

A Year of Shocking News

The year 2017 was dominated by news headlines centering on two themes: sins of the flesh and appalling violence. A succession of revelations about outrageous sexual harassment and licentiousness by political and entertainment celebrities appeared almost daily at one point. Contemporaneously, we moved with frightening rapidity from one story to the next of incidents of mass shootings, terrorism, and serial killers around the nation and world. From the Orlando airport to Las Vegas, California to London Bridge, mass violence was constantly in the news. As tragic as all these stories are, the world should not really be shocked by these incidents. They are the inevitable bad fruit of Liberalism, whose poisonous seeds were planted during the Protestant Reformation (more appropriately, *Revolution*). As Pope Leo XIII observed at the end of the 19th century:

“But that harmful and deplorable passion for innovation which was aroused in the sixteenth century threw first of all into confusion the Christian religion, and next, by natural sequence, invaded the precincts of philosophy, whence it spread amongst all classes of society. From this source, as from a fountain-head, burst forth all those later tenets of unbridled license which, in the midst of the terrible upheavals of the last century, were wildly conceived and boldly proclaimed as the principles and foundation of that new conception of law which was not merely previously unknown, but was at variance on many points with not only the Christian, but even the natural law.” (Encyclical [Immortale Dei](#), n. 23)

Two key errors of the Reformation are responsible for the unleashing of deathly violence and sexual abuse in the modern world. Luther's idea of the total depravity of man, combined with the distorted moral philosophy of Enlightenment thinkers like David Hume, produced the headlines that trouble our world. Before examining why this is the case, we must first summarize the truth about the relationship between the higher and lower powers of the soul.

The Powers of the Soul

Catholic theology and moral philosophy (in harmony with classical Aristotelian philosophy) teach that among the powers of the soul are the [intellect](#), the [will](#), and the sensitive appetites (sometimes called [passions](#)) of the irascible and the concupiscible. The intellect includes the power to [reason](#), to think rationally (which, in the case of humans, is the power to think discursively). The intellect is how we come to know the precepts of the natural law,

even if we have not heard the revelation of them by God. The will is the power to choose among the rational ends proposed by the intellect according to the precepts of natural law. The irascible appetite is a sensitive power, which means it desires or moves the composite being toward some perceived good. It is this power that causes us to desire a difficult but attainable good. It directs a person to persevere through difficulties to attain a perceived good. The concupiscible appetite is what moves the composite being to desire pleasurable goods, goods that give pleasure to the being.

In and of themselves, these appetites or passions are good in the sense that they were created by God and implanted in human nature to assist the reason and will in attaining the perfection of being. The concupiscible appetite helps move the will to desire that which is good for the being. The irascible appetite helps move the will to persevere in acts when difficult or arduous obstacles lie in the way of attaining a good. As originally created in the state of original justice, these appetites were perfectly subjected to the reason and will. This subjection is called the gift of integrity. The appetites are instrumental powers that move a being toward an end. They do not function in the identification and election of an end, but rather act to move a person toward an end proposed by reason and chosen by the will. To identify a proper end and choose movement to that end belong to the reason and will. The appetites support movement toward the ends proposed by reason and chosen by the will.

St. Thomas Aquinas explains why it is necessary that these appetites should be subject to the reason and will:

“Since the soul is one, and the powers are many; and since a number of things that proceed from one must proceed in a certain order; there must be some order among the powers of the soul. Accordingly, we may observe a triple order among them, two of which correspond to the dependence of one power on another; while the third is taken from the order of the objects. Now the dependence of one power on another can be taken in two ways; according to the order of nature, forasmuch as perfect things are by their nature prior to imperfect things; and according to the order of generation and time; forasmuch as from being imperfect, a thing comes to be perfect. Thus, according to the first kind of order among the powers, the intellectual powers [reason and will] are prior to the sensitive powers [the appetites]; wherefore they direct them and command them.” ([Summa Theologiae](#), I, q. 77, a. 4)

The Wounds of Sin

Yet, one of the wounds (effects) of original sin is the loss of integrity. The appetites are no longer naturally subject to the reason and will but can attach themselves to ends which are, in reality, not true goods (i.e., not true ends of human nature).

The infliction of this wound means that we are always engaged in a struggle to reassert the proper dominion of the reason and will over these sensitive appetites. When properly subject to them and oriented towards a true good, these appetites are a valuable aid in our striving for perfection; when not so subjected, however, they can be an inducement to sin. This internal struggle was a subject of comment by St. Paul. In one place he notes: "For the good which I will, I do not; but the evil which I will not, that I do" (Rom. 7:19). We experience the appetites at war with what we know we ought to do: "For the flesh lusteth against the spirit: and the spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary one to another: so that you do not the things that you would" (Gal. 5:17). Unlike the erroneous conclusion of Luther (discussed below), this war is not a hopeless one. With the help of God's grace and the diligent practice of virtue, the spirit can prevail against the flesh. The saints are real examples for us of heroic virtue. They are exemplars whose sanctity proves that our struggle is not hopeless.

Luther's Depravity

Luther, however, spread the error that original sin has not only wounded human nature but rendered it totally depraved. For Luther, human reason and will were totally corrupted and henceforth incapable of properly regulating human acts. In his fallen state, man could not perform a meritorious act as everything was tainted by sin. Catholic theology and philosophy, on the contrary, urge a life-long effort to reassert the dominion of the reason and will over the sensitive appetites. Due to the loss of the gift of integrity, this certainly remains a struggle, but one in which we can make progress because the wounds did not totally destroy the powers of the soul. Luther conceded the field when he argued the total depravity of human nature and its inability to make progress toward protection, even with the help of grace. For Luther, grace merely made the depraved soul tolerated by God - not by restoring it, but by simply declaring it acceptable (through faith), even though it remained depraved.

Luther's philosophical and theological heirs expanded his false idea to invert the order of the soul by elevating the passions over the reason and will. David Hume and his followers, taking the depravity of reason and will as a given, began to look to the passions as a source of knowledge. Hume and his progeny (which culminated in forms of emotivism in 20th-

century philosophy) came to see the passions as the true guide to moral judgments. Rather than being directed by reason and will, the passions became the source of knowledge that informed the reason and the moral sense. Such thinking is an inversion of the hierarchy of powers that Aquinas articulated. The conclusion of accepting this perversion is that the satisfaction of the desires of the lower passions constitutes that which is good for the person experiencing those passions. The conclusion of this false thinking is that, rather than applying the healing salve of grace to the wounds of sin, the wounds should be torn wider. The passions are indulged rather than subjugated since, for Hume and those following him, the passions are the only source of knowledge about what is good.

As the irascible appetite is that which is meant to bring a strength and perseverance, such as will aid soldiers to hold their ground in a battle, the lack of regulation of this appetite leads to the perversion of brute violence. The tenacity and strength urged by the irascible appetite are perverted into viciousness when not oriented toward a true good. Likewise, concupiscence that is disoriented will simply pursue the conquest of sensual pleasure beyond the bounds in which those pleasures belong according to natural law. Just as the irascible appetite can unleash indiscriminate brute violence, concupiscence can unleash excessive sensuality, in each case when not constrained by reason and will.

Rotten Fruits Galore

This is exactly what has been witnessed in 2017. Brutal and senseless (literally) violence has been unleashed, together with innumerable accounts of people who think they can simply satisfy their concupiscence on the body of anyone that strikes a note with their appetite. It is in a certain sense fitting that the news has been filled with stories of violence and sexual assault. Five hundred years after Luther began his path of error in 1517, we see in full color the practical results of his false ideas on human nature, original sin, and grace. The first necessary step to curb this tide of violence and unbridled concupiscence is to clearly see the problem (i.e., Luther's errors), recognize the need for grace and the practice of virtue, and work towards the restoration of dominion of the higher powers of the soul over the lower. Yet, pulling on this thread necessarily must unravel the centuries of philosophical and theological errors that date back to Luther (and even earlier to [Nominalism](#)). Unless we pull on that thread, these stories are likely to continue to repeat themselves with even more frequency.