

Gregory Graham

16 March 2009

### Avoiding Sin

In I-II, 109, 8 St. Thomas has been outlining the relationship between God's grace and human responsibility in salvation. In this article he picks up the issue of avoiding sin, and if it is possible for a man to avoid sin without the help of God's grace. He begins in the corpus by distinguishing between man in the state of perfect nature (before the fall) and man in the state of corrupted nature (after the fall). Man before the fall could have avoided sinning without God's grace because sin is a departure from what is according to nature, so man in his natural state was capable of acting according to nature rather than sin. However, now that man's nature is corrupted by the fall, we need grace to be healed from that corruption before we can hope to completely abstain from sin.

The fall corrupted both our minds and the appetites of our bodies. In this present life, God's grace provides healing for our minds, but our bodies are not healed until the resurrection. That is why St. Paul says in Romans 7:25 that in his mind he serves the law of God, but in his flesh, the law of sin. Because of this continued corruption of the flesh, it is not possible to be completely free of venial sin in this life. Although we can combat venial sin through the exercise of our reason, we have the problem that while concentrating on a particular area of sin, another area of sin may arise that we were not able to anticipate. Therefore, even with the help of God's grace, we will continue to struggle with venial sin in this life.

Because of the healing of the mind by grace, it is possible in this life to abstain from mortal sin, at least for a time, because mortal sin requires the activity of our reason to so order ourselves to an end other than that of God and destroy the principle of the spiritual life (I-II, 74, 4c). However, St. Thomas says we cannot remain for a long time without mortal sin. Any sins in our life that we did not immediately repent of drag us down to other sins. They can cause disordered conceptions of what is good, and bad habits can be formed. Therefore a person with God's grace may be caught off guard, and may revert back to old ways of thinking which could lead to the commission of mortal sin, unless by grace he is quickly brought back to "due order."

St. Thomas' distinction between mortal and venial sin by means of the use of reason caught my attention because it appears to fit with modern Catholic moral theology, which gives three conditions for mortal sin. First, the act must be gravely sinful. This condition is not addressed in this article, but can be assumed when St. Thomas speaks of mortal sin. Second, the person must have "full knowledge", knowing that the act is sinful and opposed to God's law. Thirdly, the person must have "complete consent" to the act. The second and third conditions are rooted in the mind, so it makes sense that the healing of the mind by grace can enable us to avoid mortal sin for a while.