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## Our Lady and the Law of Sin

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## OUR LADY AND THE LAW OF SIN

The title of this paper puts side by side two factors of salvation history, the person of the Mother of God and the "law of sin," and asks, at least implicitly, how they are related. This juxtaposition is not accidental, of course, even though it does not often appear as such. The intimacy of the relation, moreover, can be gathered from the fact that the law of sin was promulgated, as it were, at the same moment that Mary's freedom of it was prophesied.

The burden of these reflections, then, will be a spelling out of this relation, through a reappraisal of both the meaning of the law of sin in salvation history and the way in which Mary's victory over sin, especially in the Immaculate Conception, affects the present progress of the Church in her struggle against the powers who strive to make the law of sin prevail.

### I. THE FACTS CONCERNING THE LAW OF SIN AND MARY'S FREEDOM FROM IT.

#### A) *The Universal Application and Nature of the Law of Sin.*

The history of our salvation begins with the fall of our first parents. St. Augustine calls this sin *felix culpa*, in that it was the occasion of the working out of a plan by God to restore human nature in a manner even more wonderful than the way in which He had created it.

The Council of Trent described the effects of this transgression, first of all in Adam himself: (1) He was no longer holy and just, as he had been previous to the fall. (2) He incurred the anger and wrath of God, a sign of which was his becoming subject to death. (3) Therewith he fell under the dominion of Satan. (4) Finally, his whole being, i.e., both the spiritual and the bodily factors of his nature, suffered a change for the worse.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>DB (edit. 1963) 1511: "Si quis non confitetur, primum hominem

The same Council reaffirmed the *extent* of the harm done through the sin of Adam. He did not incur the loss of holiness and justice for himself alone. His descendants were also destined to be affected by Adam's loss. Furthermore, the entire human race—for that is the meaning of "the descendants of Adam"—suffered thereby subjection not merely to the sign of this deprivation, namely, bodily death and the weaknesses that lead to it, but also subjection to what the Council called the "death of the soul," i.e., sin.<sup>2</sup>

To be noted here, moreover, is a parallel not made explicit in the document at hand, though it is certainly in line with the general tenor of this very text. To the bodily weaknesses which eventually bring on physical death would seem to correspond certain spiritual weaknesses or tendencies, which have their term in sin. As a matter of fact the worsening human nature in its totality through the sin of Adam means just that. The body of man comes into being under the sign of death; and in the first moment of its existence changes occur which must finally result in its corruption. Likewise man's soul is created under the sign of sin; and inherent in it are propensities which would normally result in every man's imitating, according to the impulses peculiar to himself, the rebellion of Adam.

To say that salvation history begins here, with our first par-

Adam, cum mandatum Dei in paradiso fuisset transgressus, statim sanctitatem et iustitiam, in qua constitutus fuerat, amisisse incurrisseque per offensam praevaricationis huiusmodi iram et indignationem Dei atque ideo mortem, quam antea illi comminatus fuerat Deus, et cum morte captivitatem sub ejus potestate, *qui mortis deinde habuit imperium* [Hebr. 2:14], hoc est diaboli, totumque Adam per illam praevaricationis offensam secundum corpus et animam in deterius commutatum fuisse: A.S."

<sup>2</sup> DB (edit. 1963) 1512: "Si quis Adae praevaricationem sibi soli et non ejus propagini asserit nocuisse, acceptam a Deo sanctitatem et iustitiam, quam perdidit, sibi soli et non nobis etiam eum perdidisse; aut inquinatum illum per inobedientiae peccatum mortem et poenas corporis tantum in omne genus humanum transfudisse, non autem et peccatum, quod mors est animae: A.S., cum contradicat Apostolo dicenti: *Per unum hominem peccatum intravit in mundum, et per peccatum mors, et ita in omnes homines mors pertransiit, in quo omnes peccaverunt* [Rom. 5:12]."

ents' throwing off the yoke of obedience to God's will, is to be understood properly. The sense is that what takes place subsequently with a view towards the righting of the chaos produced by this act of rebellion is *contingent*, i.e., dependent on the free initiative of the merciful God and on the free acceptance of God's mercy on man's part. Nor do these two freedoms—the freedom of God and the freedom of man—belong to the same order. God's freedom is the transcendent cause of salvation history; man's freedom is only one factor, albeit a crucial one, in the working out thereof.

The starting point, then, of salvation history is an event with universal implications. In virtue of the defective way in which our first parents employed the freedom given them by God, the freedom of all other men is impaired, to the extent that the use thereof bears fruit not in salvation but in sin.

Among the terms used in Catholic tradition to describe the situation consequent upon our first parents' sin is "law." This term is used, moreover, in reference not only to the point from which salvation history takes its origin, but also to describe the end wherein this history is brought to a conclusion. The main interest here, however, is in the former reference, namely, in the universality of the "law of sin" and ultimately in the nature of that law.

Speaking for all men, St. Paul makes the following relevant statements: "... When I wish to do good I discover this law, namely, that evil is at hand for me. For I am delighted with the law of God according to the inner man, but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind and making me prisoner to the *law of sin* that is in my members. . . . Therefore, I myself with my mind serve the law of God, but with my flesh the *law of sin* " (*Rom.* 7:22 f, 25). Then, speaking on behalf of only a part of mankind he says: "There is . . . now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh. For the law of the Spirit

of the life in Christ Jesus has delivered me from the *law of sin* and of death" (8:1-3).

The fact is that all men experience a certain conflict, which consists in knowing what is right and even taking some delight in this "law of God," and, on the other hand, being drawn by an inner force toward that which is opposed to the 'law of God.' It is as if two natures were operative in man. This conflict even has the effect of making man believe that doing good does not lie within his power.

The universal condition of man, then, according to St. Paul, is that he is in the grips of the "law of sin." The knowledge he has of what is right, even in the concrete circumstances of his activity, does not enable him to attain this integrity in himself because he is powerless to put it into effect. His own powers are so disordered that they are not inclined to accomplish what the mind dictates.

St. Paul does not end on such a dismal note as this, however, even though his view of the actual situation does wring from him the cry, "Unhappy man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?" (*Rom.* 7:24). Without prejudice to the actuality of the grip of the law of sin, he is capable of saying that "for those who are in Christ Jesus" there is no condemnation (8:1). The most notable thing about this statement is that it is, unlike what is said about the inner conflict, not universal. Only those who are "in Christ Jesus" are exempt from the sentence of condemnation which would normally follow from the application of the law of sin, and this because to be "in Christ Jesus" is to fall within the province and under the sway of a new law, that of "the Spirit of the life in Christ Jesus" (8:3).

Thus we would appear to have an adequate summary description of the state of mankind as God issues the vocation to share in salvation. *Universally* present in man is the "law of the mind," whereby he is capable of judging right from wrong, and which bears fruit in the *wish* to do good, as well as *delight* at

the thought of doing good. Also *universally* present in man is another "law of the members," which is a "law of sin," in that it comes from sin and leads to sin. This law of the members comes from sin in the sense that, in virtue of the sin of our first parents, men universally have become subject not only to the guilt incurred by Adam through his rebellion, but also to the disorder in human nature consequent upon the rebellion. This latter law of sin is in conflict with the law of the mind and is present to man as the disposition or inclination to reject and abandon what the mind dictates, so that, left to himself, man will perpetrate acts leading to perdition. Finally, but *not universally*, we discover a third law operative among men, which, by destroying sin, makes the law of sin ineffective in its tyrannical dominion over man, "the law of the Spirit of the life in Christ Jesus."

This description is confirmed by Tradition, of course, although the exact relation between sin and the law of sin is not always spelled out. The doctrine of the Council of Trent is quite explicit concerning the connection between sin and physical death,<sup>3</sup> as also the direct consequence of the dominion of Satan.<sup>4</sup> No such explicit reference can be adduced regarding the law of sin as such, but the context shows that the connection is integral. This, then, is the universal state of mankind *in consequence* of the sin of Adam.

The history of man's understanding of what sin is shows that the reality, though apparently complex, is a radically simple attitude, sc., rebellion of the creature against the Creator and rejection of the measure which is imposed on the creature in virtue of the established relationship. This is true notwithstanding the fact that in the Old Testament the commonest expression for sin means to make a mistake.<sup>5</sup> Such a judgment, moreover, is based on the recognition that the nature of sin is por-

<sup>3</sup> DB (edit. 1963) 1511: "...atque ideo mortem..."

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*: "...et cum morte captivitatem sub potestate...diaboli."

<sup>5</sup> Cf. art. *Sin*, in *Bible Key Words*, by G. Quell, G. Bertram, G. Stählin, W. Grundmann, 3 (London, 1951) 8.

trayed most clearly in the opening pages of the Bible. The story of the fall shows that what man really seeks in sinning is a sort of divine sovereignty in his own affairs.<sup>6</sup> He wants to be "free from control and responsible only to himself."<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, other meanings attached to words standing for sin, such as its being an error committed through ignorance, could only be derived from the more radical sense. Error only comes into play where there is a measure and where, furthermore, some previous disorder has introduced the possibilities of falling short of or going beyond that measure.

Any more detailed analysis of the nature of sin and the modalities which it exhibits has to take into account this root form. Even St. Paul's consciousness of his having been a sinner in so far as he tried to "attain salvation along the path of self-righteousness by works of the law"<sup>8</sup> must be reduced to the admission of his having *rebelled* against God's way of salvation. Perhaps the best way of understanding this is to consider the way St. Thomas describes the sin of our first parents. It consisted principally, he says, in "the desire to be like God in the knowledge of good and evil . . . which means having the power to determine *on one's own* what is good to do and what is evil. Secondly it was the desire to be like God as regards the proper power to act, which means having the power *on one's own* to attain beatitude."<sup>9</sup> To want to be on one's own, when this is contrary to the inner structure of one's being, is rebellion in the proper sense of the word. Everything else in the genus of sin is a more or less direct consequence of this rebellion. This is true not merely in the case of our first parents, but also

<sup>6</sup> *Loc. cit.*, 26.

<sup>7</sup> *Loc. cit.*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> *Loc. cit.*, 75-76.

<sup>9</sup> St. Thomas, II-II, 163, 2, c.: "...primus homo peccavit principaliter appetendo similitudinem Dei quantum ad scientiam boni et mali...ut scilicet per virtutem propriae naturae determinaret sibi quid esset bonum et quid malum ad agendum...Et secundario peccavit appetendo similitudinem Dei quantum ad propriam potestatem operandi, ut scilicet virtute propriae naturae operaretur ad beatitudinem consequendam."

when applied to the whole of mankind. Reasonably, therefore, the power of sin is sometimes portrayed as a kind of external force, which imposes itself upon men and makes for havoc in human life.

Traditionally a clear distinction is made between sin as such—taken either as an act or a state of rebellion—and the propensity toward it, to which St. Paul refers as the “law of sin.” For example, the tridentine decree on original sin states that rebirth through faith and baptism does not eliminate “concupiscence or the tinder [of sin].”<sup>10</sup> The decree states further that the *raison d'être* of this condition of weakness is the struggle which ensues when man comes to grips with his present state. Concupiscence, taken in this sense, can do no harm, however, to those “who do not consent to it and who manfully set themselves in opposition to it through the grace of Jesus Christ.”<sup>11</sup> All this is said, moreover, against the background of the affirmation that those who are reborn through faith and baptism are “innocent, *immaculate*, pure, guiltless, and God’s dear children.”<sup>12</sup>

The use of the word, “concupiscence,” in this document and elsewhere raises a question concerning the precise nature of this propensity toward sin, which remains in all men, even though they live by faith. Does it refer primarily and even simply to the tendency of the lower powers of the soul (the sensitive appetites) to rebel against reason? Or does it refer, by metonymy, to a more profound weakness, which affects even the higher powers of man, i.e., his reason and will? The former reference is definitely part of the picture, of course, and the rebellion of the lower appetites is perhaps the one felt most acutely. Thus in commenting on the seventh chapter of the epistle to the Romans, St. Thomas observes: “The disobedience of the lower powers—to which is given the name, *fomes*

<sup>10</sup> *DB* (edit. 1963) 1515: “Manere autem in baptizatis concupiscentiam vel fornicem, haec sancta Synodus fatetur et sentit.”

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

[tinder]—is called a law, in so far as it is there in consequence of the law of divine justice, the sentence of the just judge, as it were. . . . This law, moreover, has its seat in the sensitive appetite, but is diffused among all the members [of the body], which are in the service of concupiscence for sin.”<sup>13</sup> Another perspective is possible, however, and St. Thomas actually takes it into account when he incorporates into his description of the effects of sin the tradition concerning the “wounds of nature,” a tradition he attributes to Venerable Bede.<sup>14</sup> There he observes that in the state of original justice all the powers of the soul had a natural propensity toward virtue. Now—and this is a universal condition—they are deprived of that propensity and are subject to an opposite bent. This bent, moreover, is complex, for it affects *all* the powers susceptible of being perfected through virtue. Included, of course, are the reason and the will, wounded respectively by ignorance and malice.

This doctrine would seem to have a special relevance today, and to be, thereby, all the more intelligible to us. We live in an age wherein the acquired rectification of various powers of the soul is a relatively rare phenomenon. The general reason for this is doubtless the breakdown of family life, especially as regards the authority of the father, and the consequent prevalence of repressed guilt feelings, which follow upon the rejection of paternal authority by most children. The truth of this can be tested by experience; but it remains no less true that the baptism of faith renders its recipients innocent, immaculate, pure, etc.

How are these two conditions to be reconciled? Simply by recognizing that they do co-exist and that the resolution of

<sup>13</sup> St. Thomas, *ad Rom.*, c. 7, lect. 4 (edit. Cai, nn. 587-588): “Ipsa inobedientia inferiorum virium, quae dicitur fomes, lex dicitur in quantum est per legem divinae iustitiae introducta, sicut justi pudicis sententia . . . Haec autem lex originaliter quidem consistit in appetitu sensitivo sed diffusive invenitur in omnibus membris, quae deserviunt concupiscentiae ad peccandum.”

<sup>14</sup> St. Thomas, I-II, 85, 3.

the co-existence is substantially the same as it ever was. Those who enter into salvation history through a mystical share in the saving event of Christ's Pasch may be, and doubtless still are, subject to the disorder variously called the law of sin, the *fomes peccati*, concupiscence, or the wounds of nature. The grace of Jesus does heal these wounds, of course, but this gradually, and according to the dispositions of the individual nature. It might even be that today these wounds are, for the most part, untouchable; but this would not inhibit the victory of grace, because there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

In the epistle to the Romans St. Paul sets forth clearly the temporal universality of the application of the law of sin. It was in effect before the giving of the Law of Moses (*Rom.* 5:13f). The experience of Israel under the Law proved that the Law itself did not make the law of sin ineffective, but rather intensified its influence (*Rom.* 7:7f; cf. 4:15; 1 *Cor.* 15:56). This helps us to understand salvation history, because it shows quite conclusively that *this* history does not consist in a gradual but ineluctable improvement of human nature; for even *now*, in these latter days, the law of sin abounds.

#### B) *Mary's Freedom from the Law of Sin.*

"This same holy synod declares that it has not the intention of including within the scope of this decree, where original sin is the concern, the blessed and immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God."<sup>15</sup> This rather cautious language of Trent now cedes to the more forthright statement given sanction over a hundred years ago by Pope Pius IX, to the effect that "The most blessed Virgin Mary was preserved immune from every taint of original sin in the very first instant of her conception, this by an altogether singular grace and privilege of Almighty

<sup>15</sup> *DB* (edit. 1963) 1516: "Declarat tamen haec ipsa sancta Synodus non esse suae intentionis comprehendere in hoc decreto, ubi de peccato originali agitur, beatam et immaculatam Virginem Mariam Dei genitricem . . ."

God, and in view of the merits of Christ Jesus, the Savior of the human race."<sup>16</sup>

Every word of this definition has been pondered. The meaning of some of them is still disputed. One fact is clear, however, namely, that in the working out of salvation history God chose, for reasons that are enveloped in the mystery of Christ, to exempt Mary from incurring the guilt which is the common and universal lot of the sons of Adam.

The bull *Ineffabilis Deus* also points to the foundation of the grace of the Immaculate Conception. Mary was preserved from the guilt of original sin "in view of the merits of Jesus Christ," in so far as He is the "Savior of the human race." This may be considered an implicit affirmation of Mary's being a redeemed human being,<sup>17</sup> an assumption confirmed somewhat in the constitution *De Ecclesia* of the Second Vatican Council: "...because she belongs to the offspring of Adam, she is one with those who are to be saved."<sup>18</sup>

Also implicit in the Immaculate Conception are factors directly related to the "law of sin," as described by St. Paul. M. J. Nicolas sums up these implications as follows: "[The Immaculate Conception] bears with it gifts without which a person can be holy, to be sure, but by the same token without which a person could not possibly avoid the bite or, at very least, the proposition of sin. These gifts include perfect harmony of interior movements, the spontaneous submission of the sensitive part of the soul to the spiritual, absolutely perfect balance, complete lucidity, and interior unity—in a word, and in technical language, the abolition of concupiscence."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ineffabilis Deus*, in *DB* (edit. 1963) 2803.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. E. Schillebeeckx, *Mary, Mother of the Redemption* (New York, 1964) 39-40.

<sup>18</sup> Const. *De Ecclesia*, n. 53. At the time of this writing only an unofficial translation was available.

<sup>19</sup> M.-J. Nicolas, *Essai de synthèse mariale*, in H. du Manoir (ed.), *Maria. Etudes sur la Sainte Vierge*, 1 (Paris, 1949) 725: "Elle entraîne des dons sans lesquels on peut être saint, mais sans lesquels on ne peut pas éviter la morsure ou tout au moins la proposition du péché: la parfaite

This is tantamount to saying that in Mary the law of sin was in no wise effective. That would be the meaning of saying, for example, that her interior life was altogether harmonious. Every faculty or power of her being executed the function proper to it, both according to the measure imposed from above, e.g., from a higher power, and by its own inner or spontaneous élan to the object for which it was made. Not incidentally this same harmony constituted a multiple image of trinitarian life; for wherever activity is measured and thus rectified by reason (the Word), and yet proceeds from an inner impulse (the Spirit), there is an image of the interior life of God.

Nor ought these implications to be viewed as far-fetched or far removed from the biblical doctrine concerning Mary. To say, for example, that in her the sensitive appetite submitted spontaneously to the dictates of the practical reason is simply to affirm that the description St. Paul offers of the execution of the "law of sin" does not apply to Mary. So too with terms such as "absolute tranquillity," "thoroughgoing lucidity of mind," and the "abolition of concupiscence." No one of them is an exaggeration in light of the close connection portrayed by St. Paul and spelled out by the tridentine decree on original sin between the guilt incurred on behalf of us all by Adam—from which Mary is totally exempt—and the other effects of the fall. The fact of Mary's being liberated from the tyrannical law of sin cannot be called into question.

A more positive expression of this liberation would normally include also making explicit the constant growth in love which would be consequent upon Mary's recognition of the gift of perfect interior harmony. Again in the words of M. J. Nicolas, "consciousness of being preserved at every moment from falling into evil gave Mary a feeling of gratitude comparable to

*harmonie des tendances intérieures, la soumission spontanée de la sensibilité à l'équilibre absolu, la pleine lucidité, l'unité intérieure, en un mot, et selon le langage technique, l'abolition de la concupiscence."*

that of *any* sinner conscious of being forgiven."<sup>20</sup> This is an accurate statement of the reality; because the gratuity of salvation is so much the more marvelous as its effect is more perfect. Realisation of the gift of God expanded the Immaculate Heart of Mary, making it burn with love for God, her Savior.

## II. INTERPRETATION OF THE FACTS.

### A) *Principles to be Employed in the Interpretation*

The meaning of the facts presented here concerning the law of sin—its universal application and nature—and Mary's exemption from it becomes clear only in light of the mystery of the redemptive Incarnation. The opening lines of chapter eight of the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church re-emphasizes this well-known principle: "Wishing in His supreme goodness and wisdom to effect the *redemption* of the world, 'when the fullness of time came, God sent his son, born of a woman . . . that we might receive the adoption of sons' (*Gal. 4:4*)."<sup>21</sup>

St. Thomas offers what may be considered a further precision of this principle, also helpful in interpreting the facts. He states it as follows: "The work of the Incarnation is ordained principally to the restoration of human nature through the destruction of sin."<sup>22</sup> Although the general meaning of this statement is clear, it might be helpful to note that the term, "the work of the Incarnation," stands for the *total* mystery, as it proceeds from God and is realized in the flesh of His only-begotten Son. Also to be noted is the correlation between the *restoration* of human nature and the *abolition* of sin. Restoration is not to be understood here, of course, in the humanistic sense of merely giving to man what is obviously lacking to him in the realms of knowledge and the exploitation

<sup>20</sup> *Art. cit.*, 722.

<sup>21</sup> Const. *De Ecclesia*, n. 52.

<sup>22</sup> St. Thomas, III, 1, 5, c.: "... opus incarnationis principaliter ordinatur ad reparationem naturae humanae per peccati abolitionem . . ." Cf. a. 3.

of the created universe; but in the traditional sense of a re-establishment of the order which obtained before the fall, now without the preternatural gifts, when the order of human life was based on and consisted principally in supernatural friendship with God, love rooted in faith and bearing fruit finally in face-to-face-vision.<sup>23</sup>

Although St. Thomas states his position without any apparent reference to history, it need not be taken as a pure abstraction. As a matter of fact, the statement itself occurs within his investigation of the meaning of a term employed by St. Paul and lately used again by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, "the fullness of time." That the Word was made flesh at a particular moment in history is itself meaningful. The fact is that during the whole period of time subsequent to the fall, however long that period actually was, mankind had been held in bondage by Satan. Indications are too that Satan's hold became tighter and tighter, and that man became progressively weaker in this death grip. In His wisdom, then, God postponed the work of the Incarnation just long enough that man might know how badly off he was, what estimate might be given of human nature devoid of the integrity given by God in the beginning—and this under the various circumstances of the periods of history both before and after His Covenants with the Chosen People and the giving of the mosaic law. The "fullness of time," therefore, was not a moment of plenitude in the sense that human achievement had reached a level that called for the complementary and crowning action of God. It was, rather, the moment of utter helplessness, when, in the very recognition of his need, man preserved the hope of being saved by God, though even that expectation was quite defective in its specification.

*B) Conclusions to be drawn from these principles.*

An immediate conclusion to be derived from these principles.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 13:12-13.

of course, is that the grace of the Immaculate Conception is the most perfect fruit of the Redemptive Incarnation; because it is the total preservation from sin in the person of her who is destined to be the Mother of the Redeemer. By the same token, it must be, in some sense, the total restoration of human nature in her; because the two—preservation from sin and restoration of human nature—are inseparable correlatives. Stated within the context of the ecclesial mystery, this means that “in the most Holy Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle.”<sup>24</sup>

This statement, moreover, is an intimation that the Immaculate Conception is at once the consummate work of the redemption and the principle of restoration of human nature.

The precise role of Mary's exemption from the law of sin, in the restoration of human nature, may be seen a little more clearly, if it be recalled that all grace given her, as the Mother of the Word Incarnate, is relationally hypostatic. This means that her participation in the mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation belongs to an order distinct from that enjoyed by any other mere creature's participation in it. And so, since that work, viz., the hypostatic union, is willed by God for the restoration of human nature, graces given in immediate view of that union must share in the same finality.

In order to see what this means in the concrete, however, it is necessary to refer back to the law of sin and its application at the present moment of salvation history, the moment of “realized expectation.” According to the Council's Constitution on the Church the correlative of Mary's perfection, in whom the Church “already . . . exists without spot or wrinkle,” is a striving for increase in holiness on the part of all the other members of Christ, through the conquering of sin.<sup>25</sup>

This situation needs to be spelled out and recognized for what it is. The law of sin is still operative in the Church today,

<sup>24</sup> Const. *De Ecclesia*, n. 65.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

and this notwithstanding our having been washed clean "in the bath of water by means of the word" (*Eph.* 5:27). St. Paul's description of man's state in the seventh chapter of the epistle to the Romans is quite relevant; and even his observations concerning attempts at self-justification through the keeping of the law can be interpreted for an understanding of our present status.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the striving after increasing holiness through the conquering of sin is an activity composed of good and bad factors. This striving is good in so far as it proceeds from faith in the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and thereby consists in a more or less constant abiding in Jesus. The effort put forth is vitiated, however, in so far as it consists in an attempt to "keep the law," i.e., to do works of perfection without the constant recognition that these works are themselves worthless when not done in Jesus.

A study of the history of the Church, e.g., during the era immediately preceding the Reformation, and also observation of the Catholic conscience today reveals that such "keeping of the law" without reference to the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith, and *consequent* moment by moment liberation from the law of sin, has been prevalent and is prevalent even now.

Most significant in this situation, of course, is the psychological basis for the keeping of the law. Why are people meticulous about observing regulations, when this care is not rooted in the realization that all particular norms of human activity are subordinate to the law of love? A major factor will always be the need for purity, i.e., the desire to make oneself immaculate and therefore worthy of love. This need for purity will always be the underlying motive for making an idol of the law.

Paradoxically, then, the law of sin expresses itself in part as a desire for purity. This will be true in any age, in so far as man in his present state feels the necessity of *proving* his

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Gal.* 3; *Rom.* 1:16-4:25.

own integrity, an integrity he knows deep down he does not possess. Each particular age, moreover, will experience a peculiar form of this compulsion. For example, in our own day the ponderous mass of *repressed* guilt that weighs heavily upon most men expresses itself in a peculiar vacillation between a false optimism, wherein man operates *as if* he were immaculately conceived, i.e., not affected by the law of sin, and that type of despair which ends up in self-pity at being loaded down with a burden of guilt which cannot possibly be borne. Of course, the second attitude is the more realistic, in that a certain despair concerning the capacities of human nature must precede the healing and restoration of that nature. It is not effective, however, of itself, and may well lead to a person's *abandoning* himself to the law of sin.

Two possibilities emerge, therefore, for man affected by the law of sin and unaware of the means whereby it may be abolished. Either he attempts to be born again on his own and thus to *achieve* his own immaculate conception—by the phantasy of pure naturalism or the anxious and self-justifying observance of the law—or he falls in love with sin and thus puts away the very thought of liberation from its inexorable law. Which state is the worse is difficult to say; in any case, this is the world as we see it today.

In reality, however, the human nature that is in need of purity and which cries out for restoration has the type and model of its purity and restoration in the Immaculate Conception of Mary. That men look to Mary, therefore, in her Immaculate Conception, and abide *in her* in order to die to sin and rise with Jesus to new life, is the normal way to liberation from the law of sin. She *is* the Immaculate Conception, just as she *is* full of grace (according to the greeting of the Angel who called her by that name!). The Church sees in her, therefore, her own destiny. The attaining of that destiny does not consist in feverish or anxious attempts to duplicate what God has done in her, but rather in being her children with Jesus.

Eventually this means complete liberation from the law of sin, so that Jesus Himself may present to the Father His immaculate bride, wholly without spot of wrinkle, reflecting in her perfection Christ's Virgin Mother, who was immaculately conceived and free from that law from the very beginning of her life.

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