

QUESTION 115

Flattery

Next we have to consider the vices opposed to the foregoing virtue: first, flattery (*adulatio*) (question 115) and, second, contentiousness (*litigium*) (question 116). Concerning flattery, there are two questions: (1) Is flattery a sin? (2) Is flattery a mortal sin?

Article 1

Is flattery a sin?

It seems that flattery (*adulatio*) is not a sin:

Objection 1: Flattery consists in a word of praise bestowed on another with the intention of pleasing him. But it is not bad to praise an individual—this according to Proverbs 31:28 (“Her children rose up and called her blessed; her husband rose up and praised her”). Again, willing to please others is not bad—this according to 1 Corinthians 10:33 (“I please [all men] in everything”). Therefore, flattery is not a sin.

Objection 2: The bad is opposed to the good, and criticism (*vituperatio*) is likewise opposed to praise. But to criticize what is bad is not a sin. Therefore, neither is it a sin to praise what is good—and this seems to involve flattery. Therefore, flattery is not a sin.

Objection 3: Detraction is opposed to flattery; hence, Gregory says that detraction is a remedy for flattery, explaining, “Consider that in order for us not to be elevated by immoderate praise, we are often allowed, by the wonderful moderation of our Ruler, to be wounded by detractions, so that those who are lifted up by the voice of the flatterer might be brought low by the tongue of the detractor.” But as was established above (q. 73, a. 2), detraction is bad. Therefore, flattery is good.

But contrary to this: A Gloss on Ezechiel 13:18 (“Woe to those who sew cushions for every wrist”) says, “That is, [woe to those who sew] sweet flattery.” Therefore, flattery is a sin.

I respond: As has been explained (q. 114, a. 1), the sort of friendliness talked about above (q. 113), i.e., affability, even if it principally intends to delight those with whom one lives, is nonetheless such that, when this is necessary to attain some good or avoid some evil, it does not shy away from making them sad. Therefore, if someone wished to delight others with his speech in all circumstances, then he would be exceeding the right measure (*excedit modum*) in giving delight and so would sin through excess. And if he were to do this with the sole intention of giving pleasure, he would, according to the Philosopher, be called a *pleaser*, whereas if he did this with the intention of acquiring wealth, he would be called *one who blandishes* or a *flatterer*.

Still, it is common for the name *flattery* to be ascribed to anyone who wishes, with words or deeds, to delight others beyond the right measure in communal interactions.

Reply to objection 1: It is possible to praise someone well and likewise possible to praise him badly, depending on whether the appropriate circumstances obtain or fail to obtain.

For instance, if an individual wants to delight someone by praising him in order thereby to encourage him so that he does not become disheartened in his troubles or, again, in order that he might thereby become eager to make progress in the good, then, given that the appropriate circumstances obtain, this will involve the aforementioned virtue of friendliness.

On the other hand, it involves flattery if an individual wants to praise someone in things for which he should not be praised, perhaps because they are *evil*—this according to Psalm 9:24 (“The sinner is praised in the desires of his soul”)—or because they are *uncertain*—this according to Ecclesiasticus 27:8 (“Do not praise a man before he speaks”), as well as according to Ecclesiasticus 11:2 (“Do not praise a man for his appearance”)—or, again, if one fears that he will *be moved to vainglory* by human praise, for which reason Ecclesiasticus 11:30 says, “Do not praise a man before his death.”

Similarly, it is praiseworthy to want to please men for the sake of nurturing charity and in order that a man might be able to advance spiritually among them.

On the other hand, an individual's wanting to please men for the sake of vainglory or financial gain or even in bad deeds would be a sin—this according to Psalm 52:6 (“God has scattered the bones of those who please men”). And in Galatians 1:10 the Apostle says, “If I were still pleasing men, I would not be Christ's servant.”

Reply to objection 2: Even criticizing what is evil is a vice if the appropriate circumstances are not adhered to. And the same holds for praising what is good.

Reply to objection 3: Nothing prevents two vices from being contraries. And so detraction is bad, just as flattery is. Flattery is contrary to detraction with respect to what is said, but not directly with respect to the end; for the flatterer seeks the delight of the one who is flattered, whereas the detractor seeks not to sadden the one whom he detracts (since sometimes he detracts in secret), but instead seeks to ruin his reputation (*quaerit eius infamia*).

Article 2

Is flattery a mortal sin?

It seems that flattery is a mortal sin:

Objection 1: According to Augustine in the *Enchiridion*, “Something is called evil because it does harm (*malum dicitur quia nocet*).” But flattery does great harm—this according to Psalm 9:24-25 (“The sinner is praised for the desires of his soul, and the wicked man is praised, and the sinner has provoked the Lord”). Again, Jerome says, “There is nothing that so easily corrupts the minds of men as flattery.” And a Gloss on Psalm 69:4 (“Let them be turned and blush for shame ...”) says, “The tongue of the flatterer does more damage than the sword of the persecutor.” Therefore, flattery is a very serious sin.

Objection 2: When someone does harm to another by his words, he does harm to himself no less than to the others; for this reason, Psalm 36:15 says, “Let their sword enter into their hearts.” But someone who flatters another induces him to commit a mortal sin; hence, a Gloss on Psalm 140:5 (“Let not the oil of the sinner make my head fat”) says, “The false praise of the flatterer softens up the mind, taking it away from the firmness of the truth toward something harmful.” Therefore, *a fortiori*, the flatterer commits a sin that is mortal in its own right (*adulator in se mortaliter peccat*).

Objection 3: In *Decretals*, dist. 46, it is written, “A cleric who is found to spend his time in flattery and treachery shall be demoted from his office.” But this sort of punishment is inflicted only for a mortal sin. Therefore, flattery is a mortal sin.

But contrary to this: In *Sermo de Purgatorio* Augustine counts it as a ‘minor sin’ “if someone wishes to flatter a greater person, either voluntarily or out of necessity.”

I respond: As was explained above (q. 24, a. 12 and q. 35, a. 3), a mortal sin is one that is contrary to charity. Now flattery is sometimes contrary to charity and sometimes not:

There are three ways in which flattery becomes contrary to charity:

First, *by reason of its matter*, e.g., when someone praises the sin of another. For this is (a) contrary to loving God, against whose justice the man is speaking, and also (b) contrary to loving the neighbor whom he is encouraging in his sin. Hence, it is a mortal sin—this according to Isaiah 5:20 (“Woe to those who call evil good”).

Second, *by reason of the intention*, e.g., when an individual flatters someone in order to harm him by fraud (*ad hoc quod fraudulenter ei noceat*), either coporeally or spiritually. And this is likewise a mortal sin. Of this Proverbs 27:6 says, “The wounds inflicted by one who loves you are better than the deceitful kisses of one who hates you.”

Third, *by occasioning something (per occasionem)*, as when the praise of the flatterer becomes for the other an occasion of sinning, even if this lies beyond the intention of the flatterer. And here one has to take into consideration whether the occasion is given or received, and how much damage ensues, as can be seen from what was said above about scandal (q. 43, aa. 3-4).

On the other hand, if an individual were to flatter someone just out of an eagerness to please others, or, again, in order to forestall something bad or attain something good in a case of necessity, then the flattery would not be contrary to charity. Hence, it would be a venial sin and not a mortal sin.

Reply to objection 1: These passages are talking about a flatterer who is praising someone's sin. For this sort of flattery is said to do more harm than the sword of a persecutor, since it does harm *with respect to more important goods*, viz., spiritual goods. For it does not do harm *as efficaciously*, since the persecutor's sword effectively kills in the sense of being a sufficient cause of death, while, as is clear from what was said above (q. 43, a. 1 and *ST* 1-2, q. 73, a. 8 and q. 80, a. 1), no one can be a sufficient cause of someone else's sinning

Reply to objection 2: This argument goes through for someone who flatters with the intention of doing harm. For he harms himself more than others, since he hurts himself as a sufficient cause of his own sin, whereas he hurts others only by occasioning something (*aliis autem occasionaliter tantum*).

Reply to objection 3: This passage is talking about an individual who flatters the other with treachery in order to deceive him.