goods, as I explained in chapter eighteen, section M.

D. Further comments on this approach to fundamental option

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Flick and Alszeghy, like most of the Catholic theologians who write on fundamental option, were working out of very impoverished understanding of human acts.[10] They tended to think of acts as passing events. For them, one of the unique aspects of a fundamental option is that it is an enduring disposition. As I explained in chapter eight, section J, every choice of itself is lasting, since a choice is a spiritual actuation, not a physical or psychological event or process.

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Moreover, choices are on various levels, some overarching others. The decision to commit oneself to the priesthood or to married life, for instance, establishes a framework for much of the rest of one's life; many other choices are conditioned by it. Such choices very obviously have the character of self-constitution which every choice shares at its own level; one never makes a free choice without making oneself to be. Moreover, as I explained in chapter eight, section M, and chapter nineteen, section I, the dispositions which constitute virtuous character essentially are upright choices, serving as principles by which the remainder of character is integrated.

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Once one understands the unique character and dynamic role of charity in Christian life, and also understands the persistence and structured self-constitution of choices, the data which make plausible various versions of fundamental option theory are accounted for quite adequately. Indeed, the account is more adequate than is that of any fundamental option theory, since such a theory cannot so well explain the unfolding and differentiation of the wonderful variety of Christian lives, each having its personal style as well as sharing the common form of Christ-likeness.

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As I explained in chapter twenty-four, section G, there are principles other than commitments by which people order their lives. A definite, more or less structured set of desires or interests can order the life of a person who lacks real commitments. For example, a man can direct most of his time and energy to creating opportunities for sensory gratification; a woman can direct most of her time and energy to attaining a position of power and prestige. Such lifestyles manifest what the sociologists and psychologists might take to be a fundamental orientation; these are lives of a definite form. But such lives do not require some sort of mysterious, implicit fundamental option for oneself or for the created good. The degree of coherence and purpose such lives manifest can be explained without positing any such option; to posit it is gratuitous and so unreasonable, since one should not posit any theoretical entity not essential to account for the data.

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Flick and Alszeghy claim the support of St. Thomas for the position that a child must make a fundamental option at the outset of its moral life. The article to which they refer in St. Thomas is concerned with a much more limited question: Whether venial sin can exist in someone with original sin and without mortal sin. St. Thomas thinks not. His explanation is that until a child reaches the age of moral responsibility, it cannot commit any personal sin. When it does, it first deliberates about itself. If it directs itself to a due end, then grace is given and original sin removed; if it does not order itself to a due end, to the extent possible at that age, it sins mortally, since it does not do what it can toward the good. Thus there will be no venial sin without mortal sin in one still in the condition of original sin.[11]

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St. Thomas here is considering only the case of a child who is not baptized and brought up in the faith. He does not consider the case of the child in grace, who begins to deliberate in the light of faith, by an act of faith willed out of love of God and by spontaneous willing of relevant human goods.

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Moreover, St. Thomas is taking for granted his theological theory of the natural end of the human person, a theory I criticized in part two, especially in chapter seven, section P. According to my account of human fulfillment and of the primary principle of morality, a child without grace by its first choice could do something reasonable or not, morally good or morally evil, but if it chose evil, the evil could be very slight. The implausible thesis of St. Thomas is not proved. Since reason does not know any single, all-fulfilling end, the child could not possibly order itself to such an end.

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Thus, one need not wonder what sort of act the pagan child of seven ventures its soul upon. Its early acts very likely have little order to one another; some are consistent with integral human fulfillment and others not, but none so high in level or broad in scope as to settle the orientation of the child's life as a whole for good or ill.

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Flick and Alszeghy were not trying to solve the problem of light matter, and so they ought not to be faulted for not having done so. However, their remarks on venial sin, which I cited at the end of section B, above, must not stand without comment. On their view, deliberate venial sins are compatible with charity because they do not engage the whole person, and so are not of such a degree as to alter the prevailing tendency of the fundamental option. This remark, unfortunately, explains nothing. No choice involves the whole person, so venial sins are not peculiar in this respect. That venial sins are not so great as to alter the fundamental option (which is assumed to be charity) simply is to say they are venial; the question is why they do not alter it.

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E. The hypothesis of another kind of freedom

Instead of regarding fundamental option as a basic choice or as an aspect of a fundamental commitment which marks a turning point in one's life, many (perhaps most) recent proponents of fundamental option make it something far more mysterious.[12] It becomes a total self-disposal, which is attributed not to the familiar capacity of free choice, but to another sort of freedom. In the present section, I clarify, as much as I can, what those who posit this other sort of freedom have in mind.

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It is hard to define this other freedom in any exact way. It does not correspond to anything which can be located in consciousness. The language used in reference to it

generally is highly metaphorical. Hence, it can be useful to consider the very formulations of some who posit it,

Josef Fuchs, S.J., talks about a "basic" or "transcendental" freedom. He contrasts this with what he calls psychological freedom of choice:

5 Basic freedom, on the other hand, denotes a still more fundamental, deeper-rooted freedom, not immediately accessible to psychological investigation. This is the freedom that enables us not only to decide freely on particular acts and aims but also, by means of these, to determine ourselves totally as persons and not merely in any particular area of behaviour. It is clear that man's freedom of choice and  
10 his basic freedom are not simply two different psychological freedoms. As a person, man is free. But this freedom can, of course, be considered under different aspects. A man can, in one and the same act, choose the object of his choice (freedom of choice) and by so doing determine himself as a person (basic freedom).  
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15 John W. Glaser, S.J., summarizes the thinking of a number of other authors in the following typical formulation:

According to this theory, man is structured in a series of concentric circles or various levels. On the deepest level of the individual, at the personal center, man's freedom decides, loves, commits itself in the fullest sense of these terms.  
20 On this level man constitutes self as lover or selfish sinner. This is the center of grave morality where man makes himself and his total existence good or evil.[14] With this "core" freedom, Glaser contrasts "peripheral" freedom which is "shallower" and does not have the "same degree of stability as core freedom." On this basis, Glaser thinks a person can with core freedom be constantly committed to doing God's will, while  
25 he or she with peripheral freedom quickly fluctuates between affirmation and rejection of God's will in particular acts.[15]

From these and similar descriptions, one can gather several properties of this peculiar sort of freedom, which from now on I will call "fundamental freedom." First, it is thought to be exercised at the very core of the human person; therefore, it is the  
30 locus of self-determination, and so of grave moral responsibility. Second, it does not have as its object particular possibilities to be adopted by choice, but the whole self in reference to God or to morality as such. Third, the exercise of fundamental freedom is not an action in any normal sense of the word. In some sense there is an option, but the option is to take a stance or assume an attitude, rather than to do anything whatsoever.  
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Fundamental freedom is said to belong to individuals as persons, not as agents; the assumption is that personhood is something much more than agency. One way of putting this is to say that personhood is subject, not object, and that fundamental freedom disposes the subject in respect to everything objective at once. Timothy E. O'Connell  
40 writes as follows of fundamental freedom's unique act--the fundamental option:

It is the decision to accept or reject reality as I find it. The central core of myself, the "I" which is my personhood, is confronted with a reality which transcends all categories. It is confronted with the reality of my world, my situation, my body, my feelings, my attitudes and prejudices. In fact it is confronted even  
45 by the condition of the possibility of that reality: namely, God. And from the perspective of my own core, the subjectivity that I am, this cosmically inclusive objectivity presents itself for decision. A simple, singular decision: yes or no. The freedom of the human person, then, is not categorical freedom at all. Rather it is a freedom that transcends all categories, it is "transcendental freedom." [16]  
50 Karl Rahner, S.J., explicitly makes the point that one is not aware of the time when one takes one's fundamental stance.[17]

These statements and ways of talking about fundamental freedom make clear that it is not identical with free choice. It is none too clear what the relationship between free choice and fundamental freedom is supposed to be.[18] But the proponents of fundamental freedom do make it unmistakably clear that one can choose freely in a way which is inconsistent with one's fundamental option without altering this option.[19] This possibility is the main point of positing fundamental freedom, since what it amounts to is that one can make a definite free choice with sufficient reflection in what traditionally has been considered grave matter without committing a mortal sin.  
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#### F. What arguments are given for the existence of fundamental freedom?

Why do proponents of fundamental freedom think they are justified in positing it? On their own account, it is not part of experience, so experience cannot directly justify  
65 supposing it real. Moreover, there does not seem to be any philosophical argument which would show that there is fundamental freedom, and proponents of it do not cite Scripture, the Fathers, or subsequent teaching of the Church to justify positing fundamental freedom. Rather, they offer indirect arguments based on experience. The logic of the case for fundamental option is an argument for a hypothesis.

70 Proponents of fundamental freedom seem to be arguing that certain aspects of self-determination and moral responsibility, affirmed by Christians on the basis both of faith and experience, cannot be accounted for by free choice alone. Free choice and the freedom of self-determination as the total self-disposition of the person are thought to differ in two important ways.

75 First, as proponents of fundamental freedom see it, free choice is an object of human self-consciousness whereas one's total self-disposition cannot be objectified and must remain transcendental. In other words, they think that one cannot be directly aware of, cannot directly think about, and cannot adequately describe and talk about total self-disposition. Second, again as proponents of fundamental freedom see it, free choice is limited in that what is chosen always is very limited, while a person's total self-disposition must be all-embracing. One's whole existence in its relationship to reality (God)--this cosmically inclusive objectivity--cannot be identified with doing this act or not doing it, with choosing this possibility or that one.  
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In support of the first point, a philosophical argument along the lines indicated

by O'Connell often is proposed. The assumption which underlies this argument is that subject and object must be distinct and opposed. Hence, if one's total self were an object for consciousness, there would be no subject to dispose of this totality. So total self-disposal cannot be objectified. Free choice, however, is an object of consciousness. Therefore, free choice cannot be identical with the fundamental freedom by which one totally disposes of oneself.

Many proponents of fundamental freedom add a supporting theological consideration. The Council of Trent teaches that "no one can know with the certitude of faith, which cannot admit any error, that he has obtained God's grace" (DS 1534/802). If free choices were the locus of a person's self-determination, then presumably a person could know with considerable certitude whether his or her disposition toward God is loving or not. Hence, they argue, the really significant self-disposal must not be located in free choice. Therefore, fundamental freedom must be posited, to avoid the certitude Trent excludes.[20]

In support of their second point, proponents of fundamental option offer the following considerations, which they think differentiate free choice and fundamental option. The former is limited to determination among particular possibilities. Moreover, free choices are spread over one's life; one makes different choices at different times. Thus free choices lack over-all unity; they do not make up one's morally significant life, any more than the parts of a body without the soul would make up a person. By contrast, morally significant self-determination settles a person's whole destiny in reference to God; it organizes one's life as a whole and makes one be a good or bad person. Therefore, they conclude, fundamental freedom must be posited as distinct from freedom of choice.[21]

An additional aspect of the limitation of free choices, often stressed by proponents of fundamental freedom, is that free choices concern particular, transitory acts, whereas self-determination must have a more lasting, even if not absolutely permanent, character. O'Connell, who identifies free choice with agency and fundamental freedom with personhood, says:

. . .agents, by definition, are changeable beings. As actions change, so the doers of actions change. Persons, however, endure beyond the life-span of any individual action. It follows from this, then, that agents are preeminently "do-ers," while persons are more clearly understood as "be-ers." Human beings, inasmuch as they are agents, exercise their existence through action. But humans-as-persons exercise their reality precisely by being.[22]

Glaser argues that particular choices, such as those made by persons with a "habit of serious sin," can quickly and repeatedly alternate. In human interpersonal relationships, one does not find a genuine, mature, personal love, life, and commitment which allows for a weekly or even daily transition from affirmation to rejection. Therefore, the profound reality of sin and grace must not be tied to free choice, but rather to fundamental freedom.[23]

#### G. How can these arguments be answered?

In reply to the philosophical argument that total self-disposition cannot be objectified, whereas free choices can be objects of awareness, I make three points.

First, as I explained in section C, above, proponents of fundamental option simply assume that persons have a single, comprehensive life-orientation, either toward God or against Him, and that this unitary principle is somehow the actuation of one's freedom of self-disposal. There is no reason to think that the sinner is so well integrated in sin, and there is reason to believe that charity, by which a person's life can be oriented as a whole toward God, is not a human act. So there is a fundamental principle of the life of holiness, but it does not require freedom distinct from free choice, since it is not an option.

Second, free choices have many of the features attributed to fundamental options, and so one need not posit a more fundamental freedom to account for these data. As I explained in chapter eight, sections J through M, one does determine oneself by free choices. The act of faith is made by a free choice, as I explained in chapter thirteen, section E. If one's act of faith is not total self-disposition toward God, it can be the beginning of such total self-disposition. One must proceed from this principle to work out one's Christian life, to seek perfection by a gradual growth in holiness accomplished by many day-to-day acts.

Third, while free choices and the self-determination involved in them are not a given content of experience as sense-data are, still one has an experience of self-determination in making free choices, as I explained in chapter eight, section H. This experience of making choices is not like an experience of undergoing something or of being presented with something; it is like the experience of knowing while one is knowing.[24] The fact of this experience tells against the philosophical argument that subject and object must be distinct and opposed, in the sense that the self determining itself would have to be unaware of itself doing so.

This conclusion is consistent with the teaching of Trent that one cannot know with the certitude of faith that he or she has obtained God's grace. Grace is not a human act; hence, one could be perfectly aware of every human act, no matter how profound an act of self-disposal, yet remain unaware of grace itself. Moreover, Trent excludes the certitude of faith; this certitude is superior to every other certitude; therefore, one could maintain--although I do not maintain--without denying Trent's teaching that one is aware of having obtained grace. I do not think grace can be experienced, but merely wish to point out that no one has the certitude of faith even about the last free choice he or she made, which certainly was experienced. Furthermore, Trent is talking about certainty about being in grace; the impossibility of such certainty is compatible with the possibility of certainty that one is not in grace. This point is important, because one's own act is sufficient for mortal sin, but not for grace. Hence, what Trent teaches by no means excludes what the fundamental option proponent wishes to exclude: One can be aware of committing a mortal sin and removing oneself from God's love.

To the arguments for fundamental freedom made on the basis of the limitations of free choice, I make the following reply.

Free choices are limited acts of self-determination. One does not determine oneself with respect to cosmically inclusive objectivity, because a large part of reality is totally beyond human power. The worst sin does not destroy God, end all relationship with Him (even the damned are related to God), or utterly corrupt the self. One can dispose oneself only in respect to human possibilities. One can do this with respect to all human possibilities by free choices. Therefore, the limitedness of free choices does not argue for fundamental freedom.

At the same time, free choices are not nearly as limited as proponents of fundamental freedom suppose. Choices are not passing events; they are of themselves lasting self-determinations. Although they are made throughout life, one's consistent set of free choices can constitute and articulate an enduring self, as I explained in chapter eight, section L. There is no need for fundamental freedom to understand how a saint by many acts carries out his or her personal vocational commitments, which are made to fulfill the basic commitment of faith; animated by the gift of charity, such a life is a unified whole, intelligible as a humanly good life and recognizable in the light of faith as the life of a child of God.

In chapter eleven, sections J and K, I provided an analysis of the human life of Jesus in terms of free choices, without any need to appeal to another, fundamental freedom. The free choice which He made at the level of His basic commitment overarched the remainder of His life. By such a choice, one very obviously exercises self-determination, not merely initiates a particular performance. One takes a definite stance toward the definite goods to which one commits oneself and implicitly toward other human goods--for example, Jesus committed Himself to love His human life as an expression of the unbreakable communion between Himself and the Father, and by this religious commitment implicitly took a stance toward all the other human goods, which are promoted by His redemptive act.

Finally, there is a begging of the question by those who argue that one cannot oscillate so rapidly between mortal sin and grace as persons with a "habit of serious sin" oscillate between the choice to commit the sin and the choice to amend their lives. Apart from the supposition that there is a mysterious fundamental freedom which is constant in its option through such oscillations, there are three other possibilities.

First, perhaps there is such oscillation, as pastoral practice formerly assumed; if one does not find similar alternation in human interpersonal relationships, their comparative stability could be a consequence of their comparatively limited and specific content. Many married couples, for example, persist for a long time in a relationship of considerable ambivalence. Since everything affects and nothing is hidden in one's relationship with God, it is not easy to maintain similar ambivalence; instead, the relationship can involve oscillation.

Second, perhaps the person with the habit of serious sin does not commit a mortal sin on every occasion; the sufficient reflection and full consent required for such sin could be absent, even though there is some responsibility and a well-grounded, although also exaggerated, sense of guilt. I will explore this possibility in chapter twenty-nine. Third, perhaps the person with the habit of serious sin does not really repent on every occasion; the contrition and purpose of amendment necessary for true repentance could be absent, even though there is a ritual confession and feeling of relief. I also will explore this possibility in chapter twenty-nine.

#### 50 H. Is there always a final option in the moment of death?

The third form of fundamental option theory avoids assuming that everyone in the course of life has a fundamental commitment and also avoids assuming that there is a fundamental freedom distinct from freedom of choice. It instead proposes that each individual, in the moment of death, has a final choice, which alone disposes one totally and permanently in friendship toward God or in alienation from Him. Ladislaus Boros, S.J., has been a leading proponent of this approach.[25]

According to Boros, death provides the opportunity for one's first and only completely personal choice, the choice about one's eternal destiny. It would not do to have people at death be caught in a state of sin or grace and fixed in it forever, particularly since such acts as one can do in the course of life are limited in their personal character by limited knowledge, by passion, and by the limited possibilities with which they deal.[26] The hypothesis that in the moment of death one has at last a fully free, totally self-determining choice--a choice like that of the angels--seems to Boros to solve many other theological questions, such as the fate of those dying in original sin, and, above all, to keep within their limited and merely relative significance the very limited and imperfectly personal choices which one makes in this life.[27]

The hypothesis of final option shares the fatal difficulty of the other theories of fundamental option: It assumes that one can and must make a direct choice between God and creature. Boros describes this choice with rich metaphor. In death, the individual is fully free and conscious. Man's deepest being, his universe, splendid humanity "comes rushing towards him."

Being flows towards him like a boundless stream of things, meanings, persons and happenings, ready to convey him right into the Godhead. Yes; God himself stretches out his hand for him; God who, in every stirring of his existence, had been in him as his deepest mystery, from the stuff of which he had always been forming himself; God who had ever been driving him on towards an eternal destiny. There now man stands, free to accept or reject this splendour. In a last, final decision he either allows this flood of realities to flow past him, while he stands there eternally turned to stone, like a rock past which the life-giving stream flows on, noble enough in himself no doubt, but abandoned and eternally alone; or he allows himself to be carried along by this flood, becomes part of it and flows on into eternal fulfillment.[28]

It seems clear that Boros imagines an option with no real choice. Who, in the event,

would choose to stand eternally turned to stone? Boros tries at one point to answer this objection and an objection closely related to it, namely, that the hypothesis of final option makes the present life insignificant and guarantees that everyone reaches heaven. Boros' reply is that Christ speaks of legions of fallen angels, and their decision precisely was that of the final option.[29]

Boros also underestimates the significance of free choices of the sort we make from day to day. Like proponents of fundamental freedom, he fails to see that by ordinary choices we really cause ourselves to be, and that by a whole structured set of them we constitute an identity which is truly personal, but also really human rather than angelic.[30] Boros assumes that without a final option, the ending of a human person's time of probation at death would be inexplicable. It seems to me that the real problem rather is how to explain repentance from mortal sin which can occur in this life, since any free choice of itself tends to persist, and any mortal sin of itself implies the free acceptance of (though not the direct choice of) God-lessness, for the sake of the good one finds in the morally evil possibility one chooses. I will consider this point more fully in chapter thirty.

Apart from these difficulties, the final option hypothesis seems to have some serious difficulties of its own. There is no ground in experience for thinking that people make or are in any position to make a choice at the moment of death. Boros in practice treats the choice as that of a disembodied spirit, like an angel; this supposition really makes the final option be an initial option after death. However, he cannot admit this possibility, for it would "be contrary to the Church's teaching on the inalterability of the state a man reaches through his death." [31]

Nothing in Scripture directly supports the idea of final option, and much goes against it. The warnings of the Gospel about watching and being prepared all seem to point to the importance for eternity of the condition in which one will be found. One's fate is being settled here and now: "Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!" (2 Cor 6.2).

From a rational point of view, it is very difficult to see what sort of choice one could possibly have as a final option. Boros develops the idea that the option is to make or refuse an ultimate act of self-surrender, to resign oneself wholly to destruction but with faith, or to resist the ultimate self-emptying which is death.[32]

This notion has more initial plausibility than the metaphorical description I quoted above, and it also has the merit of giving the option some reference which is not altogether otherworldly. But does such resignation and self-surrender in the moment of death itself make sense? Prior to death, one can give up the ghost, can commend oneself to God, and can resign oneself to a foreseen but not yet present inevitability. This fact gives plausibility to the notion of a final human act bearing upon death. But all such acts occur before death. If one is perfectly aware in the very moment of death, one knows that the inevitable is present. What option remains?

#### I. Why ought all theories of fundamental option to be excluded theologically?

The adoption of a theory of fundamental option logically leads to the adoption of a threefold categorization of sins. Instead of the distinction between mortal and venial sin, understood in the traditional way, those who hold for fundamental option must distinguish between the sin of the wrong option (which can be called "mortal" or "sin unto death" or something else), the sin which traditionally would have been considered mortal, since it had all three of the traditional conditions (which still can be called "mortal," or can be renamed if "mortal" is assigned to the sin of wrong option), and the sin which traditionally would have been considered venial.

In some cases, authors who adopt a theory of fundamental option avoid adopting a threefold categorization of sins by treating only sins of wrong option as mortal, and by considering all other sins, including some which meet all the traditional criteria for mortal sin, as more or less serious venial sins.[33]

Either of these approaches has the same result: Sins which would traditionally have been considered mortal turn out not to be so, in the precise sense that they do not exclude one from the kingdom, separate one from Christ, evict the Holy Spirit from one's heart, and so forth. Now, if this conclusion is correct, then the Council of Trent by its teaching on penance seriously misleads the faithful, for Trent teaches that we must examine our consciences and confess all the mortal sins we find, according to species and number, and that we may but need not confess venial sins (cf. DS 1679-1681/899). In saying this, Trent obviously takes for granted its own teaching on mortal sin (cf. DS 1544/808), which certainly reflects the common scholastic tradition, which we find, for instance, in St. Thomas Aquinas.

However, the teaching of the Council of Trent on penance cannot be misleading the faithful, for this teaching is solemn and definitive. It shares in the most unmistakable way in the characteristic of infallibility, which I discussed in chapter fifteen. Indeed, the common and received pastoral practice, which would be greatly altered by a recategorization of sins, itself implies the infallible faith of the Church and infallible teaching of the ordinary magisterium.

Therefore, such a recategorization of sins, by which sins which would traditionally have been considered mortal turn out not to be so, cannot be correct. And so the theories of fundamental option which lead to such a recategorization also are excluded.

Someone will object that if the preceding argument is sound, there will be no possibility for new insights which would reclassify any acts or make any new distinctions among sins. But the objection is not cogent. Developments and reclassifications which are compatible with the definitive teaching of the Church and with constant pastoral practice are possible, and these are not necessarily ruled out.

The point I am making can be clarified by considering some of its practical implications.[34] I wish to make a good confession, and so I undertake to examine my conscience. I am aware of a multitude of particular free choices, but whatever the moral quality of these, they are not determinative of my state of soul. What is determinative underlies the whole drift of my life. Presumably, if I had made a basic commitment

against morality and God, I would not be interested in going to confession. It seems to follow that I have not. Therefore, I need not go to confession. But perhaps I made a fundamental option of which I have not the slightest suspicion, by a fundamental freedom of which I am not at all aware? In this case, I cannot find it no matter how long I examine my conscience. Even worse, perhaps I will not make my fundamental option until I am in the moment of death? In that case, I can forget about confession and hope that all goes well at that moment. Perhaps the sacrament of anointing will be available and will help me in my time of need.

Proponents of fundamental option tend to be optimistic. They generally assume that one's fundamental option might be good even though one's free choices meet the traditional conditions for mortal sin. Logically, they ought equally to entertain the opposite possibility. If they did, they would have to admit that just to the extent that an evil fundamental option is something very different from an ordinary free choice, one might find oneself in hell without ever having made a definite free choice with sufficient reflection in grave matter, and so without ever having had an opportunity to accept the grace of repentance.[35]

At best, theories of fundamental option do not give any very clear account of the precise relationship between the multiplicity of free choices and the all-important fundamental option. To the extent that the fundamental option becomes mysterious and inaccessible to consciousness (perhaps even being transferred to an angel-like state in the moment of death), no one could possibly intelligently organize his or her life toward or by means of the fundamental option. Moreover, theories of fundamental option are essentially individualistic. In chapters eleven and twelve I have given an account, intelligible in the light of faith, of the life of Christ as a structure of human acts and of each Christian's life as a similar structure, actually united in the great, communion-forming act of the New Covenant. If fundamental options were what really mattered, how could Jesus make His own human life available to us as a principle of our own lives as adopted children of God?

### 30 J. How does St. Thomas distinguish between grave and light matter?

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, sin is like a disease of the soul; mortal sin is like death. The principle of upright spiritual life is order to the ultimate end. If this order is lacking from one's life, then one has no place to begin putting oneself straight. The disorder in one's life is not reparable from within one's life itself. Therefore, sins which destroy order to the end are of themselves irreparable, although even they can be overcome by the re-creative power of God. But sins which involve disorder only in respect to something subordinate to the ultimate end are reparable; one can put oneself straight by reorganizing according to the principle of the end, which still is present in one's life. Such sins are venial; they are like sicknesses that do not cause death, ones which the body can overcome by its own, inherent vitality.[36]

Thomas explains further that venial sin is called "sin" only in a derivative and mitigated sense. It is somehow related to mortal sin, and by this relationship shares in the significance of sin, but in itself it is not really sin at all in the sense that mortal sin is. "For venial sin is not against the law, since one who sins venially does not do what the law forbids or fail to do what it requires by a precept; but he or she behaves apart from the law by not keeping to the reasonable mode which the law points to." [37] Consistently drawing out the implications of this position, Thomas holds that although a venial sin is not actually referred to God and His glory, it does not set up a different ultimate end, but rather by one's constant order of one's whole life to God as ultimate end even the venial sin itself--although not, of course, precisely as sin--is directed toward God.[38]

Sins can be called "venial" or "pardonable" in three senses. In one sense, every sin is pardonable by God. In a second sense, even mortal sins of weakness and ignorance, where responsibility is mitigated, are partially pardonable to the extent that the sinner is not responsible for the sin. But in a third sense--and here Thomas comes to the distinction between grave and light matter--some sins are kinds of acts which are pardonable. When one wills what of itself is incompatible with charity, by which one is ordered to one's ultimate end, the sin is mortal by virtue of what one is doing. For example, some sins are against the love of God: blasphemy, perjury, and the like; others are against love of neighbor: homicide, adultery, and so on. By contrast, sometimes one wills to do what involves a certain lack of order, but not contrary to love of God and neighbor--for example, idle talk, unnecessary laughing, and the like.[39]

Thomas holds that any kind of disordered act can be made into a mortal sin by the sinner's bad intent, for one can take the occasion to alter one's ultimate end, or one can do an act venial in kind for a mortally sinful purpose--for example, tell small lies to further seduction. Also, lack of sufficient reflection and full consent can render a disordered act which is mortally sinful in kind so imperfect as a human act that it becomes a venial sin. But Thomas is insisting upon a principle which goes beyond these considerations (which proponents of fundamental option take into account and think sufficient by themselves to distinguish grave and light matter).

Some kinds of acts have about them something specific and intelligible which makes them incompatible with the harmony between God and humankind, or with the harmony of human society which charity engenders. Blasphemy or idolatry simply are not compatible with reverence for God and subjection to Him; theft and homicide simply are not compatible with a good common life in human society. Other kinds of acts involve some disorder, but they do not exclude these harmonious relationships. For instance, if someone tells a lie which does not infringe on faith or hurt anyone, but just for fun or to help someone, or if someone eats or drinks a bit too much, then such acts are venial in kind.[40]

Thus, for St. Thomas, the deliberate theft of the newspaper, which I described in section A above, is a venial sin in kind, because although it is not fair--and so violates a reasonable mode of responsibility--it is not damaging to human community, since it does not really harm anyone significantly.

K. Critical remarks on the position of St. Thomas

It seems to me that the explanation of St. Thomas fails to solve the problem, although it is suggestive. I will offer negative criticisms first, and then go on to the positive point.

First, the notion that mortal sins are contrary to the ultimate end while venial sins only interfere with things ordered to the end might be true, but it does not explain matters. The sins which Thomas considers mortal because contrary to charity also are violations of means--the good of religion and of justice. On the other hand, even in the slight matter of the theft of the newspaper there is some inconsistency with integral human fulfillment, and so (it would seem) an implicit opposition to divine goodness, in which the particular good violated by this act is a participation.

Second, the position that the mortal sinner acts against the law while the venial sinner only behaves apart from the law also seems questionable. Surely, what is wrong with stealing the newspaper is excluded by the law which forbids stealing. If the violation of the norm is not very great, still it is a violation. If it were not, in what sense would it be true to say it deviates--which Thomas admits that it does--from the reasonable mode of acting indicated by the law? One could say that in such an insignificant act, the sinner does not intend to violate the law; it is hardly in the focus of attention. But to say this misses the fact that the mortal sinner generally does not intend to violate the law; this aspect of the act is accepted more or less reluctantly. And focus of attention has to do with sufficient reflection, which is a different question from acts light in kind. If Thomas is right, the theft of the newspaper remains venial despite the sufficient reflection and full consent with which it is done.

Third, the distinction which St. Thomas articulates seems plausible enough when one thinks only of the examples he provides. But according to the Church's teaching, which Thomas accepts as determinative, many acts which do not obviously violate the good of religion or the good of justice ("charity" toward God and neighbor) nevertheless are classed as acts grave in kind (cf. GS 27). Among these are suicide, mercy killing of a willing person, and many sexual sins, including homosexual acts, simple fornication, and masturbation. On the other hand, many socially disruptive acts such as nonmalicious gossip and forming cliques are generally not considered to be grave matter.

The account of St. Thomas has caused his commentators a great deal of difficulty. The Carmelites of Salamanca, for instance, realize that sins mortal in kind are not formally and directly contrary to charity. Their account of the matter is that such sins are disruptive in ways God in His wisdom and goodness wills to forbid; therefore, the moral norms which express God's mind and will strictly prohibit such acts; and one who loves God does His will; therefore, such acts are mortal sins.[41] Again, there has been a long debate about the ultimate end of venial sins; one plausibly argued view is that such acts simply have no ultimate end, but this position is not compatible with Thomas' general theory of action.[42] At the same time, according to Trent's definitive teaching, a sinner prior to justification does good, preparatory acts aimed at fulfillment in divine life, but only after doing them receives charity (cf. DS 1526/798). I see no way in which Thomas could account for the possibility of such acts.

I think that the source of all these difficulties is in the defects which mar Thomas' conception of humankind's last end. He tends to think of the ultimate end as if it were a determinate good, rather than integral fulfillment in all goods, and he tends to think of charity as if it were somehow more specified than it really is. If my criticism of Thomas' theory of the end, in chapter seven, section P, is right, and if the account I have given of charity as a principle of Christian life in chapter eighteen also is correct, then there must be something very important short of charity and the ultimate end which mortal sin violates and venial sin does not. Moreover, this principle needs to have the specificity and intelligibility (at least, in the light of faith) of a norm or source of specific norms. Thomas has failed to make clear the necessity for such a principle and has offered no account of what it might be.

Nevertheless, his discussion of the way in which mortal sins disrupt existential harmony on various levels while venial sins do not is suggestive. Intuitively, it makes sense to say that killing and adultery are mortal because of what they do to human relationships, and idle talk and white lies are venial because they have no such impact. The question is how to relate this intuitively sensible insight to the ultimate theological principle of the distinction between mortal and venial sin, namely, that the first is incompatible with charity while the second is not.

L. How are mortal sin and one's life in the Church related to one another?

As I explained in chapter twenty-six, section C, the distinction between mortal and venial sin has antecedents in the Old Testament's distinction between expiable faults and the crimes which cut one off from the people or were punished by death. Moreover, in the New Testament the distinction between mortal and venial sin is related to the difference between the implacable opponents of Jesus, who refuse to accept Him in faith, and His followers, whose actions often are far from exemplary, but whose solidarity with Him allows them to share in the disciples' model prayer: "forgive us our trespasses."

As St. Paul points out, Christian moral life is not individualistic; it is life in and for Christ: "None of us lives as his own master and none of us dies as his own master. While we live we are responsible to the Lord, and when we die we die as his servants" (Rom 14.7-8). A man living in incest is not committing a merely private sin; he is corrupting the community, and the community ought to get rid of him, because immoral associations within the Church are altogether inappropriate (cf. 1 Cor 5). "If anyone has given offense he has hurt not only me, but in some measure, to say no more, every one of you" (2 Cor 2.5), thus to make clear the significance of an offense for the community as a whole.

Private judgment concerning sin is excluded (cf. Rom 14.4, 10; Jas 2.4, 4.12). The leaders of the Church are responsible for rebuking sinners in the presence of the assembly (cf. 1 Tm 5.20). After several attempts at correction, a person can be given up

as perverse and self-condemned (cf. Ti 3.10). However, this judgment is reserved to the Church (cf. Mt 18.17). The power of binding and loosing, of forgiving or retaining sins, has been assigned by the Lord to the Church, and its judgment is valid in heaven (cf. Mt 16.19, 18.18; Jn 20.23). The communal or ecclesial significance of sins underlies the injunction that Christians, though personally responsible each for his or her own life, bear one another's burdens (cf. Gal 6.2-5). It also underlies the practice of mutual confession and prayer for forgiveness (cf. Jas 5.16).

The ecclesial significance of serious sin is brought out most clearly by two things. First, the Eucharist is the actuation of the unity of the Church in the redemptive act of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 10.16-17). Sin and participation in the Eucharist are at odds with one another; the sinner falls under judgment for unworthy participation (cf. 1 Cor 11.26-34). Second, since communion in the Church overcomes sin and since the Church has power to forgive sin, the separation of oneself from the Church puts one beyond the possibility of repentance and forgiveness (cf. Heb 6.4-6).

St. Augustine develops in many ways the understanding of the relationship between grave sin and the Church. In some sense, grave sin cuts one off from the Body of Christ; for this reason, one in grave sin is excluded from the Eucharist. Yet the separation is not total; the practice of penance is available to the grave sinner, and for one who is baptized, no sin is absolutely unpardonable (cf. FEF 1532 and 1536). Mortal sin means spiritual separation from the Body; one does not abide spiritually in Christ, and so is unfit to share Holy Communion. Still, there is a difference between such sin and the separation from the Church of heretics and schismatics.[43] The difference between grave and light matter thus holds for persons within the Church who still have faith; some continue to build their lives on the foundation of faith in Christ, and these commit only venial sin, but others build in a way which cannot at all stand upon this foundation, and these commit mortal sin.[44]

The definitive teaching of the Council of Trent on the Sacrament of Penance helps to make clear the ecclesial dimension of sin. The faithful must confess their mortal sins integrally to a priest ordained and given jurisdiction to hear the confession; certain sins may be reserved to pontifical or episcopal authority (cf. DS 1679-1685/899-902). What underlies this system is the truth that sacramental absolution is a judicial act (cf. DS 1709/919). A person who is contrite and who has a firm purpose of amendment--conditions which ought to be fulfilled before sacramental confession--already is in an attitude of moral rectitude and, perhaps, in grace. But sin is not simply a matter of the relationship between one's will and God, as if this relationship were merely a personal, moral one. It is a matter of one's whole, real relationship to God in and through Christ, a relationship which arises and endures, is injured and restored, in the human communion of the Church.

#### 40 M. How does faith render some kinds of acts light matter?

It seems to me that the solution to the problem of the distinction between grave and light matter is as follows. In Christian life, there is a fundamental option, namely, the act of living faith. This act has both explicit and implicit specific determinations; it is not simply an option for God or moral goodness. Some morally evil acts are incompatible with these specific determinations; these are mortal sins. Other morally evil acts are not incompatible with the specific determinations of the act of faith; these, although implicitly incompatible with charity, are only venial sins, because they do not determine the self away from the life of faith.

The harmonious relationships which must be protected are specified by faith; to act in violation of these does violate charity, because it violates the faith by which charity is accepted. Thus St. Thomas is basically correct. Even in the light of faith it is difficult and not always possible to explain fully why certain kinds of acts are not light matter. Still, what the Church teaches to be grave matter by that very fact certainly is so, although one should not suppose that this teaching is a mere arbitrary decree. Having briefly stated this position, I now try to explain it.

Bernard Häring, who says many questionable things about fundamental option and mortal sin, seems to me to be entirely correct (and, as far as I know, unique) in suggesting that the fundamental option of Christian life is faith. Faith is the acceptance of God's truth and love; it includes gratitude and self-commitment.

. . . Christian life is the creative and faithful concretization of the basic act of faith.

Faith means wholeness and salvation to the extent that it is filled with hope and trust and bears fruit in love for the life of the world. If it is active in love, faith is truly a fundamental option. Hope and love do not belong only to the later unfolding of faith; they are an essential part of faith as a fundamental option. The unfolding of these three virtues--faith, hope and love--understood as integration of faith and life, occurs in the choir of virtues.[45]

In other words, the act of living faith is the formative principle of Christian moral life. This point is one I have treated in chapter seven, section B, chapter eleven, section J, and chapter thirteen, sections D and E. As I explained in chapter twenty-six, section C, the sin for St. John is lack of faith in Christ; iniquity or God-lessness and living faith are the two basic states in which human persons can be, now that the Word has come into the world.

The act of living faith has specific determinations; it is not simply a comprehensive option for God and for moral goodness. In the first place, the act of faith is specified by a definite content: One accepts revealed truth and the offer of a share in divine life from and within the Church of Christ. To sin subsequently against these specific determinations will be a sin of infidelity; by such a sin one loses faith, since willingness and unwillingness to accept God's gift cannot coexist. However, there also are other mortal sins.

This is so because the commitment of faith has some definite implications; one accepts responsibility for living as a member of the Church and sharing in its redemptive work. It follows that both kinds of acts which would be disruptive of any human community

and kinds of acts which are peculiarly disruptive of the communion and cooperation of the Church are excluded; all such acts are grave matter. Not only acts against God such as blasphemy and idolatry, and acts against human community in general such as homicide and adultery, but acts which abuse one's own body, such as fornication, are excluded by the implications of faith for ecclesial communion (cf. 1 Cor 6.15-20).

Nevertheless, there are some morally evil acts which neither violate the specific determinations of the act of faith nor any of its clear implications. The life of faith, the work of the Church can go forward despite any amount of such sinfulness in her members. Implicitly, the willing of anything morally evil is incompatible with integral human fulfillment, and so incompatible with charity. However, the willing of an immorality which is not incompatible with faith and its implications--except in the general sense that living faith points toward perfection in charity--cannot displace or qualify the self-commitment of faith, by which one abides in divine love. Thus, such morally evil acts are not grave matter.

In other words, my deliberate act of stealing a newspaper, described in section A, above, is only a venial sin because it neither is incompatible with faith itself, nor incompatible with my standing in the Church, nor incompatible with the communion of the Church, nor detrimental to her mission. It is simply immoral. As such, it implies that I do not love divine goodness; but my act of faith--if it is living faith--blocks this implication. Stealing a newspaper is building with straw on Christ, but it still is building on Him, and the perfection of the foundation protects the defective life I live upon it.

By contrast, homicide or substantial theft will disrupt human relationships; such acts among members of the Church will be destructive of its human unity, and against outsiders will block the inclusion of them in the redemptive community. In chapter sixteen, section K, I have sketched the grounds on which the Church's moral teaching on innocent life and sex rests. Because of the special characteristics of the community which the Church is, kinds of acts are grave matter which would hardly be important enough to consider crimes in any other society. In particular, the Church is not a society only of outward relationships, but of inner communion. For this reason, grave matter extends into the heart; even sins of thought have a deep communal significance.

As St. Augustine already pointed out, it is not always easy, even in the light of faith, to understand precisely why some matters are grave and others light. [46] However, the distinction has an intelligible foundation. In particular cases, the conviction and constant teaching of the Church can be based upon a sense of faith, borne of long experience, which perhaps defies any simple articulation. Still, we can be sure that if the Church teaches a certain matter to be grave, there is some reason for it. And, given that a certain sort of act is categorized as grave, one who deliberately does it surely cannot be living the life of a faithful member of the Church.

The situation in some cases, then, is like that between friends. At times one knows that acting in a certain way very much distresses one's friend. The distress might not seem reasonable, and one's friend might not be able to articulate very intelligibly the reason for the distress. Still, if someone makes clear that they find a certain sort of act very distressing, a real friend will not deliberately go on doing that sort of thing.

In sum, the act of living faith is a Christian's fundamental option. This act excludes as inappropriate not only everything not compatible with faith itself but also everything not compatible with specific conditions of the life of faith. It does not exclude all immorality, and so there is light matter. However, anything which the Church teaches to be mortal sin certainly is incompatible with the act of living faith. If one deliberately chooses to do such an act, one is unfaithful to one's commitment of faith, even though one does not commit a specific sin against faith itself, such as heresy.

In chapter twenty-three, section I, I discussed the question of the extent of the obligation to obey the law of the Church. Considering the principle of the distinction between mortal and venial sin, one ought now to see that it is altogether reasonable to consider any substantial and fully deliberate violation of the law of the Church to be a grave matter, unless the Church herself clearly indicates otherwise.

#### Notes to chapter twenty-seven

1. See Eugene J. Cooper, "A Newer Look at the Theology of Sin," Louvain Studies, 3 (1971), p. 287.

2. See Timothy E. O'Connell, Principles for a Catholic Morality (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), pp. 80-81.

3. Maurizio Flick, S.J., and Zoltan Alszeghy, S.J., "L'opzione fondamentale della vita morale e la grazia," Gregorianum, 41 (1960), pp. 593-619. The problem with which they were dealing is why people without the help of grace cannot long avoid mortal sin.

4. Ibid., pp. 597-599.

5. Ibid., pp. 599-600.

6. Ibid., pp. 600-601.

7. Ibid., pp. 601-603.

8. Ibid., pp. 603-606.

9. Ibid., p. 604.

10. For a far richer and more adequate discussion of human action in its aspect of self-determination, see Karol Wojtyla, The Acting Person, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht, Boston, London: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 105-148.

11. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae, 1-2, qu. 89, art. 6; Flick and Alszeghy (op. cit., p. 601) erroneously make the reference to qu. 90, art. 6.

12. For the only published critique of such theories that I have seen, see Theodore Hall, O.P., "That mysterious fundamental option," Homiletic and Pastoral Review, 78 (January, 1978), pp. 12-20; (February, 1978), pp. 29-50.

13. Josef Fuchs, S.J., Human Values & Christian Morality (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1970), p. 93.

14. John W. Glaser, S.J., "Transition between Grace and Sin: Fresh Perspectives," Theological Studies, 29 (1968), pp. 261-262.
15. Ibid., p. 265.
16. O'Connell, op. cit., p. 62.
- 5 17. See Karl Rahner, S.J., "Theology of Freedom," in Theological Investigations (London and Baltimore: Darton, Longman & Todd and Helicon, 1969), p. 202.
18. O'Connell, op. cit., pp. 63-64, says that the fundamental option is the deeper meaning of some, perhaps one out of one hundred, ordinary decisions; he also talks as if acts were symptoms of one's fundamental option. Fuchs, op. cit., pp. 101-104, talks
- 10 about the relationship, but never makes clear precisely what it is.
19. See Glaser, op. cit., pp. 263-265.
20. See, for instance, Rahner, op. cit., pp. 191-192; Fuchs, op. cit., p. 105.
21. See, for instance, O'Connell, op. cit., p. 62; Rahner, op. cit., p. 184; Fuchs, op. cit., p. 100.
- 15 22. See O'Connell, op. cit., p. 60; p. 217, note 5, provides a reference to the truly seminal work of Charles Curran on this point.
23. See Glaser, op. cit., pp. 260-261.
24. Wojtyla, op. cit., pp. 108-115, clearly describes the phenomena of self-determination, which are by no means inaccessible to self-awareness.
- 20 25. Boros is not by any means alone. Louis Monden, S.J., Sin, Liberty and Law (New York: Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1965), pp. 19-44, spells out a version of the final option theory. It is interesting to notice that for him the argument very heavily depends upon stressing limitations on ordinary free choices, to the point that he virtually denies real moral responsibility in the normal course of human life.
- 25 26. Ladislaus Boros, S.J., The Mystery of Death (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), pp. 86-99.
27. Ibid., pp. 127-128; cf. Monden, op. cit., 20-33.
28. Boros, op. cit., p. ix.
29. Ibid., p. 98.
- 30 30. An excellent and very telling development of this point is in a critique of Boros and other final option theorists: Matthew J. O'Connell, S.J., "The Mystery of Death: A Recent Contribution," Theological Studies, 27 (1966), pp. 434-442.
31. Boros, op. cit., p. 4.
32. Ibid., pp. 68-81.
- 35 33. See Cooper, op. cit., pp. 275-307, for a clarification of the way in which this development has occurred; O'Connell, op. cit., pp. 77-82; Bernard Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Clergy and Laity, vol. 1, General Moral Theology (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), pp. 396-410. Häring suggests (p. 402) that he only objects to a recent excessive emphasis on quantitative considerations, and that his own
- 40 approach is compatible with the Council of Trent. This suggestion obviously is false. Häring openly (p. 408) rejects the teaching reaffirmed by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith--Declaration on Certain Questions concerning Sexual Ethics, December 29, 1975 (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1976), pp. 10-12 (#10).
- 45 34. See Monden, op. cit., pp. 44-62, for a comparatively modest (perhaps because rather early) drawing out of pastoral implications; Häring, op. cit., p. 435. O'Connell, op. cit., p. 81, gives his idea of what a confession would be like if a person were adequately sophisticated in theology, as follows: "Father, this is what I have done. I don't know for sure if it was a fully human act, a fundamental option. I cannot even be
- 50 certain that it was a human act, totally devoid of those impediments which affect the mind and the will. But I know what I did, and I know that it was gravely harmful to my neighbor. I repent it. And I want the forgiveness of Christ, which may already have been given to me and which I may already have accepted, to be incarnated and renewed in this sacrament." It is perhaps significant that O'Connell limits the appropriately
- 55 relevant content to serious sins against justice, thus to suggest that many other sins--for example, in the sexual domain--are not part of that content.
35. Those who hold for a final option would object to this formulation. But a final option is not an ordinary free choice, and once one makes it, there is no possibility of repentance. Part of God's mercy to human persons is that He allows us to experience what God-lessness is like (one who really is aware of having committed mortal sin has a sense of what hell means which no angel ever had before the fall).
- 60 36. St. Thomas, op. cit., 1-2, qu. 88, art. 1.
37. Ibid., ad 1.
38. Ibid., ad 2.
- 65 39. Ibid., qu. 88, 2; De malo, qu. 7, art. 1.
40. Ibid.
41. Collegii Salmanticensis Fr. Discalceatorum, Cursus Theologicus, tom. 8, pp. 457-466 (tract. xiii, disp. xviii, dub. 1, sec. II-III).
42. See P. DeLetter, S.J., "Venial Sin and Its Final Goal," Thomist, 16 (1953),
- 70 pp. 32-70; St. Thomas, Summa theologiae, 1-2, qu. 1, art. 6.
43. See M. Huftier, "Péché Mortal et Péché Vénial," in Théologie du Péché, ed. Ph. Delhaye et al. (Tournai: Desclée & Cie., 1960), p. 403.
44. See St. Augustine, Exposition on the Book of Psalms, 81 (80), 20.
45. Häring, op. cit., p. 197.
- 75 46. See Huftier, op. cit., pp. 395-401.