

A CHURCH IN CRISIS

PATHWAYS FORWARD

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Chapter 6

IS ANYONE RESPONSIBLE?

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it? "I the LORD search the mind and try the heart, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings." (Jer 17:9-10)

WE ARE LIVING in a culture which often communicates that nobody is responsible and everyone is a victim and that forces beyond our control are overwhelming our will and determining our actions, so "we are not really responsible." The increasingly common pressure in youth sports to not focus on the actual outcomes of games but rather to award trophies to everyone just for participating may have some positive features to it, but not when it comes to the final outcomes of human lives. When it comes to the ferocious battle of kingdoms that we find ourselves in the midst of, there are clear-cut winners and losers, the saved and the damned. One of the background presumptions that undermines conviction about the importance of what God's Word reveals concerning salvation, including sexual morality, is that even though these things may be objectively seriously wrong, the conditions for them to be subjectively seriously wrong—and culpable—are so demanding that most people who do these things are probably not really culpable.

The statement of the Malta bishops in their response to *Amoris*

Laetitia speaks of this:

Throughout the discernment process, we need to weigh the moral responsibility in particular situations, with due consideration to the conditioning restraints and attenuating circumstances. Indeed, "factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision," (AL 301) or even diminish imputability or responsibility for an action. These include ignorance, inadvertence, violence, fear, affective immaturity, the persistence of certain habits, the state of anxiety, inordinate attachments, and other psychological and social factors (see AL 302; CCC 1735, 2352). As a result of these conditioning restraints and attenuating circumstances, the Pope teaches that "it can no longer simply be said that all those in any 'irregular situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace' (AL 301). "It is possible that in an objective situation of sin—which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such—a person can be living in God's grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church's help to this end" (AL 305). This discernment acquires significant importance since, as the Pope teaches, in some cases this help can include the help of the sacraments (see AL, note 351).

"By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God" (AL 305). This calls for more prudent instruction in the law of gradualness, (see AL 295) in order to discern the presence, the grace and the working of God in all situations, and help people approach closer to God, even when "not in a

position to understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law" (AL 295).³¹⁵

Yes, there are factors that may diminish culpability. Yes, accompanying people means working with them, discerning where God's grace is stirring in their lives, but with the goal of helping them come to the repentance and amendment of life that is necessary in order to be reconciled with the Lord and the Church and receive Communion. When I expressed my deep concern to a friend who serves the Church in Rome that it seemed like influential Church leaders were downplaying the seriousness of sexual sin, despite what Scripture and the Church teach, he shared his understanding of the situation. He confirmed that indeed sexual morality was being downplayed in an effort to appeal to today's culture, but also perhaps because the Church has "winked" at sexual sins in various Latin cultures. He also said that many leaders believe that hardly anyone is really culpable for sexual sins "because men are so weak," even though, theoretically, we believe these are grave sins. At root, it's a crisis of faith, not believing that with the help of grace, people are able to repent and change their lives.

This came to my attention in a vivid way one day while teaching a course in our STL program at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit.³¹⁶ I was conducting a seminar on the stages of spiritual growth for a class made up entirely of priests. When we were working on the concept of what Scripture says about sins that will exclude us from entering the kingdom—mortal sins—one of the priests spoke up in class and said something quite remarkable, both for its honesty and for its implications for understanding some truths about culpability.

He said to his fellow priests: "Let's face it. Sometimes we use the three conditions that are necessary to commit a mortal sin as a way to rationalize a choice we actually make to sin. We deceive ourselves into thinking that the gravely wrong action that we are doing isn't being

done with sufficient reflection or full consent of the will when in fact we are actually freely choosing to do it, although with less-than-full consciousness. Although sufficient reflection and full consent can happen in an instant, we often try to cover over our truly free choice to do a bad action with rationalization and self-justification."³¹⁷

And, of course, the controversy around the proper interpretation of *Amoris Laetitia* has put the question of objective wrongdoing accompanied by a lack of personal culpability front and center.

As Pope Francis put it and as was cited by the Maltese bishops:

Hence it can no longer simply be said that all those in any irregular situations are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace. More is involved here than mere ignorance of the rule. A subject may know full well the rule, yet have great difficulty in understanding its inherent values, or be in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to act differently and decide otherwise without further sin.³¹⁸

This statement has led some cardinals, bishops, and bishops' conferences to suggest that as an outcome of pastoral counseling, couples who have divorced and remarried, without submitting the situation of their first marriage to the judgment of the Church to see if they qualify for an annulment, may be given permission to "follow their conscience" if they feel at peace about receiving Communion despite their irregular situation. Other cardinals, bishops, and bishops' conferences have concluded that these interpretations are not in harmony with the teaching of the Church or the teaching of Pope Francis's immediate predecessors.

While the focus of properly weighing "mitigating circumstances" has been almost exclusively directed to the situation of the divorced and remarried, it has been noted by various commentators

that this principle can also be applied to other irregular situations, such as same-sex relationships.

As we noted in a previous chapter, this possibility has been explicitly affirmed in an interview that Cardinal Cupich gave that appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*. He made the logical point that if the objective wrong but subjective lack of culpability principle could be broadly applied to the case of the divorced and remarried, it must, of course, also be applicable to other irregular situations, such as same-sex relationships. "You can't have one particular approach for a certain group of people and not for everybody. Everyone has the ability to form their conscience well."³¹⁹

It is not my intention in this chapter to directly address the issues as they are presented in *Amoris Laetitia* and the ensuing contradictory interpretations of it; we have already done that to some extent in earlier chapters. In this chapter, I want to explore the implications of the comment of my priest-student cited above. One of the main points I will be making is that, particularly in matters of sexual morality, deception and self-deception are easy to fall into, and this propensity needs to be taken into serious account in judging our own culpability in a particular matter or in guiding others in assessing their own culpability. Another point I will make is that, even in cases of invincible ignorance or severely diminished culpability, and whatever the gravely wrong sins that are being committed may be, the pastoral response needs to be not primarily focused on determining culpability but calling to a full life in Christ, to repentance and faith and life in the Holy Spirit. Even in cases where there may be no subjective culpability, the gravely wrong actions that may have inculpably been committed are objectively damaging to souls and bodies and nevertheless need to be turned away from and replaced with a holy way of life.

WHAT DOES THE CHURCH TEACH?

There is a widespread presumption in the general atmosphere of the Church today that the conditions necessary to commit a truly culpable mortal sin are so stringent that such sins must be very rare. It's not uncommon for people to say things like this: "I've never killed anyone, so I'm ok," or, "I'm not a serial killer, or I've never committed adultery, so I'm ok." Whether we're ok or not is ultimately for God to judge, but by citing things we haven't done, we minimize those things we have done that may not even be on our radar but may be very grave, for example, not loving the Lord our God with our whole soul, mind, and heart, and our neighbor as ourselves! In an insightful article, a German writer pointed out how focus on the horror of the Holocaust sometimes has the result of giving the impression that the only really horrendous sin is behind us and everything from then on is pretty minor:

The danger of a violent hubris arises from the idea of a unique guilt. If the worst possible crime is behind us, then nothing that lies before us can ever compare. Everything that comes after Auschwitz (or colonialism, or whatever other "unique" debt may be found) has the character of a mere post-history, a *posthistoire*. This is the secret maximal permission hidden in the maxima culpa of a history without God. Nothing that we can do will ever be as terrible as the Holocaust. This relaxes our moral vigilance and introduces the idea that everything is allowed—as if there were no God.³²⁰

For that reason, my priest-student, in a flash of illumination, felt the need to call out himself and his fellow priests as willing participants in self-deception regarding their culpability and that of others. In this chapter, then, we will first examine what the Church

actually teaches about the reality of mortal sin, as represented by the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and then consider what light can be thrown on this teaching through the examination of a few of the most relevant Scriptures. Our goal is to identify some truths that can be helpful in our own lives and in our pastoral responsibilities. I will put in bold type some statements of the *Catechism* that are little known or commented on.

We find the Church's teaching on mortal sin—which sums up the moral reflection of the Church through the centuries—in sections 1857–1861 of the *Catechism*:

For a sin to be *mortal*, three conditions must together be met: "Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent."

Grave matter is specified by the Ten Commandments, corresponding to the answer of Jesus to the rich young man: "Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and your mother." The gravity of sins is more or less great: murder is graver than theft. One must also take into account who is wronged: violence against parents is in itself graver than violence against a stranger.

Mortal sin requires *full knowledge* and *complete consent*. It presupposes knowledge of the sinful character of the act, of its opposition to God's law. It also implies a consent sufficiently deliberate to be a personal choice. Feigned ignorance and hardness of heart do not diminish, but rather increase, the voluntary character of a sin.³²¹

The *Catechism* elsewhere, when discussing the deception of the

Antichrist during the final trial of the Church, acknowledges the reality of "culpable unbelief":

Then will the conduct of each one and the secrets of hearts be brought to light (Mark 12:38-40; Luke 12:1-3; John 3:20-21; Rom 2:16; 1 Cor 4:5) Then will the culpable unbelief that accounted the offer of God's grace as nothing be condemned. (Matt 11:20,24; 12:41-42)³²²

The gravely wrong actions that my priest-student was referring to were actions that included full knowledge of the gravity of the sin but, because of what appears to be "self-deception," denied that a "sufficiently deliberate . . . personal choice" had been made. The example given by this priest would seem, then, to be a case of "feigned ignorance" that actually worsens the gravity of the sin. We will examine "feigned ignorance" later on in this chapter. We will also see clearly that Scripture provides many cases where the hardness of heart that results in the rejection of Jesus's teaching is clearly thought to be culpable.

CULPABILITY

Unintentional ignorance can diminish or even remove the imputability of a grave offense. But no one is deemed to be ignorant of the principles of the moral law, which are written in the conscience of every man. The promptings of feelings and passions can also diminish the voluntary and free character of the offense, as can external pressures or pathological disorders. Sin committed through malice, by deliberate choice of evil, is the gravest.³²³

First, let me acknowledge that potential cases of inculpable igno-

rance regarding the commission of grave sins seem to be on the rise. For example, I have talked to young people who were shocked to discover that masturbation was considered to be a grave sin—so accepted has this become in our culture. I have also talked to married couples who were shocked to discover that contraception was considered to be a grave sin—so commonly accepted in our culture, and so little spoken of in our churches, has this become. And who can fully comprehend the horror of children who are exposed to grave forms of evil and even drawn into them at a very young age, who certainly have very diminished culpability, if any at all. It becomes understandable why some moral theologians have sometimes counseled that such apparently inculpable ignorance should not be disturbed by informing such people of the truth. I will suggest later in this chapter that this is not really a merciful approach to dealing with situations like this.

Also, it is important to note that the *Catechism* says that "no one is deemed to be ignorant of the principles of the moral law, which are written in the conscience of every man." While the implications of the moral law for masturbation and contraception may not be immediately apparent to many, nevertheless the "grave matter" specified by the ten commandments is held by the Church—and Scripture—to be given by God to every human conscience. We will examine briefly the foundation of this teaching in Romans 1 and 2. The *Catechism* further addresses the question of culpable ignorance:

This ignorance can often be imputed to personal responsibility. This is the case when a man "takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin" (*Gaudium et Spes* 16). In such cases, the person is culpable for the evil he commits.³²⁴

In my contact with many Catholics in many dioceses, I have been astounded to discover how widespread disdain for Church teaching and the teaching of Scripture has become in the name of "being an adult and making my own decisions about what seems right to me" and how little concern is evidenced to "find out what is true and good." After giving talks on some of the more challenging aspects of the teachings of Jesus, I frequently hear such comments as these: "My Jesus would never say that!" or, "That isn't what I've heard Pope Francis say!" or, "I'm supposed to follow my own conscience, and I feel fine about what I'm doing, and besides, the Church has to change with the times!" I believe that such approaches cloak a troublesome lack of fear of the Lord, of regard for the person of Jesus Christ, of a sincere desire to find the truth and submit to it, and a foolish presumption about virtually universal salvation.

The second instance in which ignorance does not excuse is an ignorance that is the result of the habit of committing sin. Many people, when they first commit an act of adultery, for instance, or who steal to support a drug habit, know perfectly well that they are sinning, but over time, begin to be indifferent to the concept of sin and can even come to justify their actions. Their sinful habit has almost obscured their consciences. Since the obscuring is a result of their own sinful choices, their ignorance does not excuse them from culpability.

WHAT THE CATECHISM TEACHES ABOUT MORTAL SIN

Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself. It results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. **If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes**

exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back. However, although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God.³⁵

Since only God can really know the conscience of a person and their degree of culpability, and since self-deception and hardness of heart and feigned ignorance are quite common, it would be foolish for anyone entrusted with the pastoral care of such persons to presume culpability—just as it would be foolish to presume culpability. After a time of "pastoral accompaniment," we may or may not have some idea of the degree of culpability, but in every case when people are committing objectively gravely wrong acts, they are harming themselves—and others if the acts involve others—and very well could be endangering their eternal salvation. This is why I am suggesting that the focus of our pastoral care and general concern for others should not be on determining culpability but on calling people to turn away from their gravely sinful (even if not subjectively culpable) actions. I say this with the understanding that, from time to time, it is important, particularly for priests in the confessional, to make some determination of culpability in order to discern appropriate penances or to assuage false guilt and scrupulosity.

It seems good here to underline the two important principles enunciated by this article of the *Catechism*. First of all, the sins explicitly listed in Scripture of being of such gravity to exclude persons who commit them from the kingdom of God if they don't repent (and the adumbrations of these sins as discerned by the Church in the natural law and its subsequent moral reflection) are to be clearly understood and used as a criterion for judging the objective rightness or wrongness of our own and others' actions. But secondly,

again based on the witness of Scripture and Church teaching, only God in the last analysis can truly judge the degree of personal culpability involved in a particular person's actions and determine the implications for the eternal consequences in question here. So, Pope Francis's famous declaration, "Who am I to judge?" is absolutely true as it pertains to ascertaining personal culpability, as it seems he intended, but absolutely untrue if used, as it seems he clearly wasn't intending, to cast any doubt on the objective rightness or wrongness of particular actions. Pope Francis's statement was not intended to say that the previous homosexual acts that may have been committed by the person in question were not gravely wrong and did not require full repentance along with a firm purpose to never commit them again, but, unfortunately, the lack of precision at the time let his comment go "viral," and his subsequent informal clarifications never had the same impact. Let's consider now what Scripture tells us about culpability and serious sin.

THE WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE

The overall sense one gets from the Old Testament is that sin is punished—most often in a way that seems severe—and yet God is always ready to take his people back and show them compassion if they repent. Another recurring theme of the Old Testament is that when human beings culpably sin, they have a strong tendency to deny responsibility. The blame shifting in the garden, where Eve shifts the blame to the serpent and Adam blames both the woman and the Lord for his participation in the grave sin of disobedience and rebellion, is one primary example. God does not accept their excuses or claims of not being culpable and they (and all of humanity) suffer the very painful consequences. Moses is punished for striking the rock twice, an expression of distrust in the word of the Lord,

and as a consequence, is forbidden to enter the Promised Land. Saul, among other failures, thinks he has a better idea than the Lord and disobeys in keeping some of the spoils of war and loses the kingship. David, specially chosen by the Lord, does great evil by committing adultery and murder and only repents when confronted by Nathan. While David is forgiven because of his sincere repentance and penance, the punishment is nevertheless severe: the death of the child and endless disunity and rebellion in his own household.

The story of Susanna and the unjust judges in the Book of Daniel portrays, in a striking manner, the corruption of conscience that can occur as one sin leads to another. The injustice of the judges' court rulings, perhaps motivated by greed, forms part of a complex of sins, involving lust and false witness, and leads ultimately to their undoing and their own deaths as punishment for their sins. I will put in bold type parts of the text that are particularly relevant to our considerations.

They began to desire her. And they perverted their minds and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or remembering righteous judgments. (Dan 13:8-9)

This is clearly portrayed as a culpable giving in to lust and the willful suppression of their knowledge of "righteous judgments," with their death as the punishment.

The New Testament tells us that these examples, and many more, are preserved in Scripture for us as a warning:

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. New-

ertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance." We must not indulge in immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents; nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (1 Cor 10:1-12)

It is unfortunately common for many people today to dismiss the Old Testament as outmoded in some of its essential moral teaching, when, in fact, it is solemnly reaffirmed in the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles and faithfully transmitted to this day in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Putting Christ to the test by flagrantly dismissing his teaching in the area of sexual morality is indeed an incredibly foolish thing to do. This is a mocking of God that will inevitably have severe consequences. Sexual immorality is punished in two ways, in the wretched consequences in this life—to which people enmeshed in these sins are often blinded—and, if unrepented, in the loss of eternal life:

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we

shall reap, if we do not lose heart. (Gal 6:7-9)

Romans 1, a text we looked at earlier but which we now need to consider again in greater detail, also talks about a culpable suppression of the truth that leads to every kind of disorder, with very dire consequences. I have put parts of the text that are of particular interest in bold type, although the whole text is quite remarkable for the light it sheds on our current cultural situation, and it is well worth rereading slowly and meditating on:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men **who by their wickedness suppress the truth**. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because **God has shown it to them**. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. **So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened**. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. **Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen**. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men com-

mitting shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. . . . [They are] faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them. (Rom 1:18-32)

It's important to note how culpability is explicitly attributed to those spoken about in Romans 1. Indeed, what we have here is a relentless indictment of culpability. Similar to the case of Susana and the elders who gave in to disordered desires and culpably suppressed the truth, Romans 1 asserts that God has revealed himself in some perceptible fashion to every human being and so no one is without culpability if this revelation is ignored or suppressed or actually rejected in favor of sinful actions. The sign of their rejection of the truth revealed by God and their refusal to worship him is their addiction to immoral behavior, characterized by homosexual activity and the approval in others of these behaviors, as well as many other wicked behaviors. Satan, the rebellious one, whose very identity is formed by rejecting the authority of God, desires to be worshipped, and he is working in our culture to require all to bow down to the purported "goodness" of these wicked behaviors. Those who place themselves above the authority of God and his revelation desperately want to be affirmed in their behavior and won't rest until they compel everyone to do so. The Roman emperors required this submission of the early Christians from time to time, and it produced thousands of Christian martyrs. There is a tremendous pressure on the Church and all her members and ministers today to blur the truth about these matters to avoid a confrontation with a culture that will not rest until they label us "enemies of the state, enemies of equality, haters."

Romans 1 and Romans 2, as we will see shortly, convey relentless indictments of the culpable suppression of the truth, that feigned ignorance and hardness of heart that the *Catechism* warns about and to which the priest-student in my class shockingly called our attention.

Romans 2 declares that people will be judged on the basis of the light that they have been given. It is the clear teaching of the Church throughout the ages, based on Scripture, that light is given to every human being, and how they respond to that light determines their eternal destinies. This is a basis for what the *Catechism* asserts in §1860: "But no one is deemed to be ignorant of the principles of the moral law, which are written in the conscience of every man." In commenting on Romans 2:15, Cardinal Ratzinger pointed out: "The whole theory of salvation through ignorance breaks apart with this verse."³²⁶

As familiar as this text from Romans may be, it is well worth reflecting on carefully as it is relevant to these considerations on culpability:

By your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for every one who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality. All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned

under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Rom 2:5–16)

It is important not to overlook in the texts above the supreme importance of obedience to the light that God gives to everyone, to the witness of conscience, to the universal knowability of the natural law and to the explicit Word of God. While obedience is a virtue that is widely mocked in our culture in the name of a personal freedom that often leads to deep bondage and blindness, it is essential for accessing the mercy of God. God's mercy is profound, but it must be gratefully received with faith, responded to with repentance, and lived out in obedience to the revelation of God:

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. (Heb 5:8–9)

He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him. (John 3:36)

And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him. (Acts 5:32)

I think it is fair to say that the emphasis of the Bible is not on determining culpability or degrees of culpability but on clearly calling everyone to a life of obedience to God. There is a focus on teaching and demonstrating that committing grave sin is severely punished, both in this life and in the life to come. I would go even further and suggest that the thrust of Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments is to presume widespread culpability along with widespread self-deception, and the rationalizing, blame shifting, and justification for sins that are intrinsic to fallen human beings. This was what the priest in my class was bravely acknowledging in admitting to self-deception in supposedly not giving sufficient personal consent to certain sins. The sobering declaration in the verse above—"for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury" (Rom 2:8)—certainly seems to indicate that "giving in" to selfish, lustful, rebellious desires risks eternal damnation if not repented from before death. The culpable suppression of the truth and of conscience mentioned in the story of Susanna and in Romans 1 would seem to be an easy enough thing to do when tempted by pride, lust, greed, or rebellion—as we frequently are.

Where there is some acknowledgement of lessened culpability in Scripture, the actual texts can sometimes be disconcerting:

But if that servant says to himself, "My master is delayed in coming," and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and put him with the unfaithful. And that servant who knew his master's will, but did not make ready or act according to his will, shall receive a severe beating. But he who did not know, and did what deserved a beating,

shall receive a light bearing. Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more. (Luke 12:45-48)

Jesus makes clear that truly invincible ignorance is excusable, but now that God has clearly revealed his will in Jesus, those who hear the teaching of Jesus are without excuse:

If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. (John 15:22)

Even before his resurrection, Jesus knew that, even after his resurrection and the remarkable continuation of signs and wonders that would testify to his identity, many would still not believe and be culpable for their unbelief. When the rich man found himself in hell, he pleaded that someone go and warn his brothers so they would not suffer the same fate:

But Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." And he said, "No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead." (Luke 16:29-31)

Paul teaches the same principle in his speech to the Athenians:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)

Jesus himself, on the Cross, recognizes that some of those participating in the crucifixion didn't realize what they were doing. Some may have realized they were participating in an unjust action but not realize they were crucifying the Son of God: "And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do'" (Luke 23:34). To what extent the people eventually recognized their need for forgiveness and accepted the offer of God's forgiveness, the Gospel is silent. To what extent they knew they were participating in an unjust execution but didn't know who was being executed, the Gospel is silent.

One very notable fact, as we look at the New Testament, is how often Jesus and the Apostles, the most perfect communicators of the Word that there ever were, are rejected, and how often this rejection is attributed to a culpable, self-chosen blindness or hardness of heart:

The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. (John 1:9-11)

He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God. (John 3:18-21)

When Stephen was boldly declaring the identity of Jesus, the response he received reveals what can be the wicked blindness and hatred of the human heart when faced with truth:

"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:51-60)

There is much that can be said about this text. Some of the same themes we have highlighted are found here also: the reality of hard-heartedness, the refusal of those in darkness to tolerate the light, the lack of obedience while claiming to be religious, the deep hostility to the claims of Jesus. But we should note here, as many commentators have, that Stephen is recapitulating the life and death

of Jesus, even to the point of praying for forgiveness for those who are killing him, as Jesus did on the Cross. God never delights in the death of the evildoer and always extends forgiveness and mercy, but mercy and forgiveness need to be humbly received in order to effect their work of justification and sanctification in the soul of a repentant believer.³²⁷

DELIBERATE UNBELIEF

We sometimes forget that unbelief—not believing the testimony of God himself in the person of Jesus—is one of the gravest of sins revealed in the Scriptures. As Fr. Francis Martin puts it:

The root sin of the world is the refusal to believe in Jesus and the place he holds next to the Father as the revelation of the Father. The root sin is to reject the truth: "Whoever believes in the son has eternal life. Whoever disobeys the son will not see life but must endure God's wrath" (John 3:36).³²⁸

The recurring theme in Scripture of culpable unbelief and the heart's choice to take pleasure in immorality is particularly underlined as the cause for those who will perish in the deception of the last days. Deception and self-deception often work together. The external deception of the evil one and his lies, working directly in the mind and heart of the individual or through the culture of the world, are found to be attractive to the selfish desires of the flesh and are yielded to with "sufficiently deliberate" personal assent to become culpable self-deception.

It is also clear, from the regular warnings of Jesus and the Apostles against false teachers and prophets, that deception within the thought environment of the Church must be guarded against. At

one point, Scripture indicates that the "doctrines of demons" will be infiltrated into the Church through "the pretensions of liars" (1 Tim 4:1-2). Who can deny that, just as in the early Church, we are again encountering demonic lies that are leading many to rebel against God and engage in immorality? As Paul VI said on one occasion, "The fog of Satan is infiltrating the Church":

And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming. The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thess 2:8-12)

So many of the points we have already made are repeated again, now in the context of the last days and the final separation of the human race. This is the time when the division will become apparent between those who love God and those who disdain him, when the city of God and the city of man constructed against God will be separated for all eternity. I do believe we see signs of this division and separation becoming clearer in our own time.

AUGUSTINE'S INSIGHT INTO CULPABILITY

The *Catechism* notes that there are various factors in a person's life that may reduce culpability. It states in §1860: "The promptings of feelings and passions can also diminish the voluntary and free

character of the offense, as can external pressures or pathological disorders."

Even when culpability is greatly lessened in a person's current state of "addiction," we need to remember the sobering insight of St. Augustine. Augustine acknowledges that by the time he was convinced of the truth of the faith and wanted to live in accordance with it, he was actually a slave of sexual sin and not able to get free by his own willpower alone. He was "addicted" in the language of today. Some might say today that because of the habit of sin, he was not fully culpable for repeated sinning. Yet in his remarkable honesty and deep perception of the tangled workings of the human soul, he points out that he was responsible for getting to the point of addiction or slavery by a repeated number of decisions to sin made over a period of time that were freely chosen. In other words, he was culpable for having gotten to the point of helplessness. But over a long period of time and step by step, the Lord took his desire for knowing and following him as the foundation for leading him out of his addiction, until one day, in an infusion of grace, he was given the opportunity to step free from his sin, and he did. It is well worth considering at some length his own words. We have seen previously how the *Catechism* (§1791) points out how conscience can gradually and culpably be deadened through the repeated decisions to commit sin:

I sighed after such freedom [the freedom of Victorinus to turn away from it all] but was bound not by an iron imposed by anyone else but by the iron of my own choice. The enemy had a grip on my will and so made a chain for me to hold me a prisoner. The consequence of a distorted will is passion. By servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. . . . But I was responsible for the fact that habit had become so em-

barled against me, for it was with my consent that I came to the place in which I did not wish to be.³²⁹

Augustine goes on to tell of the agonizing struggle to get free from sexual bondage and love of worldly success, which eventually led him to freedom:

Lord, my helper and redeemer, I will now tell the story, and confess to your name, of the way in which you delivered me from the chain of sexual desire, by which I was tightly bound, and from the slavery of worldly affairs. I went about my usual routine in a state of mental anxiety.³³⁰

You thrust me before my own eyes so that I should discover my iniquity and hate it. I had known it, but deceived myself, refused to admit it, and pushed it out of my mind. But at that moment the more ardent my affection for those young men of whom I was hearing, who for the soul's health had given themselves wholly to you for healing, the more was the detestation and hatred I felt for myself in comparison with them. Many years of my life had passed by—about twelve—since in my nineteenth year I had read Cicero's Hortensius, and had been stirred to a zeal for wisdom. . . . But I was an unhappy young man, wretched as at the beginning of my adolescence when I prayed you for chastity and said: "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet." I was afraid you might hear my prayer quickly, and that you might too rapidly heal me of the disease of lust which I preferred to satisfy rather than suppress.³³¹

As our class studied Augustine's remarkable analysis of deception and self-deception, of bondage and freedom, we all came to

understand with greater clarity what the courageous priest-student articulated about the self-deception that can so often be involved in choosing sin at a deeper-than-conscious level, but nevertheless truly choosing it.

One area of concern that has come up periodically in the course of this book is the underlying culture of unbelief that acknowledges what Scripture says about sexual morality and other moral issues but believes that "people are weak, and can't really be expected to live in conformity with Jesus's teaching," and that to expect real holiness is unrealistic. Unfortunately, this is a deception.

When Paul asked the Lord to remove what was a very troubling "thorn in the flesh," the Lord responded:

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Cor 12:9)

When Paul taught about temptation, this is what he said:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Cor 10:13)

And the Council of Trent solemnly taught:

If anyone says that the commandments of God are impossible of observance even by a person justified and established in grace: let him be anathema.³³²

In the teaching that provides the context for rightly interpreting the definition, Trent explains:

For God does not command the impossible, but by com-

manding he instructs you both to do what you can and to pray for what you cannot, and he gives you his aid to enable you.³³³

If we are trapped in sin, we must throw ourselves upon the Lord's mercy with great abandon and fervor and ask his help for deliverance. We must also, of course, do our part by avoiding the near occasions of sin, frequenting the sacraments, joining a 12 Steps group if appropriate, installing blocking software on our computer if necessary, and implementing the spiritual wisdom our tradition has, which has helped so many, like Augustine, get free from serious sin.³³⁴

THE CHURCH AS A FIELD HOSPITAL

But, some may ask, what about Pope Francis's emphasis on the Church as a "field hospital for the wounded," and the need to be a "welcoming" Church, a Church of mercy, and to "accompany" people in the messy complexity of their lives and relationships?

The purpose of a field hospital is to bring healing and restore the patients to active engagement in the life and mission of the Church, not to affirm them in a wounded state. The purpose of "welcoming" people to the Church is to welcome them to an encounter with the person of Christ, his truth, love, and holiness, and to draw them to deep faith, repentance, and conversion, and to embrace their baptismal identity as "missionary disciples." To accompany people is to help people, with compassion and patience, to see clearly their own situations in light of the Gospel and to take steps to bring them to true friendship with Christ, which essentially includes faithfulness to his teaching in all its dimensions.

It is not merciful to keep from people the truth about Jesus, his teaching, and their own situations. It is not merciful to allow

people to deceive themselves or be deceived and not challenge the false wisdom of the world, the flesh, and the devil, which envelops the culture today.

If we are not calling people to take up their cross and die to the world, the flesh, and the allurements of the devil, we are not preaching the true Gospel. Those who preach and teach will be held to a higher standard and judged on their fidelity to delivering the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

Only God can judge the culpability of the human heart. Our job is to call people to salvation, to righteousness, to repentance, to a life of holiness and mission. The focus of our ministry needs to be not on determining culpability but leading to holiness.

Truly, only God can judge. The time between the first and second comings of Jesus is the time to focus on proclaiming the gracious offer of mercy and forgiveness, won for us at such a price, calling all men and women everywhere to faith, repentance, and conversion. Our primary mission is not to determine culpability but to call to repentance. It is urgent that we be about the Master's business:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)

And [he] said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." (Luke 24:46-47)

A CHURCH IN CRISIS

We are bearers of such very good news. Mercy is available, sins can be forgiven, a new and better way of life is open to all, and best of all, if we persevere to the end, the unending glory and happiness of heavenly life will be ours.