

**THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF
AMERICA; THE CONCEPT
OF MORTAL SIN IN EARLY
CHRISTIANITY. A DISSERTATION**

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The Catholic University of America; The Concept of Mortal Sin in Early Christianity. A
Dissertation by Hubert Louis Motry

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HUBERT LOUIS MOTRY

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THE CONCEPT OF MORTAL
SIN IN EARLY
CHRISTIANITY

BY THE
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DISSERTATION

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INTRODUCTION.

Moral Theology enumerates among its sources the writings of the Fathers. The present study is an attempt to gather from the earliest documents of this source the texts that have reference to the concept of mortal sin, and to determine the value of such passages for the fundamental notion of grievous transgression. The period from which these documents are taken extends well into the first half of the third century.

The expression "Concept of Mortal Sin" is used in this dissertation in its broader sense, comprehending not only the nature, the extent, the required conditions of grievous sin, and chiefly its contra-distinction to venial sin, but also the practical application of the concept to the various kinds of violation of moral precepts. The theoretical concept, therefore, and the practical, come into consideration. By "mortal sin" is understood personal mortal sin, not original sin.

As with other theological concepts, we do not expect to find a formal definition at so early a period as the first and second centuries. It is only in the second half of the second century that we find the defense of Christian morality assigning a gradually more discernible outline to the concepts in question.

The dogmatico-historical discussion on penance and confession in primitive Christianity is not treated *ex professo*; sufficiently important points of contact of the present investigation with the discussion mentioned will be indicated in the course of the First Part. We refrain from referring to the discussion in the Second Part. The subject becomes quite complicated in Tertullian's works and would lead far beyond the scope of our present study. We have found nothing in his writings that could be construed as conclusive against the milder view of Pesch, Esser, Stuffer, D'Alès, "and Catholic theologians generally."¹

¹ Rauschen, "Eucharist and Penance," p. 153 sqq. Eng. transl. of 2nd Germ. ed., St. Louis, 1913.