

## QUESTION 107

### Ingratitude

Next we have to consider ingratitude (*ingratitude*). And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Is ingratitude always a sin? (2) Is ingratitude a specific sin? (3) Is every act of ingratitude a mortal sin? (4) Should favors be withheld from someone who is ungrateful?

#### Article 1

##### Is ingratitude always a sin?

It seems that ingratitude is not always a sin:

**Objection 1:** In *De Beneficiis* 3 Seneca says, “An ingrate is someone who does not return a favor.” But sometimes it is impossible for a man to return a favor without sinning, e.g., if someone has helped the man to sin. Therefore, since it is not a sin to refrain from a sin, it seems that ingratitude is not always a sin.

**Objection 2:** Every sin lies within the power of the sinner, since, according to Augustine, “No one sins in what he cannot avoid.” But sometimes it is not within the power of a sinner to avoid ingratitude, e.g., when he does not have the wherewithal to return a favor. Again, forgetfulness is not within our power, and yet in *De Beneficiis* 3 Seneca says, “The most ungrateful individual of all is the one who has forgotten.” Therefore, ingratitude is not always a sin.

**Objection 3:** It does not seem that an individual sins by not wanting to owe anything—this according to the Apostle in Romans 13:8 (“Owe no one anything ...”). But as Seneca says in *De Beneficiis* 4, “One who is reluctant to owe anything is ungrateful.” Therefore, ingratitude is not always a sin.

**But contrary to this:** In 2 Timothy 3:2 ingratitude is numbered among other sins when it says, “... disobedient to parents, ungrateful, knavish ...”

**I respond:** As has been explained (q. 106, aa. 1 and 4 and 6), the debt that belongs to gratitude is a debt that arises from the uprightness that virtue requires. But something is a sin by the fact that it is incompatible with virtue. Hence, it is clear that every act of ingratitude is a sin.

**Reply to objection 1:** Gratitude has to do with a favor. But an individual who helps someone to sin is conferring something harmful on him rather than doing him a favor. And so that individual is not owed an act of gratitude—except, perhaps, because of his intention, i.e., if he has been deceived in such a way that while he believed that he was helping him to do something good, he was actually helping him to sin. In any case, he is not owed a repayment for helping him to sin, since this would be to repay with something evil and not with something good—which is contrary to gratitude.

**Reply to objection 2:** Since, as has been explained (q. 106, a. 6), the desire to repay is by itself sufficient to repay the debt that belongs to gratitude, no one is excused from ingratitude because he lacks the wherewithal to repay.

On the other hand, forgetting a favor does involve ingratitude—not, to be sure, the sort of forgetting which proceeds from a natural defect and which is not subject to the will, but instead the sort of forgetting that proceeds from negligence. Hence, as Seneca says in *De Beneficiis* 3, “It appears that forgetfulness of a favor comes upon an individual who has not thought very often about returning the favor.”

**Reply to objection 3:** The debt which belongs to gratitude is derived from the debt which belongs to love and which no man should wish to be free of. Hence, the fact that an individual owes this debt unwillingly seems to proceed from a lack of love for the one who did him the favor.

## Article 2

### Is ingratitude a specific sin?

It seems that ingratitude is not a specific sin:

**Objection 1:** Whenever anyone sins, he acts against God, who is our greatest benefactor. But this involves ingratitude. Therefore, ingratitude is not a specific sin.

**Objection 2:** No specific sin is contained under diverse genera of sins. But an individual is able to be ungrateful by means of diverse genera of sins—for instance, if someone commits detraction against his benefactor or if someone steals from his benefactor or commits any other sin of this sort against him. Therefore, ingratitude is not a specific sin.

**Objection 3:** In *De Beneficiis* 3 Seneca says, “Someone who does not notice a favor is ungrateful; someone who does not repay a favor is ungrateful; someone who has forgotten a favor is the most ungrateful of all.” But these things do not seem to belong to a single species of sin. Therefore, ingratitude is not a specific sin.

**But contrary to this:** Ingratitude is opposed to gratitude, i.e., thankfulness, which is a specific virtue. Therefore, it is a specific sin.

**I respond:** Every vice is named from a *deficiency* in the virtue that is more opposed to that virtue; for instance, illiberality (*illiberalitas*) is more opposed to generosity (*liberalitas*) than is prodigality.

Now it is possible for a vice to be opposed to the virtue of gratitude through *excess*—for instance, as was explained above (a. 1 and q. 106, a. 4), if the repayment of a favor is either made for things for which it is not appropriate or made more quickly than is appropriate. However, the vice that arises from *deficiency* is more opposed to gratitude, since, as was established above (q. 106, a. 6), the virtue of gratitude tends toward something greater [than what has been received]. And this is why ingratitude is properly denominated from a *deficiency* in gratitude.

Now every deficiency or privation receives its species from the condition opposed to it (*secundum habitum oppositum*); for instance, blindness and deafness differ in accord with the difference between sight and hearing. Hence, just as gratitude or thankfulness is a single specific virtue, so, too, ingratitude is a single specific vice. Yet ingratitude has distinct degrees corresponding to the ordering of those things that are required for gratitude: The first thing required is that the individual should recognize the favor received; the second is that he should give praise and thanks; the third is that he should repay the favor at an appropriate time and place according to his ability. But since the last thing in the order of generation is the first thing in the order of analysis, it follows that the first degree of ingratitude is that a man does not repay a favor, the second degree is that he dissimulates in the sense of not showing that he has received a favor, and the third, and most serious, level is that he does not recognize the favor, either through forgetfulness or in any other way. And since the negation is understood in the opposed affirmation, it follows that the first degree of ingratitude involves someone’s returning something bad for what is good, the second degree involves finding fault with the favor, and the third involves thinking of the favor as if it were an unkindness.

**Reply to objection 1:** Every sin contains *material* ingratitude with respect to God, viz., insofar as the man does something that is able to involve ingratitude. However, *formal* ingratitude occurs when a man actually disdains a favor. And this is a specific sin.

**Reply to objection 2:** Nothing prevents the formal notion of a specific sin from being found *materially* in many genera of sins. And in this way the notion of ingratitude is found in many genera of sins.

**Reply to objection 3:** The three things in question are not diverse species, but diverse degrees of a single specific sin.

### Article 3

#### Is ingratitude always a mortal sin?

It seems that ingratitude is always a mortal sin:

**Objection 1:** One ought to be especially grateful to God. But a man is not ungrateful to God when he commits a venial sin; otherwise, everyone would be ungrateful to God. Therefore, no act of ingratitude is a venial sin.

**Objection 2:** As was explained above (q. 24, a. 12 and *ST* 1-2, q. 72, a. 5), a sin is mortal by virtue of being contrary to charity. But ingratitude is contrary to charity and, as was explained above (q. 106, a. 6), it is from charity that the debt belonging to gratitude proceeds. Therefore, ingratitude is always a mortal sin.

**Objection 3:** In *De Beneficiis* 2 Seneca says, “This is the law governing a favor: that the one should immediately forget having granted it, and the other should remember having received it.” But, it seems, the giver ought to forget in order to hide the recipient’s sin if the latter turns out to be ungrateful. But this would be unnecessary if ingratitude were a small sin. Therefore, ingratitude is always a mortal sin.

**But contrary to this:** A path to committing a mortal sin should not be given to anyone. But as Seneca says in the same place, “Sometimes the one who receives help has to be kept in the dark, so that he has the assistance without knowing who it is from”—which seems to present the recipient with a path to ingratitude. Therefore, ingratitude is not always a mortal sin.

**I respond:** As is clear from what has been said (a. 2), there are two ways in which someone is said to be ungrateful:

In one way, *by omission alone*, i.e., because we do not recall or praise or repay a favor that has been received. And this is not always a mortal sin. For, as was explained above (q. 106, a. 6), the debt that belongs to gratitude is that a man generously give something which he is not obligated to give and which accordingly is such that if he fails to give it, he does not commit a mortal sin. It is, however, a venial sin, since it proceeds from some sort of negligence or from the man’s lack of a disposition toward the virtue. On the other hand, it can happen that even this sort of ingratitude is a mortal sin, either (a) because of an interior act of contempt or (b) because what is withheld is, in light of the benefactor’s situation (*propter conditionem eius*), something that is owed to him by a necessity [of obligation], either absolutely speaking or in a particular case of necessity.

In the second way, one is said to be ungrateful because he not only refrains from fulfilling the debt that belongs to gratitude, but also *does something contrary to it*. And this, too, is sometimes a mortal sin and sometimes a venial sin, depending on the situation of the one who is acted against.

Now notice that the sort of ingratitude that arises from a mortal sin has the complete character of ingratitude, whereas the sort of ingratitude that arises from a venial sin has an incomplete character of ingratitude.

**Reply to objection 1:** Through a venial sin one is not ungrateful to God with the complete character of ingratitude. Yet he has something of ingratitude insofar as a venial sin removes a certain act of virtue by which a man obeys God.

**Reply to objection 2:** An act of ingratitude that occurs with a venial sin is not *contrary to* charity; instead, it *lies outside of* charity (*est praeter ipsam*), because without removing the habit of charity, it excludes some act of charity.

**Reply to objection 3:** In *De Beneficiis* 7 the selfsame Seneca says, “It is a mistake for someone to think that when we say that an individual who has done a favor should forget about it, we mean for him to shake off his memory of the deed—especially if it is outstanding. Rather, when we say that he should not remember it, we want to be understood as saying that he should not broadcast it or boast about it.”

**Reply to the argument for the contrary:** Someone who does not know about a favor is not ungrateful if he does not return a favor, as long as he would be prepared to return the favor if he found out about it.

Now it is sometimes praiseworthy that a favor be done for someone who does not know of it, both because (a) it undermines vainglory, as in the case of St. Nicholas, who, in throwing the gold into the house secretly, wished to avoid human approval, and also because (b) one does an even greater favor by the very fact that he takes into account the shame of the one who receives the favor.

#### Article 4

##### Should favors be withheld from those who are ungrateful?

It seems that favors should be withheld from those who are ungrateful:

**Objection 1:** Wisdom 16:29 says, “The hope of the one who is ungrateful shall melt away as the winter’s ice.” But his hope would not melt away if favors were not to be withheld from him. Therefore, favors should be withheld from those who are ungrateful.

**Objection 2:** No one should present another with an occasion for sinning. But an ungrateful individual, upon receiving a favor, takes it as an occasion for being ungrateful. Therefore, an ungrateful individual should not be given favors.

**Objection 3:** As Wisdom 11:17 says, “A man is punished by the very things through which he sins.” But one who is ungrateful for a favor that he has received sins against the favor. Therefore, he should be deprived of favors.

**But contrary to this:** Luke 6:35 says, “The Most High is kind to those who are ungrateful and bad.” But as it says in the same place, we must be His children by imitating Him. Therefore, we should not withhold favors from those who are ungrateful.

**I respond:** There are two things to take into consideration about someone who is ungrateful:

The first is that *he deserves to suffer*. And so it is certain that he merits the withholding of favors.

Second, one must take into consideration *what the benefactor should do*. For, first of all, he ought not to be quick in judging that someone is ungrateful, since, as Seneca points out, “It frequently happens that someone who has not returned a favor is grateful”—for perhaps he has not had the ability, or an appropriate opportunity, to return the favor. Second, one ought to try to make an ungrateful individual grateful, and if he is unable to do this with a first favor, perhaps he will do it with a second favor.

On the other hand, if he causes the ingratitude to increase with many favors and it becomes worse, then he should stop showing kindnesses.

**Reply to objection 1:** This passage is pointing to the fact that someone who is ungrateful deserves to suffer.

**Reply to objection 2:** One who shows kindness to an ungrateful individual does not present that individual with an occasion for sinning, but instead presents him with an occasion for gratitude and love. And if the recipient turns it into an occasion for ingratitude, this must not be imputed to the giver.

**Reply to objection 3:** An individual who grants a favor should not immediately show himself to be punishing ingratitude; rather, he should first show himself to be a devoted physician in order that he might heal the ingratitude through repeated favors.