



## Mortal or Venial Sin: The Eternal Doubt

**Extensive is the list of acts or situations for which people ask themselves if such a thing is a sin or not.**

Extensive is the list of acts or situations for which people ask themselves if such a thing "is a sin or not". From cheating on an exam to wasting food, however, the situations extend to an endless number, to the point that many times you can fall into a serious phariseism. Precisely because of this, the Church does not have either a list of all the acts or situations in which people may get involved, neither - as many would like - has a "sin-o-meter" to measure in which moment an act becomes a sin. However, it gives us clear guidelines to form our consciousness about it.

## Sin's Nature

**It is important to understand that all sin is bad.** Every sin hurts us and on others, although some are more harmful than others. Some are so harmful that they can be mortal. Obviously - and I clarify in case it is necessary - this shall not be understood on its literal meaning as if by committing certain acts we will fall dead, but, **some sins can cause us spiritual death.** These sins that cause us a spiritual death are which the Church calls mortal sins. Whereas, those that are harmful but not mortal, are those that the Church calls venial sins.

Facing this reality, **the Church gives us certain guidelines to be able to define whether something can be considered a mortal or venial sin.** This, not to transform us into Pharisees, and much less to fall into scruples confessing ourselves up to five times a week.

## Criteria to detect a mortal sin

The Church teaches us that three aspects must be questioned to determine whether or not something is a mortal sin:

## Is it a serious matter?

In other words, **is it a serious and direct offense against the Commandments of God?** A practical guide to answering this question is found in the Ten Commandments. We must consider the sin itself, but also the damage against the other person (a sin against our parents can be much more serious than if we had committed it against a stranger), and also the damage caused by it (for example stealing \$ 20,000 from your boss is much more serious than stealing a pencil from work).

**For a sin to be considered as "serious matter", it must be a great offense to the Laws of God** - and therefore to God -, and must cause great harm.

## Am I fully aware of the sinful act?

Full consciousness **implies knowing with certainty that what is done is a sin**. For example, if someone was never aware that contraception (artificial birth control) was a sin and contrary to God's plan regarding sex, that person could not be considered fully guilty (i.e. deserving of guilt) for such sin. So it is, knowledge is a power that implies a great responsibility, something that St. Peter knew very well and transmitted to us long before Spiderman's uncle did.

## Was the sin carried out with full consent?

It means that the act was carried out freely after a conscious decision. The actions that are carried out under threat of some kind of force (such as someone pointing a gun at our head or something similar), or actions that are carried out when the consciousness is not full and there is a lack of lucidity (for example, under the influence of drugs, alcohol or a particular psychological situation) this can limit the degree of guilt of the person. **HOWEVER**, this does not mean that the action itself is not a sin; but that the person may not be guilty at all.

And so, for a sin to be considered a mortal sin, the **THREE** conditions must be present. In summary: a sin is mortal when it is a serious matter, there is full knowledge of its sinfulness, and it has been committed freely. If any of these conditions are not met, the sin would not be mortal but venial.

## Mortal sin and the God of Love

There are always those who try to say that there is no such thing as "mortal sins", because God is a God of Love, and therefore forgives everything (something that is correct). However, if we analyze the three aforementioned premises, we will realize that it is not God who "withdraws" his Grace, but it is us who consciously, freely and deliberately decide to separate ourselves from it. To make it easier to understand, when committing a mortal sin, the message is:

"I know that what I am doing is a serious offense against Your law and that it will have a deadly effect on my relationship with you, but I do not care. I will do it freely anyway.

... That sounds like a rather BIG rejection of God, so the term "mortal sin" fits in perfectly.

### **And the venial sins?**

What about venial sins? They are not such great things then? Of course, they are! Remember that every sin is an offense against God and damages our relationship with Him and with others. The more we sin (even venial sins) the more our ability to love and serve God will be weakened.

We must understand that for God it is not enough to give us enough grace to survive, He wants to give us everything to be perfect saints.

### **IMPORTANT**

A final thought for us to have in mind: although we can observe the actions of others and determine if what they do is of serious matter (for example, if we hear of someone who committed a murder), we cannot determine his soul's state. We also have no idea to which extent the person is aware of his sin and much less the degree of freedom with which he committed it.

Although we can say that murder is a serious offense against God, we cannot say that a person is guilty of mortal sin, or that it has been separated from the grace of God. **We entrust all sinners (including ourselves) to the mercy of God.**