

## CHAPTER IV

## MORTAL AND VENIAL SIN: THE REFORMING STRAIN

THE accusation of teaching "a Jovinianish parity of sins" was frequently levelled at Anglicans by Romanists during the energetic controversies which continued throughout the seventeenth century on this point of moral theology which so easily lent itself to polemics. The doctrine of a distinction between light and criminous sins has its roots in Holy Writ, and is to be found everywhere in the history of Christian discipline and penitential transactions. Common sense and observation have emphasised S. Augustine's contention that flies and eagles are not equal because both fly through the air. But the line of demarcation between sin and sin and the doctrine of mortal and venial sin, as it confronted the Caroline writers, are not identical. With Joseph Hall they repudiated the charge of confounding sins without distinction and yet retaliated by rejecting the doctrine as received by their Roman Catholic contemporaries, claiming that, in its developed form, it had stepped beyond the bounds of Scriptural warrant. The grounds of Caroline dissent in this matter and that which they substituted for the discarded doctrine are of great moment for the understanding of the Anglican view of moral theology. But first of all, it is necessary to consider certain changes which took place in Christian thought on this subject during the preceding centuries. Be the origin of the doctrine in the attempt to smooth the rough places of law for the sake of the weak or tender conscience, or in the practical necessity for a guiding principle of division as a kind of ready reckoner for pastoral purposes, or in both these causes, a change of deep significance came about in its structure. At first, and up to the close of the patristic era, the key-note of the distinction was objectivity. The external act is the criterion, so that there is a regular *tabula* of sins, the commission of any of which involves the sinner in mortal sin. But by the time of the Schoolmen, and notably, of course, in the works of S. Thomas Aquinas, a tremendous ethical change in the idea has come about. There are still sins which are reckoned as mortal, *suo genere*, but the governing factor is no

longer the external act. It is the deliberateness with which the act is committed.<sup>1</sup> In other words, intention or motive is receiving recognition as the determining element in assessing the gravity of sin. It was to Peter Abelard that Aquinas and his fellows were indebted for this improved idea. In the *Scito Teipsum*<sup>2</sup> the discussion of sin moves forward out of the realm of externals. Consequent on this stressing of deliberateness at the expense of the merely external action, there emerged the difficulty of drawing a clear line between what was mortal and what venial. This indeterminacy inevitably paved the way for laxity in the computation of the guiltiness of certain sinful acts, a weakness upon which the Carolines were not slow to seize. "Men call what they please venial", comments Jeremy Taylor.

By the time of Bellarmine, venial sin could be depicted as "that which, without any relation either to the mercy of God, or to the state of the person sinning is of such a kind, that of its own nature, it deserves temporal punishment only".<sup>3</sup> The idea was being advanced that venial sin was rather beside the law than against it. Caroline divinity directed its heaviest fire upon this assertion that, in its own proper nature, venial sin differed from mortal sin and deserved merely temporal punishment.

In modern Anglican thought there is a hesitancy to scrap a distinction so manifestly valuable to the pastor, but the dangers of the definition, as indicated by traditional Anglican theology, are fully recognised.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, there can be no doubt that many Caroline writers are in this connection marked with a semi-rigorism, which, however justifiable it seemed at the time in the light of a reaction from the opposite tendency of Continental casuistry, always stands in danger of begetting the very laxity it strives to stamp out. Three questions seem to require answering if we would elucidate the Caroline view of the problem:

- (1) For what reasons did they deem themselves constrained to reject the doctrine as it stood?
- (2) Is there any truth in the accusation that they taught "parity of sins"?

<sup>1</sup> For some references see K. E. Kirk, *The Vision of God*, pp. 540-2.

<sup>2</sup> Abelard on mortal and venial sin, *Scito Teipsum*, Chaps. XV and XVI.

<sup>3</sup> Bellarmine, *de Amiss. grat. lib.*, I, cap. 9, comment from Davenant.

<sup>4</sup> See K. E. Kirk, *Some Principles of Moral Theology*, pp. 245-52, where the distinction is described (p. 247) as *unreal* from the point of view of God, *dangerous* from the point of view of the sinner, but *real* and *valuable* from the point of view of the priest.

(3) What division of sins did they make for pastoral purposes?

If we approach these questions in order, we shall find woven into the warp of Caroline thought, two tendencies which mould the form of the many objections to the traditional teaching on mortal and venial sin. Firstly, there is the tendency to look at the question more from the theological than the "human" or purely pastoral angle. All sin offends God. "It is all one, whether I be drowned in the ebb shore or in the midst of the deep sea."<sup>1</sup> The strength and the limitations of this attitude will be apparent at once. Bound up with this is the second tendency already mentioned, which is towards rigorism, and which finds expression in different degree with different writers. Externally, it is the reaction against the too facile casuistry of the Continent. Internally, it is part of the first tendency to look at sin from the side of its proper nature, rather than from the side of its effects or its relative guilt. Generally speaking, both tendencies become modified in actual practice, but they lie behind, and help to explain, the Caroline frame of mind.

(1) and (2) Chief among the reasons for repudiation is the knowledge that all sin is *avopia*, all sin is in its own nature deadly, mortiferous.<sup>2</sup> It is the conviction that there is a dangerous frivolity in the assumption that the lightest sin, if persisted in, may not imperil the sinner's spiritual state.

In 1567, Pius V had condemned the proposition that "no sin is of its own nature venial, but every sin deserves eternal punishment", the glory of which was a serious but utterly intransigent concept of the Christian life as a striving after "the perfect man", and the snare of which was rigorism and rigorism's dangerous consequences. Caroline theology exhibits the first of these qualities in its best aspects to a marked degree, and preserves at least a tendency to the second. The English divines recognised that if the proper nature of venial sin be held as differing from that of mortal sin, other claims, such as that it does not destroy charity or merits merely temporal punishment, may be substantiated, thus leaving an open road to a whole class of sinful actions which gradually acquire a type of permissibility. Pastoral considerations, which we shall note presently, convinced them of the advisability of stressing the theological truth that all sin partook of the same deadly nature, though the degree of guilt or danger

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Hall (*Works*, ed. Wynter, Vol. VII, p. 464).

<sup>2</sup> This term suggested by Kirk is used by some of the Carolines.

in all sins was not equal.<sup>1</sup> As they feel their way through this question, we notice that while they are perfectly unanimous upon the principle, there are shades of opinion among the Carolines. Some retain the words mortal and venial, others dispense with them because of their doctrinal significance, but all are agreed in emptying the word "venial" of the notion of something already pardoned by intrinsic right. "If venial be taken for pardonable, it is true that many circumstances make it more or less; that is, whatever makes the sin greater or less, makes it more or less venial; . . . but if by venial, we mean actually pardoned or not exacted: nothing makes a sin venial, but repentance; and that makes every sin so."<sup>2</sup> Scripture, says Thorndike, affords no grounds for the assertion that "any sin be originally venial by that first law of God, the transgression whereof it is".<sup>3</sup> Donne ushers in the subject with a fanfare of metaphors: "You heare," he tells his listeners, "of one man that was drowned in a vessell of Wine; but how many thousands in ordinary water? And he was no more drowned in that precious liquor, than they in that common water. A gad of steele does no more choake a man; than a feather, than a haire; Men perish with whispering sins . . . as often as with crying sins."<sup>4</sup> And with still greater liberality he continues, "For consider what a dangerous and slippery station thou art in, if after a victory over giants, thou mayst be overcome by Pigmees; If after thy soule hath been canon-prooffe against strong tentations, she be slaine at last by a Pistoll; and; after she hath swom over a tempestous sea, shee drowne at last; in a shallow and standing ditch."<sup>5</sup> This is rich pulpit stuff, but to the point, as when dealing with the claim that venial sin does not extinguish charity, he observes that this is to say "that a man were not hurt in his head, because he was not beheaded".<sup>6</sup> Here, at any rate, metaphor does not befog clarity. The severe Davenant, George Herbert's bishop, caps his contemporary with precision: "Our adversaries are unfortunate in this opinion, namely, that they judge the nature of sin to be deadly, merely when it

<sup>1</sup> Taylor, *Unum Necessarium*, Chap. III, Sect. v, 44: "The highest danger is not in every sin; offences and crimes must be distinguished carefully."

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, *Unum Necessarium*, Chap. III, Sect. v, 44, and cp. Bishop Hall, *Sacred Polemics*, Chapter III, Sect. III.

<sup>3</sup> *Of the Covenant of Grace*, Bk. II, Chap. XXXII.

<sup>4</sup> *LXXX Sermons*, XVII.

<sup>5</sup> *LXXX Sermons*, LXIV.

<sup>6</sup> *L Sermons*, XXI.

leads to the *extinction* of charity, seeing it manifests itself in every declension from charity and the Divine Law."<sup>1</sup> Amongst the earlier Carolines, Davenant and Field, great quoters of the schoolmen against the post-tridentines, deserve special notice, for they go straight to the main question of regeneration and grace. Bellarmine had declared that venial sin was such as of its own nature, deserved temporal punishment only, "without any relation either to the mercy of God, or to the state of the person sinning". This large statement evoked a direct denial from both Field and Davenant. Remarking on this claim of Bellarmine ("no respect had to predestination, or reprobation; to the state of man regenerate, or not regenerate"), the former defines his own position. "Wee say therefore that some sinnes are mortall and some veniall, not because some deserve eternity of punishment, and shall eternally be punished, if they remaine without grace, and unremitterd eternally; but because some sins, either in respect of the matter wherein men do offend, or *ex imperfectione actus*, in that they are, not committed with full consent, exclude not grace, the roote of remission, and pardon, out of the soule of him that committeth them: whereas other, either in respect of the matter wherein they are conversant or the full consent wherewith they are committed, cannot stand with grace. So that, contrary to Bellarmine's position, no sinne is veniall in its own nature, without respect had to the state of grace."<sup>2</sup> Field presses on to the logical conclusion that every sin in the regenerate which may consist with grace, is venial "of which sort are, all the sinnes of the elect of God called according to purpose, which are not committed with full consent".<sup>3</sup> Taylor, later on, will fill in the missing details in the picture, by defining the regenerate state in relation to sins of infirmity. Field was one of that considerable body of moderate Churchmen which has been somewhat ignored in later historical investigations of the period, being overshadowed by the great High Churchmen. It is all the more interesting, therefore, as throwing light on the unity of seventeenth-century Anglicanism, to find him making common cause with Davenant, who tended to the Calvinist school. In asserting that no sin possesses the right to pardon, both writers

<sup>1</sup> *Determinationes*, Q. XXXI.

<sup>2</sup> *Of the Church*, Chap. IX.

<sup>3</sup> And *per contra*, that every sin in the unregenerate so continuing is mortal. (*loc. cit.*)

MORTAL AND VENIAL SIN: THE REFORMING STRAIN 103  
cite Aquinas and back the quotation with Cajetan's comment *in loco*.<sup>1</sup>

The term "venial" is then denuded by Field of all that connotes an inherent right to pardon by reason of the nature of the act. He has reduced venial sin to being the equivalent of sins of infirmity, though he does not use the latter term, and is conservative enough to accept the old terminology, making no criticisms of the traditional view that slightness of matter by itself will constitute a venial sin. His conclusion represents the reluctance of the moderate to part with old (and useful) terms, coupled with the refusal to accept what he holds to be the false implications of those terms: ("some (sins) are said to be veniall, without respect had to a state of regeneration.")<sup>2</sup>

Davenant is at times curiously elusive, so that often Newman's statement that he was a Calvinist seems justified, while yet again, Bishop Bull's belief in his orthodoxy appears well-founded. But whichever be the case in the larger questions of justification and righteousness, we do not wrong Davenant if we hold him as tending more to the rigorist left-wing on questions of sin than the majority of Anglicans. He treats fully of mortal and venial sin, separately in the *Determinationes* and twice, as incidental to his arguments, in the *Disputatio*. The argument of *Determinationes*, Q. xxxi begins by noting that whereas Scripture denies parity of sins or equality of punishment, yet all sin is deadly "if it is viewed in its own proper nature, and by the strictness of the Divine law", its external quality consisting in departure from that rule to which we are required to conform. To assert then that venial sins are merely beside the law, because they are so little at variance with it, is absurd, for either venial sins are forbidden or they are not sins at all. Theologians from Augustine and Bernard to Durandus and Gerson are agreed that sin is contravention of the Divine command. If this is so, where is there room for sins which are to be described as being beside the law? How can there be a sin which is not against the law?<sup>3</sup> The only condition of a sin not being death-bearing to the sinner, is that of his

<sup>1</sup> Davenant, *Determinationes*, Q. XXXI; Field, *loc. cit.* Field's book is a quarter of a century older than Davenant's.

<sup>2</sup> *loc. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> "That, therefore, ought not to be called, and cannot be understood to be sin, which is not at variance with the law of God; but that which opposes it must necessarily of its own nature, subject the sinner to eternal death." (*ibid.*)

being in a state of grace and repentant. Davenant adduces the argument, evidently against the belief in temporal punishment for venial sin, that all offences against an infinite God must be infinite and entail infinite punishment.<sup>1</sup> His inclination to rigorism comes out in his repudiation of the idea that smallness of matter constitutes a venial sin, and in the severe limitation of the idea of the imperfect human act as a minimising cause. "Thus he sins in a smaller matter who steals a single penny from his neighbour; but yet he fastens upon himself guilt of mortal offence, because he transgresses that law of God which clearly forbids us even to covet what is our neighbour's, much more to steal or take away." (ibid.) Davenant seems not to reckon at all on the moral implications of circumstances. As to "the incompleteness of the deeds themselves", He will not permit even "the sudden motions of inordinate concupiscence, which very often steal on us unawares" to be reckoned as venial on the grounds of imperfect volition. "These quibbles avail nothing; because, that is reckoned as voluntary, not only which is committed with an express and actual willingness, but that which is not hindered by the will, when it is bound to impose hindrance." (ibid.) This is the farthest step Caroline divinity takes in this direction, for Davenant in this matter is out of alignment. For himself, he never uses the word "venial" at all, save in speaking of the views of Roman theologians.<sup>2</sup> The term venial, either in its traditional meaning amongst Roman writers or in the sense in which Field for instance accepts it, means nothing to him. As we proceed to examine the use of the term "mortal sin" by Davenant, we shall see that he has whittled down to an irreducible minimum the sins which may be classed as less criminous.

The *Disputatio* (Chap. XXXV) reveals three divisions in the connotation of this term. First there is that mortal sin which results in eternal and irremissible death to the soul, the sin against the Holy Ghost. Then follows what is usually called mortal sin, "which involves the person committing it in guilt of death, but such as is remissible; and which does not suffer him to have part in the Kingdom of God until he repent." Under this

<sup>1</sup> cp. H. Davis S.J. on how the offence of mortal sin is to be reckoned as infinite, where there is a distinct qualification as to what infinite means in this respect. *Moral and Pastoral Theology*, Vol. I, pp. 206-7.

<sup>2</sup> cp. *Disputatio* (Chap. V), where he begins a sentence "If venial sin (for I will use their own word) . . .".

heading, Davenant groups the sins of the patristic *tabulae* in general,<sup>3</sup> and "all others, whether internal or external, which are of the same nature".

This is the class usually called mortal but one feels that Davenant widens it according as he narrows his class of "venial" sins. To this second class belong all sins "in which obedience to carnal concupiscence prevails against the Spirit unto the voluntary perpetration of an act of ungodliness". They incur a new deadly guilt, until repentance removes it, and they imply "a complacency and approbation in the doer".

"Thirdly, every sin is called mortal by some of our Divines, because it would involve the person lying under, or committing it, in death according to the rigour of the law, if he were judged without the mercy of God in Christ; although being now implanted into Christ it is not imputed to him for death, but has been even remitted to him, who is yet implicated in it." In this group are to be found remains of sin in the regenerate, defects of perfect love in their works, and corrupt motions which they overcome by grace. Though they share the same nature as sins of the second (and properly called mortal) class, yet they are not to be ranked with them, for in object, end and requisite circumstances they are not "entirely depraved and corrupt".<sup>3</sup> This is Davenant's class of lighter sins. For him the word "mortal" signifies the mortiferous nature common to all sins. He never uses it as part of the traditional mortal-venial antithesis: "it is not contended by this word mortal, to distinguish or discriminate sins, as the Romish Divines are accustomed to do; but to make it evident that the desert of every, even the least sin, is death according to legal judgment." It has been thought worth while to give a full exposition of Bishop Davenant's thought because he represents at once the heaviest emphasis on that which is the common thesis of all the Carolines, the deadly nature of all sin, and the severest limitation<sup>3</sup> of the class of lighter sins which later

<sup>1</sup> Which depend on 1 Cor. vi. 9 and Gal. v. 19-21.

<sup>2</sup> He observes that all deficiencies in the good works of the regenerate have the same common nature of *ἀνομιὰ*, but are forgiven because with the forgiveness of original sin goes the forgiveness of all that may be traced to the remains of it in our nature—provided always that its promptings be resisted.

<sup>3</sup> cp. *Determinationes*, Q. XXXI, where he observes that an idle word, immoderate laughter, and the like are held by Romanists to be venial sins. "But Christ thought otherwise, who taught that, unless it be forgiven in

come to be known simply as sins of infirmity. We have seen sufficient of Hall to expect from him a balanced formulation of the central Anglican view-point, and so it is. He reproves those "who have upbraided us with the opinion of a certain Stoical and Jovinianish parity of sins", showing that we have never denied the existence of degrees of evil. Hall is content to state the position, without deep theological probings, simply stressing the common anomy of all sin, and laying it down that God's mercy and the sinner's repentance are the only prerequisites for "veniality". "Some offences are more heinous than other, yet all, in the malignity of their nature, deadly," he writes, in *Sacred Polemics*,<sup>1</sup> "as of poisons some kill more gently and lingeringly, others more violently and speedily, yet both kill. Moreover, if we have respect unto the infinite mercy of God and to the object of this mercy, the penitent and faithful heart, there is no sin which, to borrow the word of Prudentius, is not venial; but in respect of the anomy or disorder, there is no sin which is not worthy of eternal death."<sup>2</sup> Hall is contemplative and thoughtful, rather than acutely analytical. We therefore look in vain for a careful sifting of the elements in the doctrine of mortal and venial sin. He is concerned neither with controversy nor analysis so much as with the thought of the incompatibility of all sinful acts with the holiness of God—the radical idea in all Caroline reflections on the subject. "All sins make us unlike him, as being contrary to his perfect holiness; but some show more direct contrariety."<sup>3</sup> Hall is less likely than Davenant to lend urgency to Taylor's warning that if the Roman doctrine risked encouraging laxity, ours might be in danger of discouraging hope<sup>4</sup>—a pregnant reflection on the dangers of the doctrine in one who nevertheless, having weighed it, considered it to be essential in his view to a sound moral theology.

Herbert Thorndike reproduces the familiar query: "For why

this life, for every idle word an account must be rendered at the last judgment (Matt. xii. 36, 37); when no place will be left for venial sins and temporal punishments."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Chap. III, Sect. iii, and what follows, quoted in *Anglicanism*, p. 649, and cp. "I will account no sin little, since there is not the least but works the death of the soul." (*Works*, ed. Wynter, Vol. VII, p. 464.)

<sup>2</sup> *The Summary of Divine Truths Agreeable to the Faith Profess'd by the Church of England* states this with great clarity, Chap. XIV, Sects. 26–27.

<sup>3</sup> *loc. cit.*, p. 502.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, *Unum Necessarium*, Chap. III, Sect. iv.

is any thing sin, but because it ought not to be done", and is generally in accord with the stage of the discussion reached by Field. He, too, receives the terms themselves without comment, but excises all idea of sin as being venial in its own nature. He does not attempt to delimit or describe venial sin in detail but it is quite clear that he holds it to be the equivalent of sins of infirmity, though he does not use this expression. "If any man will say, that some sins are venial, others mortal, in regard of those terms of reconciliation with God, which the Gospel proposeth (which as no sin voideth if repentance follow, so those sins which the present weakness of our mortal nature cannot easily avoid, must not be thought to infringe);<sup>1</sup> he shall say no more, than the Gospel of Christ will warrant by necessary consequence." He concludes: "whether any sin be originally venial, by that first law of God, the transgression whereof it is" we have no information in Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

Though it does not describe lighter sins as sins of infirmity, the relevant chapter of "The Preservative against Popery" goes a step forward and denies that the term venial sin can mean anything at all: "That some sins are less than others it is confessed; but that any sins are properly venial, we deny. To be *venial*, is to be worthy of *Pardon*, or not to deserve *Punishment*; but whatsoever does not deserve *Punishment*, can be no *Sin*, for all *Sin* infers an *obligation to Punishment*; and therefore to be a *Sin*, and yet be *venial*, is in proper terms, no better than a flat contradiction."<sup>3</sup>

Sanderson condemned outright the distinction as corrupting all moral theology,<sup>4</sup> and does not employ the terms at all because of their implications and associations. He would have the Christian to aim at no lower mark than Christian perfection, and in consequence he shows a rigorist tendency. His most valuable contribution to Anglican moral theology, setting aside his famous work on the problems of conscience, resides in his answer to the third of our questions (see p. 100), for it is here that Sanderson, critical lover of Aquinas, best complies with that principle learnt

<sup>1</sup> This implies a wider conception of the class of lighter sins than Davenant holds, and represents the general view of Caroline writers from which, on this point, Davenant is of a dissident.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from *Of the Covenant of Grace*, Bk. II, Chap. XXXII.

<sup>3</sup> Tit. VIII, Chap. VI, Sect. iv.

<sup>4</sup> *De Juramenti Obligatione*, Præc. III, Sect. xv.