

CIRCUMSTANCES AND MORAL ACTS

Man was created and placed on this earth in order that he might work out his eternal salvation. But in order that this reward may be his he must be faithful in God's service. He must do good and avoid evil since this is the first precept of the natural law. Moreover we know from Sacred Scripture that "Faith without works is dead" (Jas. II. 26). It would be irrational for a man to allow anything to stand in the way of his acquiring his ultimate end, the Beatific Vision. For this reason it behooves him to know something about the morality of his actions. He should know what makes one act good and another evil.

The acts of man are of two kinds; namely moral acts or, as they are often called, human acts, and acts of the man. A moral act is one which proceeds from the free will or from some other faculty by the command of the free will. Such acts are either virtuous or sinful and hence are deserving of reward or punishment. Acts of the man are those which either proceed necessarily from the will, or proceed from some faculty independently of any deliberate act of the will; as, for example, the beating of the pulse and some mimetic movements. It is obvious that such acts are morally indifferent, since the essential condition of liberty, that is, the freedom to place or not to place the act, is lacking. We are concerned only with the former class because circumstances can in no way affect the morality of acts of the man.

There are several considerations which enter into the goodness or the malice of a moral act. The moral goodness of an act depends primarily upon its conformity to right reason. Acts which will bring us nearer to our ultimate end, that is, heaven, are morally good; those which turn us away from that end are morally evil. But in addition to this objective goodness or evil of an act circumstances may also affect the morality of an act.

A circumstance is defined as an accident affecting the morality of a human act already constituted. St. Thomas (S. T. Ia, IIae, VII, I) says: "Names of more obvious things are transferred so as to signify things less obvious." And consequently just as in the physical order we give the name of circumstance to that which, although extrinsic to a thing, yet affects it, so

also in the moral order we call any extrinsic thing which affects the morality of an act a circumstance. It is also of some importance to note that the act is already constituted since this is what differentiates circumstances from the objective goodness or malice of an act. Circumstances affect the act as a moral and not as a physical entity. For example, it would not affect the morality of alms-giving whether the alms were in the form of gold or silver.

St. Thomas enumerates (S. T. Ia, IIae, VII, 3) seven circumstances as follows: Who, what, where, by what aids, why, how, and when. In giving his reason for this enumeration he says that a circumstance can modify a moral act in three ways; First, it may modify the act itself; secondly, it may modify the cause of the act; and thirdly it may modify the effect. The circumstances of time, place, and manner are related to the act itself. The person, intention, and means are related to the cause. The circumstance, what, is related to the effect. The frequency of an act is sometimes given as a circumstance, but, as Cajetan observes, incorrectly so. The number of times an act is repeated implies only the addition of one act to another and does not directly touch any particular act in the manner required for a circumstance.

It is evident that circumstances effect the morality of an act. We judge of the perfection and imperfection of human acts in the same way in which we judge of the perfection of everything else. We know that in man the first perfection comes from the soul but nevertheless the superaddition of accidents makes him more perfect. A man would not be duly perfect if he were absolutely devoid of color. The same is true of moral acts. They also receive perfection or imperfection from the circumstances. The truth of this will be even more manifest after consideration of the various circumstances.*

The circumstance, who, does not signify the person who performs the act so much as some quality of the person. It may regard his relations to another. For example, if one were to injure one's lawful superior it would be a sin not only against justice but also against the virtue of piety.

The circumstance, what, refers to an accident of quantity or quality joined to the object rather than the object itself. To

* Billuart. Tom. II Dissert IV cap. 2.

steal property belonging to the Church would be a sacrilege as well as theft. To steal something of great value would be a graver sin than to steal some insignificant thing.

The circumstance, where, refers to some quality of the place in which the act is performed. Thus to commit a sin in public would give scandal; to commit a sin in a Church would in some cases be a sacrilege.

The means or the instruments used in performing an act will also affect its morality. This is exemplified in the martyrdom of many of the Saints who were put to death by most cruel instruments of torture.

The circumstance, why, is the most important one and on this account is treated by St. Thomas in a special article. It refers not to an intrinsic but to an extrinsic end. The end of an act may be considered in two ways. Acts are of their very nature ordained to some end, that is, an intrinsic end, which pertains to the substance of the act; as, the giving of alms is ordained to the alleviation of poverty. In addition to this, however, one may have some other end in placing an act; as, for example, one giving alms, might have the intention of elevating one's self in the opinion of one's fellow-men. It is evident that such an intention can, and indeed often does, destroy the merit of an otherwise good act.

The circumstance, how, denotes the manner in which the act is done. The violation of a law through contempt for either the law or the law-giver increases the malice of an act. Ignorance also belongs to this class of circumstances. If one were to perform a vicious act with invincible ignorance, but would not perform it had one known its malice, one would not be guilty of sin.

The time when an act is performed may affect its morality. Servile work which would be morally good at times would be sinful if done on Sunday. The length of time an act endures may also affect the morality.

There is another division of circumstances, namely, circumstances which change or multiply the species of morality, those which increase, and those which diminish the goodness or malice of an act. In the case given above of stealing a sacred article, the fact of its being sacred changes the species of the morality of the act. Such an act is not only theft but also a sacrilege. To

steal a great amount would be an example of an increasing circumstance. It would be a diminishing circumstance if the amount stolen were negligible. A circumstance, lessening the malice of an act to such an extent that it renders venial a sin which is of its nature mortal, is said to be an infinitely diminishing circumstance.

And thus we see that acts receive their morality from their accordance with or opposition to the principles of right reason. The circumstances, also, often play no small part in the morality of our acts. Circumstances which change the species of an act and those which notably increase the malice of an act are always matter of confession. These principles must be applied to every one's action and heaven will be the reward from "Him who, without respect of persons, judgeth according to every one's work" (I. Pet. 1, 17).

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