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CATHOLIC RETREATS

THE ANATOMY OF TEMPTATION  
A RETREAT GUIDE ON DAVID AND GOLIATH

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# INTRODUCTION

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## *Retreat Overview*

For the last two thousand years, the prayer that Jesus taught us, the Our Father, has been a dependable school of Christian life and faith. But have you ever thought deeply about how this prayer ends?

After praising God, expressing our desire to do his will, and asking him for the blessings we need, this prayer puts the following words on our lips, minds, and hearts: “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

Jesus wasn't being negative and pessimistic by ending the prayer like this; he was being realistic. He wants to remind us that living a fruitful, meaningful Christian life isn't always just a walk in the park. It's often a struggle and a battle.

We have evil enemies, especially the devil and the other fallen angels, and we are vulnerable to their spiritual attacks. This shouldn't make us panic — after all, Our Lord is infinitely more powerful than the devil — but it should keep us on our toes.

In this Retreat Guide, *The Anatomy of Temptation: A Retreat Guide on David and Goliath*, we are going to prepare ourselves for this spiritual battle by reflecting deeply on some tactics of our spiritual enemies.

- In the two meditations, we will expose some of those tactics and learn how David countered them.
- In the conference, we will look at something closely related to the anatomy of temptation — the anatomy of sin.

But before we begin, let's take a few moments, in the silence of our hearts, to remind ourselves that Jesus revealed these truths to us because he loves us and wants the very best for us.

Let's renew our faith in that love, and ask God to enlighten and strengthen us for the spiritual struggles that are sure to accompany our Christian journey.

## FIRST MEDITATION

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### *Scattered and Stuck*

God's chosen people in the Old Covenant, the Israelites, had been given a mission.

By settling in the Promised Land and creating a culture there based on worshipping the one, true God, they would bring God's blessings into the world and prepare the way for the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

In that way, they foreshadowed God's chosen people of the New Covenant, the Church, the worldwide community of believers in Jesus Christ. The Church too is called to bring God's blessing into the world, in fact, we are called to spread God's blessings and salvation into every corner of the world.

Since our mission in the New Testament is similar to the Israelites' mission in the Old Testament, their experience has lessons for us: how God worked in their lives can teach about how God wants to work in our lives.

One challenge the Israelites frequently faced was invasion — they had enemies who wanted to conquer and enslave Israel, and force the Israelites to worship false gods.

In a similar way, we Christians, and the Church as a whole, find ourselves frequently invaded by temptations, by invitations to sin and so to worship false gods, so to speak, through behaviors like selfishness, arrogance, and laziness.

During the lifetime of King David, Israel's most aggressive and dangerous enemy was the Philistines. And one of the most famous clashes between the Israelites and the Philistines is the one where David faced down the giant Philistine warrior, Goliath, who was both a real historical figure, as well as a symbol of the ancient enemy of God and God's people, the devil himself.

By reflecting on this clash between David and Goliath, we can discover certain elements that are common to all clashes between God's enemies and God's people — we can discover the anatomy of temptation.

## FIRST MEDITATION

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### *Frightened into Flight*

At the time of this famous encounter, David had been anointed by the prophet Samuel as a future king of Israel, but he hadn't yet been crowned.

Saul was king of Israel, and David, as the youngest son in a large family, was still living at home, helping his father take care of their flocks.

But his older brothers had joined Saul's army, which was facing down the Philistines. David's father sent him on an errand to where the armies were camped, to bring some supplies to his brothers.

When David arrived, the Bible tells us what he found:



*The Philistines were stationed on one hill and the Israelites on an opposite hill, with a valley between them.*

– 1 Samuel 17:3

But the two armies just looked at each other across that valley, without ever engaging in battle, for one simple reason — Goliath. Goliath was a massive, accomplished warrior, equipped with the most advanced armor and weaponry of the epoch, and he had issued a challenge to the Israelites.

Here's how the Bible describes it:



*A champion named Goliath of Gath came out from the Philistine camp... He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel: "Why come out in battle formation? I am a Philistine, and you are Saul's servants. Choose one of your men, and have him come down to me. If he beats me in combat and kills me, we will be your vassals; but if I beat him and kill him, you shall be our vassals and serve us." The Philistine continued: "I defy the ranks of Israel today. Give me a man and let us fight together."*

– 1 Samuel 17:4, 8-10

That was the challenge that Goliath had issued to God's people, and in the very next verse, we are told how Israel responded:



*When Saul and all Israel heard this challenge of the Philistine, they were stunned and terrified... When the Israelites saw the man, they all retreated before him, terrified*

– 1 Samuel 17:11, 24

Here they were, God's chosen people, engaged in their mission of settling the Promised Land so as to bring God's blessings into the world, and in the face of Goliath's challenge, their courage failed, and they fled.

Here we have the first tactic of the ancient enemy. He intimidates us. He makes our Christian vocation seem so difficult, so risky, so threatening to our reputation and worldly hopes, that we give it up.

Obeying and defending Church teaching on life, marriage, and sex, for example, seems almost as impossible in our secularized society as taking on Goliath in hand-to-hand combat, so we compromise, we dodge the issue, we avoid making waves — we flee the spiritual battlefield.

Something similar can happen even in smaller things — simple but essential virtues like honesty, piety, and mercy can easily retreat before the intimidating challenge of a world so intent on competition, convenience, and reputation.

Whenever the devil can frighten us into infidelity, into fleeing from the costly effort that being faithful to Jesus Christ often demands, he will. That was Goliath's first tactic, and it's an essential feature in the anatomy of temptation.

## FIRST MEDITATION

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### *The Stagnation of Routine*

But another verse in this passage is equally revealing, though much less well known. Do you remember how long the two armies stood staring each other down across that valley as Goliath defied God and God's people?

It wasn't just one day; it wasn't just a week; the Bible tells us how long this paralysis lasted:



*Meanwhile the Philistine came forward and took his stand morning and evening for forty days.*

– 1 Samuel 17:16

Forty days — a biblical phrase meaning a good, long time. And how was Israel faring during those forty days of a stalemate with the Philistines? The soldiers weren't winning battles, nor were they working productively back at home.

The whole nation was simply stagnant, making no progress in their God-given mission, stuck there sitting around waiting for something to happen.

This is another tactic we have to be ready to face. Sometimes, even if we are courageous enough to stick around in our Christian lives, we will gradually fall into routine.

We will reach a certain level of virtue, a certain Christian comfort zone, and just stop there, getting complacent. Going to the next level, taking the initiative, responding to what we know God is asking of us seems to be too risky and too much trouble.

And so, we fall into the temptation of routine — not actually doing evil, maybe, but not advancing the cause of good either.

For forty days Goliath stopped Israel from making progress in its mission, without shedding a drop of blood.

Routine, complacency, and procrastination can do the same thing to us — this too is a notable feature in the anatomy of temptation.

## FIRST MEDITATION

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### *Conclusion: Being Honest*

David was able to stand up to Goliath, finding courage when no one else could, breaking Israel out of its stultifying routine, and in the next meditation we will reflect on how he did that.

But for now, let's take a few minutes, in the silence of our hearts, to speak to the Lord about these two tactics of our spiritual enemies. Let's ask the Holy Spirit to show us how far fear and routine have entered into our soul and impeded our spiritual progress. After all, it's hard to defeat an enemy if we don't even know he's there.

The following questions and Bible passages may help your meditation.

### *Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion*

- 1 What real-life situations tend to make me want to dodge my Christian duties?
- 2 What are my deepest fears, and how do they affect my friendship with Jesus Christ?
- 3 During the last couple of weeks, in what ways have routine and an attachment to my comfort zone inhibited me from loving God and neighbor as I truly want to?

## *Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation*



*Finally, draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power. Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens. Therefore, put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist on the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground. So stand fast with your loins girded in truth, clothed with righteousness as a breastplate, and your feet shod in readiness for the gospel of peace. In all circumstances, hold faith as a shield, to quench all [the] flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*

— Ephesians 6:10-17, NABRE



*My child, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trials. Be sincere of heart and steadfast, and do not be impetuous in time of adversity. Cling to him, do not leave him, that you may prosper in your last days. Accept whatever happens to you; in periods of humiliation be patient. For in fire gold is tested, and the chosen, in the crucible of humiliation. Trust in God, and he will help you; make your ways straight and hope in him. You that fear the Lord, wait for his mercy, do not stray lest you fall.*

— Sirach 2:1-7, NABRE



*So submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you of two minds. Begin to lament, to mourn, to weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.*

— James 4:7-10, NABRE

## SECOND MEDITATION

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### *False Ideals and True Courage*

When David arrived in the Israelite camp to deliver the supplies to his brothers, he quickly figured out what was going on, and he decided to do something about it.

He convinced King Saul to let him take up Goliath's challenge. Saul even gave David his own armor and weapons, thinking that this would give him a better chance at victory. But David wasn't an accomplished warrior, like Saul; he was just a shepherd, and a very young man, and the armor and weapons didn't fit him.

Here's how the Bible describes it:



*Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic, putting a bronze helmet on his head and arming him with a coat of mail. David also fastened Saul's sword over the tunic. He walked with difficulty, however, since he had never worn armor before.*

— 1 Samuel 17:38-39

## SECOND MEDITATION

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### *Setting Up False Ideals*

Here we have a third tactic of our spiritual enemies, a third characteristic in the anatomy of temptation: setting up a false ideal.

Saul and his advisers made the mistake of thinking that David would fight Goliath on the Philistine's own terms, that he would approach the challenge the way everybody did in those days, the way the world said you were supposed to — with armor and sword.

They forgot that David was just a shepherd boy, not a trained warrior; the armor and sword actually impeded him from doing what God was asking of him.

We can find ourselves in a similar situation as we strive to meet the challenges that come to us along our Christian journey.

- We can easily fall into the temptation of trying to live up to someone else's standards, instead of God's;
- Of seeking our fulfillment in trying to please other people or win the world's approval, instead of God's;
- Of thinking that we are supposed to defeat all our enemies and win all our battles by depending on our own strength, instead of God's.

That's living a false ideal, aiming at the wrong target, climbing up the wrong ladder of success.

God calls us to fulfill a mission in this world.

- To courageously face up to the Goliaths that intimidate us,
- To avoid falling into complacency and routine,
- And to "fight the good fight of the faith" as St. Paul described the Christian life (1 Timothy 6:12).

But he wants us to fight with his weapons, the weapons of humility, and faith, and hope, and mercy — not the weapons that the world uses, like manipulation, and flattery, and seduction, and dishonesty, and deception, and self-reliance.

When David realized that Saul's armor and weapons were not meant for him, he took them off. He faced his enemy armed only with his shepherd's staff, his sling, and five smooth stones that he gathered from the nearby streambed.

In biblical terms, those items are symbolically significant.

First of all, God had revealed himself to Israel as their shepherd — thus, the shepherd's staff symbolizes David's confidence in God's ability to protect him and give him victory.

Second, in the Bible, the flowing waters of a river or a stream always signify God's grace, the faithful and saving action of God in the world.

And so, the five smooth stones from the streambed emphasize that David is going into battle on God's terms, not on the world's terms. He is fighting not for the false ideal of his own worldly glory, but for the true ideal of God's eternal glory.

Always to live for God's Kingdom and by God's standards, that is how we can be sure to resist this third feature in the anatomy of temptation, the setting up of a false ideal.

## SECOND MEDITATION

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### *Where Did David Get His Courage?*

Now we are ready to reflect a little bit more on the source of David's courage. Why was David fearless and energized in the face of the Philistine threat, when no one else was? What was his secret?

## SECOND MEDITATION

### *Conclusion: Following David's Example*

The same thing goes for us. The more intimately we know God, the more deeply we experience his goodness and faithfulness, and the more deeply we reflect on that experience in prayer, the more courageous we will be in facing our Goliaths.

Do you remember how Jesus resisted the temptations that he faced during his lifetime? In the desert, he responded to temptation by quoting the words of Scripture, which shows that he had meditated on those words and knew them well. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he responded, St. Luke tells us, by praying even more fervently (cf. Luke 22:44).

We will always have to face spiritual enemies like Goliath, who either try to intimidate us into flight, or lull us into complacency, or trick us into pursuing a false ideal — that's the anatomy of temptation.

But as long as we develop our personal relationship with God through a growing life of prayer, we will be able to remember that “the battle belongs to the Lord,” and when we reach into the ever-flowing stream of divine grace, we, just like David, will find all we need to win yet another victory in “the name of the Lord.”

Let's take a few minutes now, in the silence of our hearts, to reflect prayerfully on the wonderful lessons that God wants to teach us through this famous encounter between David and Goliath.

The following questions and Bible passages may help your meditation.

### *Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion*

- 1 Striving for an ideal is an essential part of any spirituality. What are some of the false or incomplete ideals promoted by the world around us? Which of those do I find most tempting and why?
- 2 When have I experienced in a particularly intense way God's goodness and strength? Remember and savor those experiences, and thank God for them.

Simply put, David was a man who had come to know God personally and intimately; he had personally experienced God's goodness and power, and reflected prayerfully on that experience — that was the source of his courage. This is, in fact, what David told Saul when the King hesitated to accept the young man's offer to fight the Philistine. He explained:



*Your servant used to tend his father's sheep, and whenever a lion or bear came to carry off a sheep from the flock, I would chase after it, attack it, and snatch the prey from its mouth. If it attacked me, I would seize it by the throat, strike it, and kill it. Your servant has killed both a lion and a bear. This uncircumcised Philistine will be as one of them, because he has insulted the armies of the living God... The same LORD who delivered me from the claws of the lion and the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.*

— 1 Samuel 17:34-37

This unshakeable confidence in God comes across again in David's response to Goliath's scornful insults right before their fight begins. He tells the Philistine:



*You come against me with sword and spear and scimitar, but I come against you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel whom you have insulted. Today the LORD shall deliver you into my hand; I will strike you down and cut off your head... thus the whole land shall learn that Israel has a God. All this multitude, too, shall learn that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves. For the battle belongs to the LORD, who shall deliver you into our hands.*

— 1 Samuel 17:45-47

For David, God is not an abstract idea nor a distant sovereign; he is a real person, a living presence — David knows and fights in the Lord's name, a symbol of God's personal identity.

This intimate relationship with God is what gives him the confidence and the courage he needs to go into battle against a seemingly invincible enemy.

3

What are some of the good points of my prayer life right now? What are some aspects that could use improvement? What one thing could I do this week to help deepen my life of prayer?

*Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation*



*But you, man of God, avoid all this. Instead, pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness. Compete well for the faith. Lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called when you made the noble confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge [you] before God, who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus, who gave testimony under Pontius Pilate for the noble confession, to keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ that the blessed and only ruler will make manifest at the proper time, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, and whom no human being has seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal power. Amen.*

– I Timothy 6:11-16, NABRE



*No one can withstand you as long as you live. As I was with Moses, I will be with you: I will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and steadfast, so that you may give this people possession of the land I swore to their ancestors that I would give them. Only be strong and steadfast, being careful to observe the entire law which Moses my servant enjoined on you. Do not swerve from it either to the right or to the left, that you may succeed wherever you go. Do not let this book of the law depart from your lips. Recite it by day and by night, that you may carefully observe all that is written in it; then you will attain your goal; then you will succeed. I command you: be strong and steadfast! Do not fear nor be dismayed, for the LORD, your God, is with you wherever you go.*

– Joshua 1:5-9, NABRE



*The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name — he will teach you everything and remind you of all that [I] told you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid... I have told you this so that you might have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world.*

– John 14:26-27, 16:33, NABRE

## CONFERENCE

### *The Anatomy of Sin*

Temptation is not the same thing as sin. After all, Jesus was tempted, but he never sinned.

Temptations come to us from various sources — three sources, really: from our fallen human nature; from the fallen world around us which tends to idolize things like money and sex and power; and from our ancient enemy, the devil.

We can't avoid experiencing temptation, though we can often avoid putting ourselves in situations where we know we will be assaulted by temptations. Avoiding those kinds of situations is traditionally called, avoiding the "occasions of sin."

And that's what temptations are: They are invitations to sin, to consent to any thought, word, or action that goes against God's good and wise plan for us and for the world.

And that's why it's good for us to understand the anatomy of temptation; it can help us identify temptations when they come, and be better prepared to resist them.

But it's also useful for us to understand sin, to take some time to think about it. Sin is not a popular topic these days. In fact, it is a deeply misunderstood topic. But since it is an essential element in the Christian story, we have to untangle those misunderstandings. After all, St. Paul summarized Jesus' entire mission in terms of sin. He wrote to Timothy: "This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (I Timothy 1:15).

## CONFERENCE

### *Three Anti-Responsibility Theories*

One reason sin is so misunderstood these days has to do with three modern thinkers that have shaped the secular worldview so predominant in our globalized society: Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Charles Darwin.

They all claimed to provide scientific evidence against the possibility of sin. They claimed to prove, in different ways, that feelings of guilt aren't really feelings of guilt, that a guilty conscience is actually a mental disorder, that sin is an illusion.



- Darwin suggested that human beings are essentially the same as animals or plants or bacteria: we are all products of random chance, and we are just different sized pancakes mindlessly shaped out of the same primordial batter. As a consequence, we can have no real responsibility for our actions; any sense of guilt that we might feel is pure invention, a mere tactic by some advanced pancakes to dominate some less advanced pancakes.
- Freud attributed our sense of guilt to a combination of repressed psychic drives and artificial, socially constructed behavioral norms. For Freud too, therefore, all feelings of guilt are a malfunction, something we need to overcome in order to be fully human.
- Marx posited that human behavior is essentially determined by economic conditions. Therefore, our ideas and decisions don't really belong to us; they flow from the forces of history. Any feelings of guilt, of personal regret or remorse, are only illusory; they have no real meaning, because our actions are not really our own.

These theories, and their relativistic spin-offs that reverberated through the twentieth century and beyond, apparently offer a relief from the burden of personal responsibility. Since they eliminate any absolute, fixed moral norms, they imply that our freedom has no proper limits, that we can and should do whatever we want, whatever we feel like. Only when we throw off the shackles of moral obligation, so they say, will we experience the fullness of life. We each are supposed to define our own happiness, our own morality, our own meaning.

This view of the human person leaves no room for any concept of sin, neither of original sin, the rebellion of humanity's first parents against their creator, nor of personal sin, the extension of that rebellion into our individual decisions and actions

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## CONFERENCE

### *The Freedom to Love or to Sin*

But the Church has always taught that the real reason behind our feelings of healthy guilt is precisely our sin.

When we do something wrong, when we use our freedom selfishly, when we ignore or injure or demean ourselves or our brothers and sisters, our conscience bothers us; we feel guilty.

The Church teaches us that this kind of guilt, the kind that stems from sin, from objectively wrong decisions and acts, is something healthy, something God built into our souls in order to warn us when we are in moral danger.

Just as our physical nervous system causes us pain when our bodily integrity is threatened, so our conscience is designed to make us feel guilt when our moral, spiritual integrity is threatened.

This is the truth that God has revealed, a truth that saves us from getting tangled up in the secular seductions of Darwin, Freud and Marx.

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## CONFERENCE

### *Learning from the Saints*

The easiest way to verify that this Catholic teaching is true is simply to reflect on the lives of those men and woman who have lived the Catholic faith most completely — the saints.

The men and women throughout history who have followed Christ wholeheartedly, including the part about repenting from one's sins and seeking God's forgiveness, have had a curious experience: they have been able to find lasting joy, real meaning, and interior peace even in the midst of immense suffering, whether physical suffering, like sickness, disease, imprisonment, and physical torture, or moral suffering, like insults, slanders, and humiliations. What is perhaps even more remarkable is that they are able to forgive those who caused them their suffering, to love their enemies.

Just think about the Church's very first martyr, St. Stephen, who was stoned to death outside Jerusalem for preaching the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus. As he was being killed, he pleaded for God to have mercy on his murderers, even as they were furiously buffeting him with rocks and hatred.

Or we can call to mind St. Maximilian Kolbe, the Franciscan priest interred in a Nazi concentration camp for no other crime than being a Catholic priest. In the midst of the physical and moral horrors he underwent there, he was a beacon of hope and light for his fellow prisoners, and an example for his captors. He arranged secret Masses, he surreptitiously heard confessions, and he even offered his own life in the place of a fellow prisoner who was randomly chosen for a scapegoat execution.

In a situation where personal survival had become not only the highest value but even a maniacal obsession, this kind of heroism and moral strength was inconceivable.

In every chapter of human history, the Church has given the world men and women like that, men and woman who find happiness, meaning, strength, and peace in the midst of life's most trying hardships, and who share that treasure with others, leaving in their wake souls, families, and societies more joyful, more just, and more vibrant.

That's what happens when people follow the Church's view of the human condition, when they take responsibility for their actions, when they admit that they are free to do what is right or to do what is wrong, and when they respond to objective feelings of guilt by repenting and seeking God's forgiveness.

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## CONFERENCE

### *Mortal and Venial Sins*

Whenever we choose something radically opposed to God's goodness – like sabotaging someone's reputation, using pornography, or purposefully refusing to worship God on the Lord's Day — we are rejecting God's friendship.

In those cases, we destroy the theological virtue of charity in our soul — we cut ourselves off from friendship with God. That constitutes a mortal sin, which God will readily forgive if we sincerely repent and go to him in the sacrament of confession.

Whenever we give in to temptations that are opposed to God's goodness in less radical ways — like procrastinating on our basic duties, over-indulging in food or other material pleasures, or stealing small office supplies from an employer for personal use — we aren't outright severing our friendship with God, but we're distancing ourselves from him.

We're making small concessions to selfishness that close off certain sectors of our heart from his love and thereby weaken the theological virtue of charity in our soul. That constitutes a venial sin, which God will readily forgive if we sincerely repent even if we don't go to confession, but which, if left un-repenting, could easily snowball into the outright rebellion of mortal sin.

It's not always easy for us to distinguish between mortal and venial sins.

Mortal sins require not only serious matter (stealing a candy bar wouldn't be serious matter; embezzling \$100,000 would be), but they also require what theologians call full knowledge and full consent.

Someone who has never been told that purposely skipping Sunday Mass is a mortal sin doesn't commit a mortal sin if he skips Sunday Mass. And a teenager who has an abortion because her parents and her friends and her boyfriend are exerting extreme pressure on her may not be fully responsible for her actions.

The gravity of the sin, like the very possibility of sin in the first place, depends on the exercise of our God-given freedom, on the degree of our responsibility.

Sometimes we have difficulty distinguishing between sins and simple mistakes.

If I sincerely forget to send my mom a Mother's Day card, I may have strong feelings of regret, but I shouldn't feel morally guilty about it, I shouldn't feel remorse. If I do, it's a sign that my conscience may be overactive, or scrupulous.

If, on the other hand, I purposely avoid calling my mom on her birthday because I'm nursing self-righteous resentment about something she said five years ago, then I ought to feel guilty; Christians honor their parents, they don't hold grudges against them.

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## CONFERENCE

### *Conclusion: Full Humanity in Freedom and Love*

It's worth mentioning that our freedom — that capacity which makes sin possible for us — is not unlimited. We cannot choose to be squirrels, for instance, or to travel back in time.

And we don't always see the right choice clearly — especially if our conscience has been negatively affected by a society that doesn't believe in sin in the first place. But that's one reason why God left us his Church; in cases of doubt, we can look to the Church for guidance, consult its teachings and its pastors, and they will bring our conscience back to good health.

Freud and company would have us believe that we are simply victims, that we can't really control ourselves, that we have no responsibility, no ability to resist temptation, no way to form and strengthen our character, no chance of becoming saints.

The Church disagrees. It realizes that choosing what is right is hard for us — which is why it gives us so many helps, like the Eucharist and confession and the Catechism and prayer and spiritual direction — but it never insults us by saying that sin is just an illusion, that we really can't sin anyway.

The Church is too wise for such a diabolical copout, too experienced; it knows that if it is impossible for us to sin, it is also impossible for us to love, since both require freedom and responsibility. And if it's impossible for us to love, well then, life doesn't really matter anyway.

I mean, even Darwin, Marx, and Freud wouldn't want to marry a robot.

Take some time now to prayerfully go over the personal questionnaire — it may provide the Holy Spirit with a chance to give you some new insights about the anatomy of sin in your own spiritual life.

### *Personal Questionnaire*

- 1 What struck me most in this conference and why? What did I learn that I didn't know before?
- 2 Think about the times I have experienced guilt and forgiveness in a particularly intense way. What did I learn from those experiences? What does God want me to learn from them?
- 3 In what ways do I sometimes evade taking full responsibility for my actions?
- 4 Explain in my own words why it is dehumanizing to deny the reality of personal sin — in other words, why philosophies like those of Darwin, Freud, and Marx can do damage to human communities.
- 5 When we sin, we choose to do something wrong because we think it will bring us something good or help us avoid something bad. Think about my most common temptations: What is the “wrong” thing that they present to me? What is the “good” thing that they present to me?

- 6 Some spiritual writers identify three “root” sins, or sinful tendencies, that tend to make us vulnerable to temptation. Each root sin consists in hoping to find our fulfillment in something besides God: “pride” seeks fulfillment in personal excellence; “vanity” seeks fulfillment in the approval of other people; “sensuality” seeks fulfillment in material comforts and pleasures. Which of these three root sins seems to be most active in my life?
- 7 Traditional Christian spirituality identifies seven capital sins – sins that give rise to other sins. Here are the seven capital sins. Take some time to think about each one in the following terms: Does my culture encourage or condemn this capital sin, and how? What specific sinful actions could flow from this capital sin? How present is this capital sin in my own life?
  - Pride (arrogance and self-righteousness)
  - Anger (the emotion is natural and can be healthy, but when we let it drive us to disordered thoughts and actions, it becomes sinful)
  - Lust (the disordered seeking of sexual pleasure, especially outside of the marriage covenant)
  - Avarice or Greed (the disordered seeking of possessions and/or riches)
  - Sloth or Spiritual Laziness (the disordered reluctance to perform good works, whether spiritual or corporal)
  - Envy (the disordered displeasure at another's success)
  - Gluttony (the disordered over-indulgence in pleasures of the palette)
- 8 Sin matters because it affects my relationship with God and with others. How aware am I of this relational aspect of sin?

