ON CHEATING IN EXAMINATIONS: A LETTER TO A HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

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A Letter To a High School Principal

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My dear———

Your letter to the Editor of Theological Studies has been forwarded to me with the request that I reply to your inquiry about cheating in examinations. This seems to be a matter which the moral theologians do not treat. I notice that Father Woywood, writing in the *Homiletic Monthly* for June, 1940, p. 998, says that he consulted on this point Sabetti-Barrett, Noldin-Schmitt, Konings, Lehmkuhl, Genicot-Salesmans, Slater, McHugh-Callan, Ferreres, Aertnys-Damen, without success. However, it is a matter to which I have given some thought in the past, and which I have discussed with other moralists, and so I offer my opinion on the questions you propose, for what it is worth.

Your questions read:

> "What is the moral guilt of a person who cheats in the following kinds of examinations?
>
> A) A common term examination through which the teacher checks the work done by the student.
>
> B) A competitive examination for a medal, a scholarship.
>
> C) A professional examination to obtain a license to practise law, medicine, etc.
>
> D) An accumulation of deceptions of class A) "What is the nature of the sin, if any? Is it against justice, obedience, etc.?"

A) To cheat in a common term examination is ordinarily venially sinful, the sin being that of lying. The student who submits work as if it were his own unaided effort, when in reality it is not his own, is lying, not by his words but by his deeds. Where nothing is at stake except the teacher's check upon the student's class standing, this sin is not grave. I suppose it is conceivable that, in some circumstances, passing in such work would not amount to a claim of originality—e.g. in a place where cheating was extremely common, or to some extent countenanced, or at least winked at by the school authorities themselves. But in this country at any rate, I believe that cheating is an offence against common honesty and amounts to a lie.

Is it also a sin against obedience? For it is obviously against the school rules everywhere. No general answer can be given to this question. In the case of grade school pupils, whose teachers are more or less strictly *in loco*

parentis, the injunctions of these teachers and the school authorities would frequently bind the consciences of the pupils in the same way as the commands of their parents. If such school authorities and teachers intend to bind the consciences of their pupils when they forbid cheating of various kinds in examinations, it is clear that they have the power to do so, and that to violate their

commands would be a sin against obedience. However, it would be only a venial sin. I am inclined to think that in the case of young pupils (grade school age), there will frequently be such a sin of disobedience. And even in cases where the school teachers do not intend to exercise their quasi-parental authority to bind the consciences of the children, the children will frequently commit a subjective sin of disobedience when they violate school rules, especially the rules against cheating.

But as pupils grow older the likelihood that they are under a strict obligation of obedience to school rules decreases. I do not believe that students in college, and especially in the university, are ordinarily obliged in conscience to obey the particular rules of the school. I do not mean that it is beyond the competence of school authorities to make rules binding in conscience, at least for students who are not yet of age, but I do not believe that is ordinarily the intention of the authorities. The disciplinary regulations, including those governing cheating, are like merely penal laws—at least in the schools with which I am familiar. When I taught in college myself I remember telling my class (Freshmen) that they were forbidden to use "trots," but that if they did use them they would not commit a sin as far as I was concerned, but would be guilty of a breach of academic discipline which would be severely punished (by low marks) if discovered. I have heard of other school authorities who had similar views of the obligation of school regulations.

It is not clear then, in general, whether cheating will also be a sin against obedience. To my mind, the presumption in the case of young pupils is that there is a sin of disobedience, in the case of college and university students that there is not. But I cannot draw the line on these cases.

B) In a competitive examination for a medal or scholarship cheating is a sin against justice. The other competitors have a strict right in justice that they shall not lose their chance of winning or have their chances diminished by such means. I also consider it a sin against justice to cheat when an examination is going to determine class standing or rank. For instance, if the pupils will be ranked first, second, third, etc., all the way down the list, a certain amount of *honor*, if not of emolument, goes with such ranking. To deprive another of the honor due him by cheating and taking his place away from him is, therefore, a sin of injustice. At times, too, the first third of a class is given certain privileges. To get into the first third by cheating, thus excluding someone else, is, of course, unjust to that someone else.

The gravity of these sins of injustice is judged by the gravity of the injury which is caused or attempted by the person cheating. For instance, it would be a grave sin of injustice to cheat in order to deprive another of a scholarship, or, perhaps, of a medal, or, to my mind, of first or second ranking in a class when such ranking connotes a considerable honor. But merely to increase one's own class ranking at slight expense to the ranking of another would not be a serious matter—to make a person twelfth instead of tenth, for instance. But in practice, with regard to the gravity of these sins, the following points must be noted:—

1. Frequently there is no grave subjective guilt, because the students when they cheat do not advert to the fact that they are guilty of injuring or trying to injure others—or at least they are not aware of the serious guilt which may be present in what they are doing.

2. Frequently, too, even in a case where a student deliberately sets out to deprive another of his due in a serious matter, the cheating is not *effective* in bringing about this result. It does not follow at all, because a student cheats in order to get an unjust advantage, that the cheating is

the real reason why he does get the advantage. Some cheating is very insignificant and has no calculable effect on the results in the examinations, or at any rate it often remains uncertain whether the cheating was really the effective cause of the outcome. This uncertainty increases in a case where it is probable that the other competitors also cheated. When this happens, the student is guilty of an internal sin against justice, but he is not guilty of an external sin, that is, he is not guilty of having done an external injury, and so he does not have to make it good.

3. But when there is an external sin of injustice, when for instance the cheating is so extensive that it is clear that it has *resulted* in an unjust outcome (and the student does all this deliberately), then of course there is an obligation of restitution, which is grave in grave matter. The cases where this would be verified in practice would be comparatively infrequent in school and college examinations, I believe. Very often it will be impossible to say with assurance that the cheating was efficaciously unjust. However, in a clear case, restitution, e.g., of the scholarship or of the medal, would have to be made. It may be made in some way that would protect the reputation of the cheater. Moralists set down norms for deciding when the danger to reputation constitutes a sufficient excuse for postponing restitution, and this particular type of case can be very delicate and difficult.

C) In the case of an examination to obtain a professional license (e.g., to practise law or medicine), cheating involves the sin of lying, as in any examination. I do not believe it ordinarily involves a sin of disobedience. At any rate I am willing to admit in practice the probability of the opinion which holds that civil laws of this kind (they are rules according to which such examinations are conducted and such licenses are granted) are merely penal and do not bind the conscience.

And if the examinations are not competitive, as they generally are not, I do not believe any sin of injustice is committed by the *cheating itself*.

However, it would be sinful—both against charity and justice—for a person who was not properly qualified for law or medicine to attempt to *practise* those professions. For he would expose his clients to harm. Hence, in a case where the cheating was very extensive, e.g., a candidate for a license has someone else take the examination for him—there is serious danger that a candidate whose qualifications are gravely insufficient will begin to practise. Inasmuch as cheating of this kind involves this danger, I suppose it can be said to be against the natural law on the score of justice and charity. But in practice I imagine that people who cheat to that extent tell themselves that they will prepare themselves better afterwards, or only take cases within their competence, etc. So the real problem for the moralist arises when unqualified professional men actually begin to practise. It is not so much a problem of cheating in the licensing as it is a problem of professional practice. It goes without saying, however, that in speaking to students of the evils of cheating in examinations these dangers can be stressed.

D) Finally, you submit the question of an accumulation of deceptions in ordinary class and term examinations. I do not believe that the accumulation of such sins of itself amounts to a grave sin. Just as a person who is an habitual liar does not thereby sin gravely, so a student who cheats regularly is not on that account guilty of grave sin.

But the *practice* of cheating does almost inevitably carry in its wake other elements of sinfulness which are not usually present in isolated instances.

A student in college, for instance, who regularly cheats exposes himself to the danger of discovery with its consequent disgrace. This disgrace may be so great as to affect his family. Hence he violates charity towards himself and them.

He may even violate justice if he rashly runs the risk of dismissal with consequent financial loss to his parents. And the fact that he cheats regularly is probably a sign that he is not studying regularly, that he is wasting his time, and failing to make the advance in studies which his parents and the school have a right to expect of him. And so, even if the sin of cheating itself may not be a strict sin of disobedience, the *practice* of cheating almost surely is connected with sins of disobedience.

But to my mind the most serious consideration in this connection is the acquisition of two very bad habits which may seriously affect a boy's virtue in later life. I mean the habit of lying and dishonesty in action, and the habit of *grafting*, i.e., trying to get something for nothing. However, when I say that these are serious considerations I do not mean that the practice of cheating amounts to a mortal sin on that account. I merely mean that we have very good reasons for speaking severely against the practice.

One other point. In speaking to students about the immorality of cheating I do not think it is wise to use such terms that they, at least those of more delicate conscience among them, will think that mortal sin is common in this matter in schools and colleges. As a matter of fact I feel sure that by far the great majority of cases of cheating that occur involve no serious guilt at all. It is always a dangerous matter to try to distinguish mortal and venial sin for young people. It is much better to allow this aspect to be treated by their confessors in the rare individual cases when the need arises. We have plenty of ammunition and motives to use when speaking about the sinfulness of cheating without resorting to the false, or at least misleading, thunder of mortal sin. It is enough to mention the possibility of that in cases where justice is involved, and for the rest stress the dangers of habitual dishonesty, etc.

I hope that the above little dissertation—which turned out to be much longer than I had anticipated—answers your questions. I shall be glad to hear from you if you have further inquiries. The particular opinions I have set forth here are my own, but of course are based on the general principles of Catholic morality.

Yours sincerely in Christ,