
Are "Bad Thoughts" Always Sinful ?

Question: You are suddenly aware, let us say, that "bad thoughts" are occupying your attention. There has been pleasure. But the moment you came to your senses you tried to turn your attention to something wholesome. Has there been sin? Isn't pleasure derived from bad thoughts always a sure sign of sin ?

Reply: Pleasure derived from bad thoughts can be involuntary; and in that case, of course, it is not sinful. If, therefore, through no fault of your own a bad thought comes into consciousness and the moment you realize what you are doing you try to get rid of the thought, the pleasure connected with it is not voluntary and is not sinful.

Neither is the frequency of the violence of temptations a sure sign of sin. Either, or both, may depend, not upon your free will, but upon your temperament, or your education, or your environment, or even upon the providential designs of God.

If, however, a person causes himself violent or frequent temptations by attendance at a suggestive show, by bad reading, or by taking part in evil conversation, he is responsible. According to St. Francis de Sales, "If I know that some certain conversation leads me to temptation and to a fall, and I do voluntarily engage therein, I am, doubtless, culpable for all the temptations that shall arise."

Here is a point to remember: mortal sin happens only when we are aware of the presence of the evil thought and when, for the sake of the pleasure, we fully consent to keep the thought in mind.

You may safely judge your culpability in the matter of bad thoughts by the following principles:

1: There is no consent, hence no sin, if a feeling of disgust with the temptation has been present, or if you turn to prayer or to any other legitimate and attractive thought (such as a thrilling football game) to distract the intellect and will.

2: There is some consent, hence venial sin --

a. If before repelling the temptation you momentarily hesitate, not wanting to offend God, yet wishing to relish the forbidden pleasure; or

b. if resistance is real but feeble and indolent; half resistance is half-consent and venial sin.

3: Consent is full and gravely sinful when, despite the protests of conscience, which recognized the gravity of the evil, the will acquiesces in the pleasure presented to it by the temptation.

If, in spite of this knowledge, you still have difficulty in a particular case, consult your confessor. If your conscience is lax, the presumption is against you; if you have a delicate conscience, not in the habit of yielding consent, you are most probably free, at least from serious sin.

PRAYERS: deceased: father of John Kennedy of Farley; mother of Mike Thompson of Lyons; mother of Dan O'Shea of Zahm; grandmother of Rocco Tannone of Morrissey; father of Tom Medland, '30; Louis E. Riedinger, '90; George McGee, '01.