

QUESTION 11

Heresy

Next we have to consider heresy. On this topic there are four questions: (1) Is heresy (*haeresis*) a species of unbelief? (2) What is the subject matter of heresy? (3) Should heretics be tolerated? (4) Should those who revert from heresy be welcomed back [by the Church]?

Article 1

Is heresy a species of unbelief?

It seems that heresy (*haeresis*) is not a species of unbelief:

Objection 1: As was explained above (q. 10, a. 2), unbelief exists in the intellect. But heresy seems to belong not to the intellect but rather to the appetitive power. For Jerome says (and this is in *Decretals* 24, q. 3), “‘Heresy’ (*haeresis*) is taken from the Greek for ‘choice’ (*electio*)—more specifically, that each one chooses for himself that teaching (*eam sibi unusquisque eligat disciplinam*) which he thinks is best.” But as was explained above (*ST* 1 -2, q. 15, a. 1), choosing is an act of the appetitive power. Therefore, heresy is not a species of unbelief.

Objection 2: A vice takes its species principally from its end; hence, in *Ethics* 5 the Philosopher says, “He who commits adultery in order that he might steal is more a thief than an adulterer.” But the end of heresy is temporal advantage, especially preeminence and glory, and this pertains to the vice of pride or of covetousness; for in *De Utilitate Credendi* Augustine says, “A heretic is one who, for the sake of temporal advantage, and especially for the sake of glory and preeminence, either produces false and novel opinions or subscribes to them.” Therefore, heresy is a species not of unbelief, but instead of pride.

Objection 3: Since unbelief exists in the intellect, it does not seem to belong to the flesh. But heresy belongs to the works of the flesh; for in Galatians 5:19-20 the Apostle says, “The works of the flesh are manifest, which are fornication, uncleanness ...,” and among the others he later adds “dissensions (*dissensiones*) and sects (*sectae*),” which are the same as heresies. Therefore, heresy is not a species of unbelief.

But contrary to this: Falsity is opposed to truth. But a heretic is “one who ... either produces false and novel opinions or subscribes to them.” Therefore, heresy is opposed to truth, on which faith is founded. Therefore, it is contained under unbelief.

I respond: As has been pointed out, the name ‘heresy’ (*haeresis*) implies a choice (*electionem importat*). But as was explained above (*ST* 1-2, q. 13, a. 3), an act of choosing has to do with the means to an end, with the end presupposed. Now as is clear from what was said above (q. 4, aa. 3 and 5), in the case of the things to be taken on faith, the will assents to something as its proper good. Hence, that which is the principal true thing (*principale verum*) has the character of an ultimate end, while the true things that are secondary (*secundaria*) have the character of the means to that end. But since anyone who takes something on faith assents to someone’s word (*alicuius dicto assentit*), in each case of faith (*in unaquaque credulitate*) the principal true thing and, as it were, the end seems to be *the one whose word is assented to*, whereas the secondary true things are *the things which are such that, by holding to them, one wills to assent to someone*. So, then, one who has Christian faith in the right way assents with his will to Christ in those things that truly belong to His teaching.

Therefore, there are two possible ways in which someone can deviate from the rectitude of Christian faith:

In one way, *by not willing to assent to Christ Himself*, and this individual has, as it were, a bad act of willing with respect to the end itself (*habet quasi malam voluntatem circa ipsum finem*). This is pertinent to the species of unbelief that belongs to the pagans and Jews.

In the other way, the individual intends, to be sure, to assent to Christ, but he *fails in choosing the things by which to assent to Christ*; for he does not choose those things that have truly been handed down by Christ, but instead chooses things which his own mind suggests to him.

And so heresy is the species of unbelief that belongs to those who profess the Faith of Christ but corrupt its dogmas.

Reply to objection 1: An act of choosing belongs to unbelief in the way that, as was explained above (q. 2, a. 1), an act of willing belongs to faith.

Reply to objection 2: Vices have their species from their *proximate* end, whereas they have their genus and their cause from their *remote* end. For instance, when someone commits adultery in order to steal, here the species *adultery* is taken from the proper end and object, whereas what is revealed by the ultimate end is that the adultery arises from the theft and is contained under it as an effect is contained under its cause or as a species is contained under its genus. This is clear from what was said above about actions in general (*ST* 1-2, q. 18, a. 7).

Similarly, in the case under discussion the proximate end of heresy is adhering to one's own false judgment, and the act has its species from this. On the other hand, what is revealed by the remote end is the cause of heresy, viz., that it arises from pride or from covetousness.

Reply to objection 3: Just as 'heresy' comes from 'choosing', so, as Isidore says in *Etymologia*, 'sect' (*secta*) comes from 'sectioning' (*a sectando*), and this is why a heresy and a sect are the same thing. And both belong to the 'works of the flesh'—not, to be sure, with respect to the act itself of unbelief as regards its proximate object, but rather by reason of their cause, which is either (a) a desire for a disordered end, to the extent that they arise, as has been said, from pride or covetousness, or (b) some imaginative illusion, which is a principle of going wrong, as the Philosopher likewise notes in *Metaphysics* 4. Now the imagination in some sense belongs to the flesh, insofar as its act exists with a corporeal organ.

Article 2

Does heresy have to do properly with what belongs to the Faith?

It seems that heresy does not have to do properly with what belongs to the Faith:

Objection 1: As Isidore points out in *Etymologia*, just as there are heresies and sects among Christians, so, too, there were heresies and sects among the Jews and the Pharisees. But their dissensions did not have to do with what belongs to the Faith. Therefore, heresy does not have to do with what belongs to the Faith as its proper subject matter.

Objection 2: The subject matter of the Faith is constituted by the *things* that are believed. But heresy has to do not only with *things*, but also with *words* and the explanations of Sacred Scripture. For instance, Jerome says, "If anyone understands Scripture in a way different from what is urged upon us by the intent of the Holy Spirit (*sensus spiritus sancti*), by whom Scripture was written, then even if he has not withdrawn from the Church, he can still be called a heretic." And in another place he says, "Heresies arise from words spoken irregularly" (*ex verbis inordinate prolatis fit haeresis*). Therefore, heresy does not properly have to do with the subject matter of Faith.

Objection 3: Sometimes the sacred doctors disagree even about the things that belong to the Faith—e.g., Jerome and Augustine on the cessation of the observances of the Law (*circa cessationem legalium*). And yet they do this without the vice of heresy. Therefore, heresy does not have to do properly with the subject matter of the Faith.

But contrary to this: In *Contra Manicheos* Augustine says, "Those who, in the Church of Christ, savor what is sick and depraved, and if corrected in order that they might savor what is healthy and

upright, do not want to amend their destructive and death-dealing dogmas, but persist in defending them, are the heretics.” But destructive and death-dealing dogmas are nothing other than dogmas that are opposed to the dogmas of the Faith, through which, as Romans 1:17 says, “the just man lives.” Therefore, heresy has to do with what belongs to the Faith as its proper subject matter.

I respond: In the present context we are speaking of heresy insofar as ‘heresy’ implies the corruption of the Christian Faith. Now it is irrelevant to the corruption of the Christian Faith if someone holds a false opinion in matters that do not belong to the Faith, e.g., in geometrical matters or others of this sort, which cannot in any way pertain to the Faith. Rather, it is relevant only when someone has a false opinion with respect to the things that belong to the Faith.

As was explained above (q. 1, a. 6, *ad 1*), there are two ways in which something belongs to the Faith: (a) *directly and principally*, such as the articles of the Faith, and (b) *indirectly and secondarily*, such as the things from which the corruption of some article follows. There can be heresy with respect to both of these, just as there is faith with respect to both.

Reply to objection 1: Just as the heresies of the Jews and Pharisees had to do with certain opinions pertinent to Judaism or Phariseism, so, too, the heresies of Christians have to do with those things that are pertinent to the Faith of Christ.

Reply to objection 2: Someone is said to explain Sacred Scripture “in a way different from the what is urged upon us by the intent of the Holy Spirit” when he twists the explanation of Sacred Scripture to something contrary to what has been revealed by the Holy Spirit. Hence, Ezechiel 13:6 says of the false prophets, “They have persisted in confirming their words,” viz., through false explanations of Scripture. Similarly, it is also through the words which one speaks that he professes the Faith, since, as was explained above (q. 3, a. 1), confessing is an act of faith. And so if there is irregular speech with respect to the things that belong to the Faith, the corruption of the Faith can thereby occur. Hence, in a letter to Proterius, the Bishop of Alexandria, Pope Leo writes, “Since the enemies of the cross of Christ lie in wait for our every word and syllable, let us give them no occasion—not even a slight one—for deceitfully claiming that we agree with the Nestorian understanding.”

Reply to objection 3: As Augustine says (and this is contained in *Decretals* 14, q. 3), “If they defend their position, albeit a false and perverse position, without any obstinate animosity, and if they seek the truth with cautious care, and if they are prepared to be corrected, then they should in no way be counted among the heretics.” For, to be more specific, they are not making a choice to contradict the teaching of the Church. So, then, certain doctors seem to have disagreed either (a) with respect to things such that it makes no difference to the Faith whether one holds the one side or the other, or (b) even in certain matters that do belong to the Faith but had not yet been decided by the Church. However, after such matters have been decided by the authority of the universal Church, then if anyone rejected this sort of determination, he would be judged a heretic.

Now this authority resides principally in the Supreme Pontiff (*principaliter residet in summo pontifice*). For *Decretals* 24, q. 1 says, “Whenever the meaning of the Faith is in dispute (*quoties fidei ratio ventilatur*), I think that all our brothers and fellow bishops should turn to none other than Peter, i.e., to the authority of his name. Neither Jerome nor Augustine nor any of the sacred doctors defended his own opinion in opposition to the authority of Peter.” Hence, Jerome says, “This is the faith, most holy Pontiff, that we have learned in the Catholic Church. If anything herein has by chance been asserted with insufficient skill or with too little caution, then we want to be corrected by you, who hold the Faith and the chair of Peter. However, if this our confession meets with the approval of your apostolic judgment, then if anyone wishes to fault me, he will prove himself to be ignorant or malevolent, or even not a Catholic but a heretic.”

Article 3

Should heretics be tolerated?

It seems that heretics should be tolerated:

Objection 1: In 2 Timothy 2:24-25 the Apostle says, “The servant of God should be mild-mannered, correcting with modesty those who resist the truth, in the hope that at some time God might grant them the repentance to acknowledge the truth and they might free themselves from the snares of the devil.” But if heretics are not tolerated and are instead handed over to death, the possibility of repenting is removed from them. Therefore, this seems to be contrary to the Apostle’s precept.

Objection 2: What is necessary in the Church should be tolerated. But heresies are necessary in the Church; for in 1 Corinthians 11:19 the Apostle says, “There have to be heresies, in order that those who are reprovved might be made manifest to you.” Therefore, it seems that heretics should be tolerated.

Objection 3: In Matthew 13:30 the master ordered his servants to let the weeds grow until harvest time—which is the end of the world, as is explained in the same place. But according to the explanation given by the saints, it is heretics who are signified by the weeds. Therefore, heretics should be tolerated.

But contrary to this: In Titus 3:10-11 the Apostle says, “After the first and second corrections, avoid the man who is a heretic, knowing that one who is of this sort has been subverted.”

I respond: There are two things that should be taken into account concerning heretics, one on their part and the other on the Church’s part:

On the part of the heretics there is a sin in virtue of which they deserve not only to be separated from the Church by excommunication but also to be excluded from the world by death. For it is much more grievous to corrupt the faith, through which the soul has life, than to counterfeit money, through which temporal life is underwritten. Hence, if those who counterfeit money or other malefactors are promptly and justly handed over to death by secular rulers, then, *a fortiori*, heretics, immediately upon being convicted of heresy, are able not only to be excommunicated but to be justly killed as well.

However, on the part of the Church there is mercy or compassion (*misericordia*), aimed at the conversion of those who go astray. And so the Church condemns them not immediately, but after a first correction and second correction, as the Apostle teaches. After that, however, if the heretic is found to persist in his stubbornness, the Church, having given up hope for the heretic’s conversion (*de eius conversione non sperans*), provides for the salvation of the others by separating the heretic from the Church by the sentence of excommunication, and, beyond that, leaves him to a secular tribunal (*relinquit eum iudicio saeculari*) to be cut off from the world through death. For Jerome says (and this is in *Decretals* 14, q. 3), “Decayed flesh should be cut off, and mangy sheep should be driven from the fold, lest the whole house, the whole lump of dough, the whole body, the whole flock, burn, perish, rot, die. Arius was but one spark in Alexandria, but because that spark was not immediately snuffed out, its flame laid waste to all the world.”

Reply to objection 1: What is pertinent to the modesty in question is that the heretic is corrected a first time and a second time. But as is clear from the passage adduced from the Apostle, if he refuses to retract, than he is taken to have been subverted.

Reply to objection 2: The advantage that stems from heresies lies outside of the intention of the heretics. For this advantage is, as the Apostle says, that the constancy of the faithful is put to the test, and, as Augustine says, “that we shake off our sluggishness and study the divine Scriptures more carefully.” By contrast, what is intrinsic to their intention is to corrupt the Faith, which involves the greatest harm.

And so one should look at what is *per se* in their intention, so as to exclude them, rather than at what falls outside their intention, so as to put up with them.

Reply to objection 3: As it says in *Decretals* 24, q. 3, “Excommunication is one thing, and

eradication is another.” For as the Apostle puts it (1 Corinthians 5:5), someone is excommunicated “in order that his spirit might be saved on the day of the Lord.”

However, even if heretics are eradicated through death, neither is this contrary to our Lord’s command, which should be taken to apply to a case in which it is impossible for the weeds to be extirpated without extirpating the wheat, as was explained above when we were talking about non-believers in general (q. 10, a. 8).

Article 4

Should those who revert from heresy be welcomed back by the Church in all cases?

It seems that those who revert from heresy should in all cases be welcomed back by the Church (*revertentes ab haeresi sint omnino ab Ecclesia recipiendi*):

Objection 1: Jeremiah 3:1 says under the personage of the Lord, “You have fornicated with many lovers, but come back to me, says the Lord.” But the Church’s judgment is God’s judgment—this according to Deuteronomy 1:17 (“You shall hear the lowly as well as the great; neither shall you respect any man’s person, because it is the judgment of God”). Therefore, even if some have fornicated through unbelief, which is spiritual fornication, they should nonetheless be welcomed back.

Objection 2: In 18:22 our Lord commanded Peter to forgive his sinning brother not just seven times but “seventy times seven times,” by which He means, according to Jerome’s explanation, that “someone should be forgiven no matter how many times he has sinned.” Therefore, no matter how many times someone sins by relapsing into heresy, he should be taken back by the Church.

Objection 3: Heresy is a type of unbelief. But other non-believers who will to be converted are welcomed back by the Church. Therefore, heretics should likewise be welcomed back by the Church.

But contrary to this: A decretal says, “Those who, after retracting their error, have fallen back into the heresy they retracted, should be left to a secular tribunal” (*saeculari iudicio sunt reliquendi*). Therefore, they should not be welcomed back by the Church.

I respond: In accord with its institution by our Lord, the Church extends her charity to everyone, not only to her friends but also to her enemies and persecutors—this according to Matthew 5:44 (“Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you”).

It pertains to charity that one both will good for one’s neighbor and do good for one’s neighbor. Now there are two sorts of good:

The one is the *spiritual* good, viz., the salvation of the soul, which is what charity mainly has to do with, since this is what everyone should will for another out of charity. Hence, on this score, reverting heretics, no matter how many times they have relapsed, are welcomed back by the Church for repentance, through which the way to salvation is laid out for them.

The other sort of good is that which charity has to do with secondarily, viz., the *temporal* good, including bodily life, worldly possessions, good reputation, and secular and ecclesiastical authority (*dignitas ecclesiastica sive saecularis*). Now we are not bound by charity to will this good for others except in relation to their eternal salvation and the eternal salvation of others. Hence, if some good of this type can pose an obstacle to eternal salvation for many individuals, then it is not necessary for us to will a good of this sort out of charity; just the opposite, we should will that he lack this good, both because eternal salvation is to be preferred to the temporal good, and also because the good of many is to be preferred to the good of a single individual.

Now if reverting heretics were always welcomed back in such a way that their life and other temporal goods were preserved, then this could be detrimental to the salvation of others, both because they might infect the others if they relapsed [into heresy], and also because if they got away without any

punishment, then others might feel more secure in relapsing into heresy (*alii securius in haeresim relaberentur*). For Ecclesiastes 8:11 says, “Because sentence was not passed quickly on the evildoers, the children of men perpetrated evil without fear.”

And so the Church not only welcomes back for repentance those reverting from heresy for the first time, but also preserves their lives, and sometimes restores them by dispensation to the ecclesiastical status that they previously had, if they seem to have been truly converted. One reads that this has been done frequently to promote the good of peace. However, when those who have been welcomed back fall again [into heresy], this seems to be an indication of their inconstancy with respect to the Faith. And so those returning yet again are, to be sure, welcomed back to repentance, but they are nonetheless not freed from the sentence of death.

Reply to objection 1: In God’s judgment those who return are always welcomed back, since God scrutinizes hearts and He knows those who are truly returning—but this the Church cannot imitate. Rather, the Church presumes that those who, having been welcomed back, fall [into heresy] again, have not truly reverted [from heresy]. And so she does not deny them the way to salvation, but she does not protect them from the danger of death.

Reply to objection 2: Our Lord is speaking to Peter about a sin committed against oneself, which is always to be forgiven, in order to spare the returning brother.

However, He should not be understood to be speaking about a sin committed against one’s neighbor or against God—which, as Jerome points out, it is not up to our discretion to forgive. Rather, in this sort of case a procedure has been established by law that befits the honor of God and the advantage of our neighbors.

Reply to objection 3: When other non-believers, who have never accepted the Faith, have not yet been converted to the Faith, they are not showing any sign of inconstancy with respect to the Faith, in the way that relapsed heretics do. And so the arguments are not parallel in the two cases.