THE PROXIMATE OCCASION OF SIN ACCORDING TO ST. ALPHONSUS

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The Proximate Occasion of Sin According to St. Alphonsus

Summary: Three vitally important propositions in the moral teaching of S. Alphonsus—Meaning attached by him to a proximate occasion of sin. Difference between his definition and that of others before and since—Justification of the Saint's definition—Unlawfulness, according to the Holy Doctor of unnecessarily frequenting the probable danger of mortal sin—His teaching defensible from analysis of function of prudence—How to expose oneself to the probable danger of mortal sin is substantially to disregard the norm of prudence in grave matter, i.e., gravely sinful—Fallacy inherent in the more liberal view—Pertinent considerations from teaching of Revelation on the necessity and distribution of grace—Rashness of exposing oneself to the practical possibility of lacking the means needed to keep God's Law—How it is consistent with prudence to frequent necessary occasions—High extrinsic authority of the Most Zealous Doctor.

We propose in this article to expound and defend the thought of S. Alphonsus on three vitally important points of practical morality. They are concerned with the proximate occasion of mortal sin and may be stated as follows: 1) an occasion of sin is proximate as soon as it involves a probable danger of formal sin: 2) it is a serious sin needlessly to expose oneself to the probable danger of mortal sin: and 3) the frequentation of a proximate occasion or probable danger of sin is lawful if there is some physical or moral necessity and if at the same time one has a sincere resolution to use the supernatural means necessary actually to avoid any sin to which the occasion or danger would of its nature be likely to lead the person frequenting it.[1]

1 The Alphonsian teaching has been fundamentally and eruditely explained and proved in the valuable work of Fr. Ter Haar, C.SS.R.: *De Occasionariis et Recidivis* (Rome, 1927). The same author has also compiled a most useful *Casus Conscientiae de praecipuis huius aetatis Peccandi Occasionibus* (1934), where the principles of the Holy Doctor are further elaborated and abundantly illustrated by practical applications.

1. An occasion of sin is proximate as soon as it involves a truly probable danger of sin.

For S. Alphonsus a proximate occasion of sin is something external to a person—whether it be another person, or some place or thing—which places him in grave danger or serious probability of sinning mortally, even though it is also probable that in spite of the occasion sin will be avoided.[2]

2 *Theol Mor.* lib. 6, n. 452 (vol. 3, p. 457), References to the Saint's *Theologia Moralis* are according to the critical edition of Fr. L. Gaude, C.SS.R. According to S. Aphonsus [sic] the probability of sin can arise from various causes: vg., the nature of the occasion in itself—as with an obscene book, past experience, the known fragility of a given individual, etc. Obviously every occasion will not involve the same danger of sin for every individual.

A more liberal view restricts a proximate occasion to one in which a person rarely, if ever, abstains from serious sin. This does not please the Holy Doctor,[3] and his peremptory rejection of this opinion had much to do with its subsequent disappearance from the writings of moralists till it was revived by a number of more recent authors.[4] Thus Genicot describes a proximate occasion as one "in qua homo semper vel saltem omnino frequentius peccat"[5]: Noldin requires it be connected with sin "morali quadam necessitate[6]: Ubach that the sin follow "semper vel fere semper",[7] while Fr. Davis states very clearly: "A proximate occasion is one in which a person almost always sins".[8]

3 *ibid.*

4 This revival seems largely due to the great influence of Fr. A. Ballerini, S.J., although he himself did not formulate an express definition of a proximate occasion. However, he tried to detect a certain incoherence in the teaching of S. Alphonsus (*Adnot. in Gury,* 11, n. 440), and even tried to claim the Holy Doctor's patronage for the more liberal view the latter most expressly rejected (*Opus Morale,* V, n. 168). An ingenious but quite unconvincing attempt to separate the Holy Doctor's authority from the view commonly associated with his name has recently been made by Fr. Fabregas, S.I. (*Periodica,* 1941, p. 33).

5 Ed. 1922, v. 2, n. 371.

6 Ed. 1923, v. 3, n. 398.

7 Ed. 1935, v. 2, n. 2103.

8 v. 3, 1, p. 291.

Where sin is morally certain, the occasion is not only proximate but it is also immediate. However, the question arises:—in qualifying occasions of sin must the terms "immediate" and "proximate" be taken as interchangeable, so that a proximate occasion always means an immediate occasion? The answer of S. Alphonsus is already clear nor was he the first theologian to think true probability of sin is all that is required for an occasion to be designated proximate.[9] In spite of the revival of the more lenient opinion the Saint still receives strong support from reputable authors and at the present time the drift is probably in his direction.[10] At any rate, an examination of the theologians who have at various times expressed their views on the matter would justify the assertion that his opinion is at least "multo communior".[11]

9 He quotes amongst others Suarez, Croix, Segneri, and Roncaglia.

10 Fr. Salsmans S.I. has been so impressed by the arguments of Fr. Ter Haar that in the later editions of Genicot (1931, 1939) he no longer admits the teaching of that author: Noldin's editor, Fr. Schmitt, attempts a rapprochement (Sd. [sic] 1937, *De Principiis,* n. 326, nota).

11 After an exhaustive study Fr. Ter Haar concludes that the opinion of S. Alphonsus is followed by the great majority of theologians who have written since his time (n. 65). We have verified that the view of the Holy Doctor is favoured by the following: Lehmkuhl (2, n. 617), Ojetti (Syn. v. occasio), Salsmans and Napholc (*Periodica* 1932, p. 146-157)—all S.I.: the Dominicans Pruemmer (3, n. 449) and Merkelbach (3, n. 666): Tanquerey (*De Penitentia* (1921), n. 525). There are also the moralists of the Redemptorist Congregation, vg., Ter Haar, Van Rossum (*Comm. de Iudicio Sacramentali* n. 13), Marc (v. 2, n. 1819), Aertyns-Damen [sic] (2, n. 469), and Wouters (2, n. 459). Other names are given by Ter Haar and Napholc (in an excellent historical sketch in *Periodica,* 1932, p. 27-28).

As all admit, an occasion of sin is something external to the person sinning or likely to sin and for that reason is a more restricted term than a danger of sin which can be internal—for example, the strength of a person's passion. It is true that a proximate occasion means an occasion which is so to speak, "next to" sin itself: but this "nextness to sin" is to be understood of a proximity proper to a sin-inducing factor *external* to the person who may be led into sin. Therefore an occasion will be proximate *if of itself and without the intervention of other external influences* it is apt effectively to lead a man into sin, or in other words if it gives him a motive or incentive which he is likely to consider a sufficient inducement to sin.[12] This is verified if considering the nature of the occasion and the kind of person confronted by it, we can say the mere presence of the occasion is truly likely to result in his sinning, even though it is also probable that he will not sin.

12 Obviously between the occasion and the sin there always intervenes the consent of the will.

We may confirm this by a brief consideration of the traditional division of occasions of sin into proximate and remote.[13] If an occasion involving a grave or probable danger of sin is not by that very fact a proximate one, then unless one is to challenge a division long considered adequate we must take it that at least some occasions involving such danger must be remote. But how do theologians describe a remote occasion? Naturally they take the word "remote" in its obvious sense, and so they tell us a remote occasion of sin is one which is far removed from sin itself. It is therefore, some external factor hardly likely of itself to provide a motive sufficient to lead one into sin—something which involves a danger of sin which is slight or improbable. To quote only two authors—both opposed to S. Alphonsus—Genicot says there is a remote occasion: "si leve peccandi periculum occurrit ac proinde peccatum est parum probabile", and Noldin: "in qua periculum peccandi leve est".[14] If this is so and if the description is meant to be adequate, as presumably it is, it is impossible to classify as a remote occasion one which makes sin truly probable. Hence we must admit with S. Alphonsus that as soon as an occasion involves a real probability that a person frequenting it will sin, it is to be classified as proximate.

13 Some theologians while supporting the substance of S. Alphonsus' teaching have proposed to introduce a third member into the division—the "occasio propinquior" (cfr. *Napholc.* 1. cit., p. 154-155), which designates an occasion involving a probable as opposed to a more probable danger.

14 Genicot, n. 471. Noldin, n. 398.

However, a far more serious consideration was in the mind of the Holy Doctor when he so categorically rejected the view of those theologians who required for a proximate occasion that its connection with sin should be morally certain. Everyone admits there is per se an obligation to avoid the proximate occasion of serious sin and that this obligation is a grave one.[15] All theologians—or practically all of them—would subscribe to a definition of a proximate occasion which defines it as one which it is gravely unlawful to frequent without necessity: but the Saint was deeply convinced that one cannot without necessity expose oneself to an occasion wherein sin is probable, and that he

who does so is already guilty of serious sin even though it might also be probable that the sin of which there is danger will be avoided. Accordingly he insisted that a probable danger of sin is sufficient to make any occasion involving such a danger a proximate occasion. This brings us to the fundamental point of cleavage between the Holy Doctor and his adversaries.

15 This theological teaching is based on the condemnation by Innocent XI of the proposition: "potest aliquando absolvi qui in proxima peccandi occasione versatur quam potest et non vult omittere, quin immo directe et ex proposito quaerit, aut ei se ingerit" (Denzinger, n. 1211, cfr. S. Alph. 1, VI, n. 454).

2. It is a serious sin needlessly to expose oneself to the probable danger of mortal sin.

S. Alphonsus makes frequent use of the expression "periculum probabile peccandi", but he warns us the adjective "probabile" does not qualify "periculum" absolutely but in its relation to a probable sin. Therefore a "probable danger" does not mean an uncertain danger: the danger is certain, but it is not certain whether one will yield to it, and therefore the sin of which there is danger is uncertain,[16] though certainly probable. Certain probability of sin is certain danger of sin, just as certain probability of death is certain danger of death.

16 "Licet peccatum sit incertum an sit vel non committendum, certum tamen est periculum peccandi" (1.V., n. 63, vol. 2, p. 751).

Before we go further it is useful to recall the meaning attached by the Holy Doctor to the word "probable". When he uses the word without restriction he means by it something which is truly or solidly probable: and truly or solidly probable means an opinion or a statement based on a reason sufficient of itself to draw the assent of a prudent man.[17] Sometimes he speaks of two contrary or contradictory opinions as being truly or solidly probable: in such a case he does not mean that the mind can at the same time assent to both of them as true in themselves nor does he mean—as we shall show later—that it can *legitimately* assent to either at the more arbitrary choice of the will. He simply means that either view is supported by a reason strong enough to justify a prudent assent were it not for the fact that each side neutralises the other.[18] Therefore a prudent judgment is impossible.

17 "Probabilis (opinio) est, quae gravi fundamento innititur, vel intrinseco rationis vel extrinseco auctoritatis, quod valet ad se trahendum assensum viri prudentis, etsi cum formidine oppositi" (lib. 1, n. 40, vol. 1, p. 21).

18 Therefore the only legitimate state of the mind is one of positive doubt, so that the probability of neither side gives a prudent norm for acting. In this sense S. Alphonsus says: "sola probabilitas haud firmum praebet fundamentum ad licite operandum" (lib. 1, n. 56, v. 1, p. 25). Here the teaching of S. Alphonsus is in perfect accord with the nature of the mind and the explicit utterances of the Angelic Doctor, who writes: "quandoque (intellectus) non inclinatur magis ad unum quam aliud....propter apparentem aequalitatem eorum quae movent ad utramque partem; et ista est dubitantis dispositio, qui fluctuat inter duas partes contradictionis" (*De Ver.,* q. 14, a. 1). For practical purposes S. Alphonsus does not consider that this state of doubt is removed till one side is supported by reasons which are certainly or notably stronger than the reasons for the other. (cfr. "*Homo Apostolicus,*' Tr. 1, c. 3, n. 31, and the quotation from the 7th ed. of the "*Theologia Moralis*" given by Gaude, v. 1, p. 25, n. 54, in note a).

The Saint's teaching that it is unlawful deliberately to frequent an occasion in which one will probably sin can be restated as follows: it is a serious sin deliberately to frequent an occasion where it cannot be prudently judged that mortal sin will actually be avoided. Some examples will clarify the position of the great moralist. A man goes into an hotel and drinks in circumstances which make it impossible for him to assert definitely that he will not get seriously drunk. Perhaps in these same circumstances he has frequently been drunk in the past, or perhaps the hold drink has upon him is rapidly becoming such that serious abuse is definitely likely. Yet no one can definitely say that on this or that occasion he will get drunk, for we can suppose that the chances in both directions are roughly equal. According to S. Alphonsus such a man is guilty of mortal sin—at least objectively—each time[19] he goes deliberately into these dangerous circumstances. Company keepers see each other at places

or times or in other circumstances which are likely to lead them into mortal sin: they know this because perhaps they have fallen in the past, or perhaps because they must honestly acknowledge that their sense of modesty is so breaking down that to court temptation *even once more* is seriously to risk a fall. To take such a risk even once is in the eyes of the Holy Doctor a mortal sin, even though it may also be probable that they will not fall, for the vital point is that as long as a fall remains probable there is no room for a prudent judgment that sin will actually be avoided.

19 We emphasise the words "each time" to bring out the difference between the opinion of S. Alphonsus and the one he criticises. However, it must be remembered that according to all theologians it is gravely unlawful to go *habitually* into even a probable danger of sin, because such conduct is to expose oneself to the moral certainty of sinning some time or other (cfr. Genicot, n. 372, p. 338). Therefore a confessor who neglects to warn occasionaries (vg., company-keepers) that they must give up at least the *practice* of frequenting probable danger of mortal sin because he does not consider they have an obligation to do so is acting on an opinion reprobated by all moral theologians.

The objection now arises: is not the real probability that sin will be avoided sufficient to excuse one from serious imprudence?[20] The opponents of S. Alphonsus unhesitatingly answer this question in the affirmative and seem to consider their assertion self-evident.[21] We maintain that an impartial examination of the function of the virtue of prudence in relation to our present problem will show that the severer but not unduly strict view of S. Alphonsus is founded on correct theological principles.

20 That there is at least a venial sin of imprudence is commonly admitted.

21 S. Alphonsus states his opponents' case as follows: "quia, ut dicunt, cum sit eo casu etiam probabile quod non adsit periculum peccandi, non operatur temere qui tali occasioni se committit" (1. V., n. 63). Fr. Davis seems to consider the question solved by merely stating it: "The question is....whether we are obliged to give up or avoid an occasion in which we shall probably not sin at all, though probably we shall do so". (v. 3.1., p. 292). Cappello and Genicot have the same attitude. The latter says: "non apparet cur vere graviter peccet qui habet omnino notabilem probabilitatem se in hac occasione quam adit, non esse graviter peccaturum: non enim iste eligit rem qua morali necessitate peccatum secum trahit" (n. 372), cfr. Cappello *De Sacramentis,* v. 11, 1., n. 827 (Ed. 1938).

We shall formulate our argument syllogistically: Substantially to disregard the direction or norm of prudence in grave matter is a mortal sin. But he who deliberately, that is, without necessity, exposes himself to the true probability of mortal sin disregards the norm of prudence substantially and in grave matter. Therefore he commits a mortal sin.

The major of the above argument can be explained and amplified by recalling the exceedingly important role of prudence in our moral life. Its scope or purpose is to direct our actions to the last end of human life: each virtue, whether acquired or infused, disposes the faculty in which it is found, to act in accordance with the formal object proper to that virtue. But far more is necessary. Human actions are surrounded by an infinite variety and complexity of circumstances. This fact makes it difficult for particular virtues to attain their objects or to function with proper facility—so many different factors have to be considered before we can know in a great many cases in what direction their functions lie. Hence a more general virtue is needed which will securely direct each virtue along its proper path, enabling us to plan, judge and impose upon ourselves whatever course of action a virtue may require in any particular set of circumstances.[22] This most necessary guiding principle is the virtue of prudence which though residing in the practical intellect is the queen of the moral virtues, and is classically defined as "recta ratio agibilium".[23] Since it is essentially designed to direct the other virtues, prudence will bind as they do:[24] hence where these impose an obligation in grave

matter whose fulfillment prudence is called upon to ensure, there will immediately arise a grave precept of this latter virtue. Therefore, if this precept is substantially set aside or disregarded there will be a grave sin of imprudence.

22 As the Angelic Doctor says: "Ad rectam electionem non solum sufficit inclinatio in debitum finem, quod est directe per habitum virtutis moralis: sed etiam quod aliquis directe eligat ea quae sunt ad finem, quod fit per prudentiam, quae est consiliativa et iudicativa et praeceptiva eorum quae sunt ad finem" (1: 2ae, q. 65, a. 1).

23 ibid. "The material object of prudence embraces individual human actions performed under choice and freely (agibilia). The formal object of prudence is the right deliberation, decision and direction (recta ratio) to be given to human actions with a view to the observance of the golden mean" (McHugh and Callan: "*Moral Theology*", v. 2, n. 1629).

24 "Prudentia participatur quodammodo in omnibus virtutibus inquantum est directiva earum" (2: 2ae, q. 53, a. 2).

We have now to establish the minor of our main argument—that one who without reason exposes himself to the probable danger of mortal sin substantially disregards the norm of prudence in grave matter. The matter is grave because it is a question of avoiding a grave sin, and the norm of prudence is disregarded substantially because if prudence has for its function that we actually avoid sin then it makes it imperative that we do nothing without a reasonable judgment that we will not on account of what we do commit a sin. Where sin is truly probable such a judgment is impossible: therefore deliberately to expose oneself to the probable danger of sin is substantially to disregard what prudence demands.

Why is it not sufficient to act on a judgment of probability—"it is truly probable I will not sin"? The answer is that prudence must ensure the *actual observance* of the precepts—a point which cannot be too much emphasised. Being directive of the other virtues it must bind as they do. No one observes the obligations of chastity or sobriety unless he is actually chaste or sober: likewise no one fulfills the obligations of prudence arising from its relation to these virtues unless he sees to it that he will actually be chaste or sober. In other words prudence is not satisfied as long as one is content so to direct his actions that avoidance of grave transgressions is no more than probable.

One wonders if the opponents of S. Alphonsus are assuming that it is possible to form a definite judgment of fact on the mere probability that something is or will be—even though it is quite as probable that it is not or will not be: or if this is considered an unfair way of stating an adversary's case we may ask whether it is argued that we can form a practically certain conscience based on the true probability we will not sin, passing thence to the definite assertion that sin will actually be avoided.[25] As already pointed out, the only legitimate state of the mind in the face of equal and opposite probabilities is one of doubt, and therefore S. Alphonsus in refusing a man the right to expose himself to probable danger of sin espouses a doctrine consistent with his rejection of the principle dear to many Probabilists—"qui probabiliter agit prudenter agit".[26] Nor is there room here for the application of the reflex principle admitted by Probabilists and Equiprobabilists alike—"lex dubia non obligat", since there is a sufficiently certain obligation from the virtue of prudence to avoid probable danger of formal as opposed to material sin.

25 S. Alphonsus attributes to his opponents the following argument: "quia (ut aiunt) cum probabile sit quod ille peccabit, et probabile quod non peccabit, potest sibi formare conscientiam certam, et proinde iudicium practicum non fore peccaturum" (lib. VI., n. 453, vol. 3, p. 460).

26 cfr. "Homo Apostolicus" Tr. 1, c. 3, n. 31. Here the Saint argues cogently that where there is a solid argument on the other side, the mind can assent to a probability as being true only through the arbitrary intervention of the will.

Psychologically, of course, such an intervention is possible but it has no rational or moral justification, inasmuch as a mere whim is elevated to the dignity of a rational motive. The defence of probabilism which supposes the contrary has been described by a modern theologian who is himself of probabilistic leanings as based on a principle "omni sanae philosophiae contrarium, apud veteres scholasticos inauditum, experientiae psychologicae repugnans, ac rectae rationi et prudentiae adversum" (Merkelbach, v. 2, p. 101, n. 1).

We conclude then, that wherever there is true probability that a certain occasion will lead to sin it is impossible to form a certain judgment that sin will be avoided, so that it is gravely imprudent to expose oneself deliberately to such an occasion as it is acting with substantial imprudence in grave matter.

This argument can be strengthened by considerations proper to the supernatural order. It is theologically certain that grace is necessary even to keep the natural law and overcome serious temptations, and it is the common teaching of theologians that one in sanctifying grace cannot hope to remain in that state without a further supply of actual grace.[27] Without going into obscure and debatable points about the nature and extent of this impotence,[28] it is a reasonable deduction from what is beyond dispute that a probable danger of sin is likely to involve a temptation so severe that to overcome it a man will need the help of grace. In its efforts to avoid the actuality of sin supernatural prudence must take this likelihood of the need of grace into account with a view to ensuring first that whatever grace is offered will be corresponded with, and secondly—what is even more important—that grace if needed will certainly be there in sufficient strength to make it morally possible to avoid a fall.

27 This latter point is deduced from the teaching of the Council of Trent that without a special help from God no one can persevere in the state of grace till death (Sess. VI, c. 22, Denz. n. 832) cfr. Diekamp-Hoffman. *Manuale Theologiae Dogmaticae.* v. 3, 2, p. 51, n. 2.

28 It is certain that without grace man can avoid some sins and overcome certain light temptations; it is also certain that without grace man will from time to time encounter temptations he will be unable to overcome. cfr. Pesch *De Gratia,* n. 146.

It is sometimes said that the very probability that one will not sin is a sign that temptation can be overcome with the ordinary helps of grace.[29] But for prudence the crucial question is: shall we actually remove the danger by corresponding with such helps, presupposing they will be really there? On the contrary we might well ask: will a person exposing himself to the probable danger of sin from a mere whim give a serious thought to the need of grace when temptation comes? Is he more likely to correspond with or to reject grace? How anxious will such a man be to use grace according to its supernatural purpose, when he seems to think of the supernatural intervention of Almighty God as little more than a convenient device to save him from the probable consequences of his own temerity? The introduction of the grace element does not serve to lessen the imprudence of one who without reason exposes himself to the probable danger of mortal sin. Moreover, it unveils a radical defect in the opinion we are venturing to criticise.

29 Genicot, n. 372. Cappello, n. 827.

It is taken for granted that the ordinary helps of grace which will perhaps be necessary for victory will be available for a man who is in serious danger of his own seeking, or at least it is assumed that he can obtain those helps by prayer.[30] Is this contention well founded? It is true that God is in some way bound to give us all the aid necessary to keep His Commandments: He will allow us to be exposed to no *unavoidable* temptation which at least with His help we will not be able to overcome. Dare we say

God will help us in dangers that we have deliberately sought? Theologians who think so should prove their assertion: and they should prove it not by easy a priori assumptions but by arguments drawn from the founts of Faith, since only in them can we find or hope to find the arrangements God has made for the distribution of His supernatural benefits.

30 Genicot, ibid. Cappello ibid.

Turning to these, two things are seen to stand out. One is that we can't hope to keep the Commandments without an abundant supply of grace which is ordinarily given to those who pray[31]: the other is that a condition for the infallible efficacy of prayer for the grace necessary to overcome temptations is that we do not neglect to use those means of avoiding sin which are already in our power. This is the teaching of the Council of Trent making use of the memorable words of S. Augustine[32]: "Deus impossibilia non jubet, sed jubendo monet, et facere quod possis, et petere quod non possis". If having done what we can, we pray for the aid still necessary, the Council assures us such aid will be forthcoming: "et ipse adiuvat ut possis".[33]

31 See the Golden work of S. Alphonsus: *Prayer: the Great Means of Salvation.*

32 *De Natura et Gratia,* c. 43, n. 50.

33 Sess. VI, c. 11, Denz., n. 804.

On the one hand then, it is probable that one who goes into a probable danger of sin will be confronted with a temptation to overcome which he will need actual grace; on the other hand it is certain that prayer itself is not guaranteed to provide us with sufficient grace, unless we do what is already in our power to avoid sin. One who without reason goes into a probable danger of sin cannot be said to be observing the "facere quod possis" of S. Augustine and the Council. Therefore, even if he prays he cannot expect grace with any certainty.[34] If it is imprudent to go unnecessarily into circumstances where it is likely we will commit mortal sin, it is surely even more imprudent to expose ourselves by our deliberate action to the practical possibility of lacking the very means required to give us the moral strength to resist temptation.[35]

34 S. Alphonsus makes great capital out of the words of Trent in his work on prayer (*Ascetical Works,* v. 3, p. 214, ss. ed. Grimm). No doubt they were in his mind when he wrote in his *Theologia Moralis* that the resolution to use the means of grace does not justify one in frequenting a voluntary occasion—"eo quod Deus non adiuvat temere se periculo exponentes" (1.V, n. 63, v. 2, p. 751).

35 This argument is well developed by Fr. Napholc, S.I. (*Periodica,* 1932, p. 142-150), who regards it as fundamental. cfr. Ter Haar, p. 33-35. It is worthy of note that Fr. Genicot himself does not venture to suggest that it can safely be assumed that a man can overcome a probable danger of sin with his unaided natural powers.

Examples and comparisons used by theologians and sacred orators to drive home their warnings on the obligation to avoid dangerous occasions may now be seen in all their force and value. One who deliberately drinks poison and expects to survive is implicitly tempting God for such an expectation can only be based on the assumption that God will, if necessary, intervene outside the ordinary course of His Providence in order to save him. Is it not then, tempting God in a matter even more serious if one goes deliberately into probable danger of sin and expects not to fall, since such an expectation is an implicit challenge to God to intervene with His Help outside the ordinary norm He has imposed upon Himself in distributing His grace?[36] If the obligation to preserve our bodily life forbids us under pain of serious sin to expose it unnecessarily to grave danger even though it is fairly likely the danger will not prove fatal, does not the obligation to keep ourselves alive in divine grace

forbid us even more peremptorily to expose ourselves to the probable danger of losing it by mortal sin—a danger, we repeat, arising from the fact that on account of our rashness we have probably deprived ourselves of the helps necessary to avoid disaster?[37] If a law forbids us to place ourselves in the moral or physical impossibility of observing it, does it not in that very fact forbid us to deprive ourselves of the certainty of having the means necessary for observing it?[38] If, finally, it is wrong to act with a doubtful conscience not knowing or caring if what we do is sinful, is it not wrong to act as though we don't care whether or not we shall have the means of not sinning? In both cases there seems to be at least objective contempt for the obligations God has placed upon us.[39]

36 "Si homo praetermittat facere quod potest, solum divinum auxilium expectans, videtur tentare Deum" (2: 2ae, q. 53, a. 4, ad 1).

37 Thus S. Alphonsus: "Si est illicitum uti opinione probabili sine iusta causa cum periculo damni alieni spiritualis vel temporalis...quanto magis id non licebit ubi periculum imminet propriae animae" (S. Alph. 1.V, n. 63). cfr. Ter Haar, n. 45: Merkelbach, n. 666-3: Napholc, p. 146.

38 The famous words of Fr. Suarez are therefore applicable: "in moralibus perinde est aliquid facere et exponere se periculo faciendi" (*De Sacramentis in Genere,* Disp. 16, sect. 11, n. 3).

39 Fr. Ter Haar aptly quotes the words of S. Thomas: "Quicumque non cavet pericula, videtur contemnere id cuius detrimentum pericula inducere possunt" (Quod 1.3, art. 9, ad 3).

3. The frequentation of a proximate occasion or probable danger of sin is lawful on account of some physical or moral necessity coupled with the sincere resolution to use the means of grace.

With all theologians S. Alphonsus admits that there are occasions of sin which though normally to be avoided, can be lawfully frequented if such frequentation is morally or physically necessary.[40] He insists, however, on one condition—one must have the firm resolution to use the means of grace, which God then places at our disposal. Such a resolution, argues the Holy Doctor, makes the danger formally remote, even though the occasion is of itself proximate—i.e., apt of itself to expose one to the probable danger of sin.[41]

40 17.V1, n. 455, vole 3. p. 463, col. 2. [sic]

41 "Periculum de se proximum tunc fit remotum tam ratione circumstantiae necessitatis, quam ratione mediorum praecaventium, quae persona proponit (ut tenetur) adhibere" (1.V, n. 63, vol. 2, p. 751, cl. 2. cfr. 1.V1, n. 452, v. 3, p. 458, cl. 2).

The consistency of this position with all the foregoing can now be briefly pointed out. The sincere resolution of a man who has to face an occasion of sin which is not of his own seeking gives him confidence that God will grant all necessary help to avoid sin. He has accomplished the "facere quod possis" of the Council of Trent. All the grace he will eventually need may not be present as yet, but he can take to himself the further admonition of the Council and use the means of grace—especially prayer, and he will infallibly obtain it. He resolves—as he is bound, to employ these means to the utmost,[42] and this resolution springing as it does from his certainty that God will not belie His Promises gives him a notably greater probability that he will not sin. Hence in frequenting the occasion he can form the definite judgment prudence requires:—"In spite of the danger I shall not sin".[43] Accordingly the danger itself diminishes below the limits of true probability and becomes formally remote, no matter how proximate it might be in itself or actually would be in other circumstances.

42 S. Alphonsus tells us a man will fulfill this obligation—"diligenter avertendo animum a delectatione turpi vel ab alia passione; et insuper se muniendo piis cogitationibus, orationibus ac sacramentorum frequentia" (1.V *ibid*).

43 The nature of the case makes it impossible to form a completely certain judgment, for we are dealing with the realm of the contingent, where the mind must be content with what appears most likely. As the Angelic Doctor puts it: "Quia materia prudentiae sunt singularia contingentia, circa quae sunt operationes humanae, non potest certitudo prudentiae tanta esse, quod sollicitudo omnino tollatur" (2: 2ae, q. 47, a. 9, ad 2). This "prudential" or "probable" certitude is nevertheless a definite judgment that what appears more likely is in fact true, though there is a certain fear that we may be in error (cfr. S.Th. Post. Analyt. lib. 1, lect. 1).

Conclusion.

The work of a confessor is probably never more laborious or delicate than when he has to deal with penitents who are frequenting occasions of sin. The principles of S. Alphonsus are eminently reasonable and consistent, and have the high extrinsic authority that comes from the patronage of the Holy Doctor whom the Apostolic See has praised in a special way for having steered the safe middle course be- tween the extremes of laxity and rigorism in the direction of souls.[44] We do not claim that the confessor who applies these principles is going to find his task any the less arduous:[45] in fact it is much easier readily to give or refuse absolution accordingly as one adheres to principles which are too liberal or severe beyond measure, than to weigh probabilities and take the trouble necessary to dispose penitents that the Saint would have us take. Experience, however, will most certainly confirm the deep supernatural wisdom and salutary prudence of the theological teaching of the great missioner and shepherd of souls who is Holy Church's Most Zealous Doctor.

44 In the Apostolic Letter conferring on him the title of Doctor of the Church, Pius IX praises S. Alphonsus for having opened a safe road 'inter implexas theologorum tum laxiores tum rigidiores sententias,...per quam christifidelium animarum moderatores inoffenso pede incedere possent".

45 For abundant illustrationes [sic] of the application of the Alphonsian principles in practice, one can again recommend the work of Fr. Ter Haar, C.SS.R.: *Casus Conscientiae de Praecipuis Huius Aetatis Occasionibus*.

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