

Killing a Conscience in Seven Steps

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Description

The following article describes the seven phases one experiences in the process of losing one's conscience and becoming unavailable to the Holy Spirit and God's grace. Rev. Philip Dion explains these steps, which were once listed by St. John Fisher, so we can be better prepared to avoid them ourselves and to help others who happen to be on their way down this path to hopelessness.

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An elderly French couple, having retired after long years of work, were enjoying a tranquil, bucolic existence in a cottage outside of Paris. While rocking on the porch one evening, they were discussing what the other would do if one of them died. After some thought, the husband said, "Well, if one of us dies, I'll move back to Paris."

How human! It's always easier to think of others dying, rather than ourselves. You'll die and you'll die and you'll die, but I won't die. Something of the same mind also shows up in our attitude toward sin and sinners. It's easy enough to see other's faults and sins but not always easy to see our own. It's not that we cannot see them but just that we don't have the courage to look at them. They hurt our pride, or make us uncomfortable or dissatisfied with ourselves. We prefer to live in a fool's paradise of denial instead of tackling the exertion to get rid of them.

As with dying, it's easy to philosophize about sin and evil in the world and to cluck the tongue about the wickedness of this generation and be scandalized by it. It's so easy to make up a litany of social sins like injustice, dishonesty, graft, mugging, big industry pollution of water and the atmosphere, violation of so-called animal rights and sexism. But it is not so easy to face our personal sins, their causes and consequences. We don't want to look straight at that inner self which we struggle to bury in our subconscious.

Actually, each of us has three selves. First the public self which functions while we are in the presence of others, as on a stage. We're always trying to make a good impression, wondering what others are thinking of us and how we are impressing them. We are putting on a show. But a time comes when we leave the stage and slam the dressing room door behind us. We find ourselves alone. Then our private self takes over. We do things we would never do if others were looking at us: checking the waistline from the side, trying to get a look at the bald spot, making faces in the mirror, checking the cavities in our teeth. There's no need here in private to put on a show or be on display.

But besides these, each of us has a third self, our inner self. That's the one we don't want to face up to. That's where, if it happens, we take a good hard look at what we really are before God and why. Generally, we abhor confronting this self, so we constantly try to distract ourselves when it rises up into our consciousness. We wake in the middle of the night and it looms and disturbs us so we snap on the radio to see what's going on with the talk shows. When awake, we can't stand being alone, because that vision of what we really are might show up again, so we must get with the crowd, change into the fast lane, find some distraction.

This is why today, when the world does evil, it's the fashion to ignore and forget what's done, or to excuse it, to call it a mistake. Anything but sin. Our behavior is socially unacceptable or we're not relating properly to others. Moreover, it's always

easy to look around and see that what I did is no worse than what others do.

But the top of the line brand of rationalizing and shirking responsibility, a practice that enjoys a booming popularity today, is not only excusing one's misdeeds and sins but actually defending them and maintaining they are simply not sins. They are my right; they are necessities of life; they are manifestations of freedom and not misdeeds at all. Besides, everyone's doing it. They are only reasonable allowances that must be made for life in the 21st century. After all, there is such a thing as exaggeration and losing one's sense of proportion. Thus each person becomes his own pope, do-it-yourself pontificating. But if each one is his own judge, who will be condemned? What spawns such a state of mind? A few centuries ago, St. John Fisher described the successive steps of the tragic process which leads to a such a dead conscience.

First Step

The English martyr bishop once preached a Lenten course to the Court of Henry VIII when Henry was still a true defender of the faith. In that series, the bishop traced out what he described as seven steps to the development of a bad will or dead conscience. The first step on this road, he claimed, has one wrestling with a temptation to do an evil or sinful act. The evil appears to him under the guise of a good, to do which promises pleasure, satisfaction or reward of some kind. For example, he might be tempted to rob a bank or to seduce a friend's wife or to some other sinful aberration from God's will, the gravity of which is testified to ultimately by the ordinary Magisterium of the Church. If the act promised no satisfaction or enjoyment, obvious there would be no temptation. No one was ever tempted to sneak a dose of castor oil, like an alcoholic snatching a furtive drink for the kick involved. Pleasure, satisfaction, titillation are essential to temptation. At this stage, of course, there is no question of the person sinning no matter how strong the temptation might be, provided the temptation is resisted.

St. Paul recalls even the Lord, like us in all things except sin, was subject to temptation in the desert. So there can be no guilt in the mere appearance of the sin to the mind, with all its enticement to anticipated pleasure or satisfaction. Moreover, God graciously permits no one to be tempted beyond his power to resist. "My grace is sufficient for you."

Second Step

On the other hand, should the person succumb to the temptation and decide to do the evil deed, that is, to grab the proffered satisfaction or pleasure, he thereupon takes the *second step* of the process. He has, at that moment, voluntarily committed the sin *internally*. "Whoever looks after a woman," in the sense in which Jesus spoke, "has already committed adultery in his heart." He has committed his will and incurred the guilt of the sin which, in the proposed example, would be serious or mortal and break his relationship of love with God.

Third Step

After incurring the guilt of the sin internally consenting fully to the temptation, should he continue down the steep ladder, he takes the *third step* of the process as proposed by St. John Fisher. All three synoptics described this step as it was taken by Judas Iscariot in betraying Jesus. After he had dickered with the Jewish chief priests and officers, it is written that he took the money and "*then kept looking for an opportunity* to hand him over without creating a disturbance" (Luke 22:6, emphasis added). Thus, the unfortunate dupe in our horrible example schemes and searches out the means to put his already determined plot into action. He "cases" the bank site, plans the location of a getaway car, discovers the least busy time at the bank; or, in the other case, he devises plans for contacting his friend's wife at the most opportune time and place. By taking this third step, he has increased his malice, guilt and culpability of his sin, since he has *more firmly determined* his will to externalize what was previously solely an internal sin.

Fourth Step

Having decided on the means he will use, if he persists in this resolve, he moves on to the *fourth step*. He de facto actualizes the sin by doing the evil act in the external forum. He robs the bank. He violates the other man's wife, or whatever. His sin has now further grown in gravity since it has accumulated the added guilt of the concomitant injustices to the bank depositors who have lost their money, or the insurance company which must raise its rates to subsidize the loss; or, in the other case, because of the hurt and injustice accruing to the husband and/or family of his seduced victim.

The culprit has now put himself into a state of more serious mortal sin than before he acted. But he can still hope for the grace of repentance and conversion in the normal course of God's dealing with his children. Jesus insisted that he had not come to

call the self-righteous but sinners. "Those who are well need not a physician." Thus the person, while in a state of grave sin, has reason to hope that God's grace will ultimately bring him to repentance. In his inner self, when he faces it, his conscience still realizes the evil of his ways and the seriousness of his condition, however he may try to stifle it. While he is sick spiritually, it is possible for him to recognize that fact along with his need for the divine physician.

Fifth Step

But having externalized the evil act to which he was tempted, and having felt the pleasure or benefits of the sin, he can find it so appealing and satisfying that he is led to move on to the *fifth step* of the process. He can so forget the love of God and the God who loves him that he slips quite easily into repeating the sin again and again, i.e., robbing other banks or seducing other's wives until he develops a *habit* of bank robbery or seduction. Thus, he reaches a point where he has *confirmed* his will in *habitual* evil or mortal sin. His conscience is numbed.

But even at this tragic point, he can still hope for repentance and salvation in the ordinary operation of God's grace. Despite his habit of mortal sin, which he commits easily, with pleasure and without effort (a second nature), he still acknowledges in his inner self or conscience, when he faces it, that what he is doing is wrong. His conscience continues to function correctly though feebly and he is still amenable to the light of grace bringing truth to his mind and strength to his will. Thus, God can lead him to repentance and conversion even while he pursues his acknowledged evil.

Sixth Step

He continues in his condition until one of two things happens. He decides he can no longer live that way since he has no true peace, and so he repents and is reconciled with God. Or, if reconciliation does not happen, he then plunges into the next curve of the downward spiral leading to total confirmation in evil. When that happens, he has taken the *sixth step* of the process which effectively puts him in a condition of hopelessness.

The essence of this step is that he starts to tell himself seriously that, for him, these sinful acts, in which his will is habitually confirmed, are *not sinful*. He convinces himself that robbing banks or seducing married women or homosexual acts or contraception or abortion is all right for him. Circumstances make them acceptable and justifiable in his or other's cases. Those who say nay just do not understand the ramifications of the times or social conditions, or what people in general are doing. They should wake up and get with it, and slough off their "hangups." In a word, he has become a full-fledged dissenter from, at very least, the teaching of the ordinary Magisterium, the guardian of Christian morals, a teaching which demands religious consent and conformable conduct.

St. John Fisher insisted that at this point the sinner had reached a state of being practically hopeless for heaven because he has closed off every avenue by which truth can reach his person. First, his *will* is confirmed in a habit of mortal sin from constant repetition. Now, by taking this latest step of self-deception, he has blocked from his *intellect* the light of truth and the influence of the Holy Spirit. He is saying that wrong is right. There is no way for God's truth to reach him and he has willfully put himself into a condition of *unavailability* to the Spirit. His conscience is dead and he has killed it.

Note that the Holy Spirit, in influencing persons, does three things, if his operation is not resisted. First, he conveys truth to the mind. Then he moves the mind to grasp and understand the truth he makes known. "He will bring to mind all things I have told you." Finally, he moves the will to "do the truth in charity," as St. Paul says. That is, he moves the person to *believe* God's word as made known and guaranteed, ultimately by the magisterium of the Church, and moves his will *to do* God's will as he has made it known. All these operations, of course, are not coercive and require free acceptance and cooperation by the recipient.

However, by repeatedly resisting God's grace and refusing to listen to the Holy Spirit, one actually loses the ability to accept his love and mercy on his terms. This is the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit, who never ceases to offer his love and grace. This individual has confirmed himself in a crass, erroneous conscience and is reduced to calling black white and saying no is yes.

Pope John Paul II interceded for such types in his Marian prayer at Los Angeles. He prayed for "all those who are confused about the truth and are tempted to call evil good and darkness light." St. John the Evangelist puts it this way: "If we say we are free of the guilt of sin, we deceive ourselves; the truth is not to be found in us. But if we acknowledge our sins, he who is just can be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrong. If we say we have never sinned, we make him a liar and his word finds no place in us" (1 John 1:8-10).

So, by ignoring St. John's cautions and denying his sin, the subject has put himself in the state of being unavailable to God's action and, in effect, has *made himself* unforgivable. He commits moral suicide, doing tremendous damage to himself and others by blasting out the very foundation of hope, which is faith. He has reached the depths of infidelity, the loss of faith, which, by its nature, implies commitment to the will of God who is believed by faith. Such confusion in one's life finally produces a condition of slavery. Pope John Paul, on his visit to New Orleans, made it clear to any unfortunate who might find himself in such a state and would listen: "Even though you can come and go as you like, and do what you want, you are not free if you are living under the power of error or falsehood, deceit or sin." As the TV commercial used to say, "You can't fool mother nature."

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews described this state in even more frightening terms:

For when men have once been enlightened and have tasted the heavenly gift and become sharers in the Holy Spirit, when they have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to make them repent again, since they are crucifying the Son of God for themselves and holding him up to contempt." (Heb. 6:4-6).

Such a person has left no access for God's grace to come to or operate in him, for the Holy Spirit will never force his acceptance. No power on earth, in heaven or in hell can possibly coerce the free will of a person to accept or act on the impulse of God's grace. No external cause or factor can produce faith. Nothing within a person can generate what is above the powers of nature. Thus, only a miracle of grace can bring about the conversion of a resisting heart.

But to expect such a miraculous conversion in the natural order exceeds the ordinary mode of operation of God's grace. To hope for such a miracle at the end of life or at any other moment, for that matter, is the sin of presumption in its purest form, for God is not mocked. Moreover, such a state, being completely incompatible with supernatural hope for heaven and the vision of God, can never produce true inner happiness, even on this earth.

Seventh Step

The first sign that habitual sinning and perversion is a disastrous turning off the road to God is sadness. Nature is relentless and ultimately strikes anyone who acts against her. As with the law of gravity, one can deny sin but he never escapes the effects of sin. Archbishop Sheen used to tell the story of the Spartan boy who stole a fox and hid it beneath his toga. While he was denying the theft, the fox was eating away at his entrails. The first warning of sadness springs from within, from the inner self and it remains because, though dull and subtle, it is persistent and inexorable.

Now, because no one likes to be the only one miserable, (misery loves company), a person confirmed in a habit of sin which he has foolishly convinced himself is not sin, boldly strides to the *seventh* and final *step* to spiritual destruction. He proceeds to pull out all the stops to convert others to adopt his convictions, to persuade them to think and act the way he thinks and acts. He wants to make others as unhappy as he is. His joy is to "debunk" others and try to free himself from guilt by projecting it onto others. He wants to make others as unhappy as he is.

Thus, he and his ilk take to shouting their conclusions and theories from the rooftops, whether they are about pornography, contraception, abortion, homosexuality or whatever is the blue plate special of the day. They resort to bitter, desperate self-defense to protect themselves in their own eyes against nay-sayers. They strive to indoctrinate others in their errors, seeking their approval. As St. Peter warns in his second epistle, "They will eagerly try to buy you for themselves with insidious speeches, but for them the Condemnation pronounced so long ago is at work already, and Destruction is not asleep" (2 Pet. 2:3, J.B.). So they are welcomed on Phil Donohue or Oprah or Sally or other TV or radio talk shows. Like magnets, they attract cliques at cocktail parties and spew their venom against the Holy Father and the Church's teachings; they write letters to editors; they join demonstrations; they carry signs to try in any way possible to get others to adopt and act on their views. Chicago Tribune Columnist Mike Royko stands up and psycho-babbles for the whole group: "I stopped being a Catholic many years ago (my family didn't want somebody like [Card.] O'Connor telling us how many children to have)." Like young boys whistling their way past a cemetery on a dark night, they pump up pseudo-courage to continue on their perilous path.

"After all, what does that old bachelor in Rome know about life; what does he know about marriage and love and contraception or homosexual activity? It is by Beelzebub that he is trying to cast out these practices he calls devils."

Thus, as a modernized version of St. John Fisher would have it, some *put themselves* in a state of unforgiveableness because they refuse to accept Gods' conditions for forgiveness, i.e., the willingness to admit their wrong doing. If a person is sick and admits it, there is some hope that the cause of his sickness can be discovered and remedied. But if a person is sick and insists that he is well, if he refuses to acknowledge that he might be ill, there is not much the Divine Physician can do for him. The worst thing in the world is not sin. It's the denial of sin by a false conscience. The unforgivable sin is the denial of sin.

Thus, objectively, confirmed dissenters from the Church's moral or dogmatic teaching cannot bring themselves to act contrary to the self-justifying conclusions of their own minds. Such resent the very authority upon which faith rests. If the truth is not run through the computer of their own judgment, they fear restraint of their liberty, the height of intellectual pride. Acceptance of truth on faith in God seems to them a reflection on themselves, an indignity to their human nature whose autonomy they regard as the primary operational principle. The truth is, submission by faith to the authority of God is not an insult, not a humiliation, not a degradation. It is rather a liberation from the five-barred cage of the senses, a guarantee that one will not be misled or tricked.

After all, the Catholic Church is a voluntary community and in deliberately choosing to remain part of it, all Catholics, clerical and lay, must provide "submission of mind and will" to the Church's ordinary magisterial teaching on faith and morals. The Church cannot force moral decisions on anyone since such decisions are made in the internal forum which is not subject to external forces.

According to St. John Fisher, one at this stage has reached the condition of hopelessness, because by infidelity, the opposite of faith, he has destroyed any basis of hope he may have had. He cannot really hope to be with one in whom he has no functioning faith. In the spiritual realm, such dissent is a disaster comparable to AIDS in the physical order. It threatens more than the physical life. "Do not fear those who deprive the body of life but cannot destroy the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in Gehenna" (Matt.10:28).

Obviously there are many whose activity, objectively, indicates a dead conscience, because they have completed the seven steps described by St. John Fisher. They are what Mother Teresa calls the poorest of the poor of this world, however prosperous they may look, no matter what posh suburb they may inhabit. They must be the first concern of the Church in pursuing its fundamental option for the poor, and should be the object of unceasing prayer by all Catholics. When the Apostles asked Jesus why they could not expel a certain demon, he replied, "This kind you can drive out only by prayer" (Mark 9:29). There but for the grace of God go I.

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