

QUESTION 124

Martyrdom

Next we have to consider martyrdom (*martyrium*). And on this topic there are five questions: (1) Is martyrdom an act of virtue? (2) Which virtue is martyrdom an act of? (3) What about the perfection of this act? (4) What is the sort of penalty associated with martyrdom? (5) What about the cause of martyrdom?

Article 1

Is martyrdom an act of virtue?

It seems that martyrdom is not an act of virtue:

Objection 1: Every act of virtue is voluntary. But martyrdom is sometimes not voluntary; this is clear in the case of the Holy Innocents who were killed in the place of Christ and of whom Hilary says in *Super Matthaeum*, “They were borne to the attainment of eternity through the glory of martyrdom.” Therefore, martyrdom is not an act of virtue.

Objection 2: Nothing illicit is an act of virtue. But as was established above (q. 64, a. 5), it is illicit to kill oneself. Yet it is through this that martyrdom is consummated, since in *De Civitate Dei* Augustine says, “During a time of persecution certain holy women, in order to escape from those who threatened their chastity, threw themselves into a river and in that way died; and their martyrdoms are celebrated in the Catholic Church with the most solemn veneration.” Therefore, martyrdom is not an act of virtue.

Objection 3: It is praiseworthy for someone to freely put himself forward to carry out an act of virtue. But it is not praiseworthy for someone to offer himself for martyrdom; instead, this seems presumptuous and dangerous. Therefore, martyrdom is not an act of virtue.

But contrary to this: The reward of beatitude is not owed to anyone except for an act of virtue. But it is owed for martyrdom—this according to Matthew 5:10 (“Blessed are those who suffer persecution for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”). Therefore, martyrdom is an act of virtue.

I respond: As has been explained (q. 123, a. 12), virtue involves an individual’s persevering in the good of reason. Now as is clear from what was said above (q. 123, a. 12 and *ST* 1-2, q. 109, aa. 1-2), the good of reason consists (a) in *truth* as its *proper object* and (b) in *justice* as its *proper effect*.

Now the nature of martyrdom involves an individual’s standing firmly in truth and justice against the force of his persecutors. Hence, it is manifest that martyrdom is an act of virtue.

Reply to objection 1: Some claim that the use of free choice was miraculously accelerated in the case of the Holy Innocents, with the result that they suffered martyrdom voluntarily.

However, because this position is not supported by the authority of Scripture, it is better to reply that the slaughtered children attained by God’s grace the glory of martyrdom that in other cases is merited by the individual’s own will. For the shedding of their blood for the sake of Christ takes the place of Baptism. Hence, just as Christ’s merit operates through baptismal grace in order for baptized children to obtain glory, so, too, in the case of children who were killed for the sake of Christ, the merit of Christ’s martyrdom operates in order for them to attain the palm of martyrdom. Hence, in a sermon about the Epiphany, Augustine says, as if addressing those children, “Anyone who has doubts about your crown for suffering in the place of Christ likewise does not think that Baptism in Christ benefits infants. You were not old enough to believe in the Christ who would suffer, but you had flesh in which you endured suffering in the place of the Christ who would suffer.”

Reply to objection 2: In the same place Augustine says, “It is possible that, by certain testimonies worthy of belief, divine authority persuaded the Church to honor the memory of those holy women.”

Reply to objection 3: Precepts of law are given concerning acts of virtue. Now it was already explained above (*ST* 1-2, q. 108, a. 4) that certain precepts of divine law were handed down with an eye to the preparation of the mind, i.e., in order that a man might be prepared to do *this* or *that* when it became opportune. So, too, certain precepts involve an act of virtue having to do with the mind's preparation, i.e., in order that when such-and-such a cause supervenes, the man might act in accord with reason. And this seems to be observed especially in the case of martyrdom, which consists in an appropriate endurance of sufferings that are inflicted unjustly.

So, on the one hand, a man ought not to give another an occasion for acting unjustly. But, on the other hand, if that other individual were to act unjustly, then one should endure it with moderation.

Article 2

Is martyrdom an act of fortitude?

It seems that martyrdom is not an act of fortitude:

Objection 1: 'Martyr' in Greek means 'witness' (*testis*). But testimony is given to *faith* in Christ—this according to Acts 1:8 ("You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem ...") And Maximus says in a sermon, "The mother of martyrdom is the Catholic Faith that those illustrious champions have underwritten with their own blood." Therefore, martyrdom is an act of faith more than an act of fortitude.

Objection 2: A praiseworthy act mainly involves that virtue (a) which inclines one toward the act and (b) which is manifested by the act and (c) without which the act is not effective. But it is *charity* that mainly inclines one to martyrdom; hence, Maximus says in a sermon, "Christ's charity prevails in the martyrs." Likewise, it is charity that is manifested by the martyr's act—this according to John 15:13 ("A greater love no one has than to lay down his life for his friends"). Again, without charity martyrdom accomplishes nothing—this according to 1 Corinthians 13:3 ("If I hand over my body to be burned but do not have charity, it profits me nothing"). Therefore, martyrdom is an act of charity more than an act of fortitude.

Objection 3: In a sermon Augustine says of St. Cyprian, "It is easy to venerate a martyr by celebrating him, whereas it is a great thing to imitate his faith and patience." But with each act of virtue, what is mainly rendered praiseworthy is the virtue whose act it is. Therefore, martyrdom is an act of *patience* more than an act of fortitude.

But contrary to this: In his letter *Ad Martyres et Confessores* Cyprian says, "O blessed martyrs, with what praise shall I extol you? Most courageous soldiers, how shall I find words to proclaim the strength of your heart?" But each individual is praised for the virtue whose act he exercises. Therefore, martyrdom is an act of *fortitude*.

I respond: As is clear from what was said above (q. 123, a. 1), fortitude involves strengthening a man in the good of virtue against dangers—principally against the danger of death, and especially the danger of death as it exists in battle (*in bello*). Now it is clear that in the case of martyrdom a man is firmly strengthened in the good of virtue, since he does not abandon faith and justice in the face of the imminent danger of death which likewise threatens him in a certain particular struggle (*in quodam certamine particulari*) with his persecutors. Hence, Cyprian says in a sermon, "The crowd of those present looked on with admiration at a heavenly contest (*caeleste certamen*), and they saw the servants of Christ standing in battle with a full voice, an uncorrupted mind, and godly strength." Hence, it is clear that martyrdom is an act of fortitude. And it is because of this that the Church reads of the martyrs that "they became valiant in battle" (Hebrews 11:34).

Reply to objection 1: In the case of fortitude there are two things that have to be taken into consideration. The first is the *good* in which the courageous individual is confirmed, and this is the *end*

of fortitude. The second is the *firmness* itself with which the individual withstands the contrary elements keeping him from that good, and this is what the *essence* of fortitude consists in.

Now just as *civic* fortitude strengthens a man's mind in *human justice*, for the preservation of which he endures the danger of death, so, likewise, *grace-filled* fortitude (*fortitudo gratuita*) strengthens a man's mind in the good of *God's justice*, which, as Romans 3:22 explains, "is through faith in Jesus Christ." And so martyrdom is related to *faith* as its *end* in which the individual is confirmed, whereas it is related to *fortitude* as the *habit which elicits it*.

Reply to objection 2: Charity inclines one toward the act of martyrdom as that act's *first and principal* mover in the manner of the *commanding* virtue, whereas fortitude inclines one as the *proper mover* in the manner of the *eliciting* virtue. And hence it is likewise the case that martyrdom is an act of charity *insofar as charity is the virtue that commands it*, whereas it is an act of fortitude *insofar as fortitude is the virtue that elicits it*. And so it is that martyrdom makes both virtues manifest.

Now martyrdom has the fact that it is meritorious from charity, just as every virtue does. And this is why it avails nothing without charity.

Reply to objection 3: As has been explained (q. 123, a. 6), the principal act of fortitude is *to endure*. This is the act that martyrdom involves—and not the secondary act of fortitude, which is *to attack*. And the reason why patience is concomitantly commended in the martyrs is that patience assists fortitude with fortitude's principal act, viz., *to endure*.

Article 3

Is martyrdom an act of maximal perfection?

It seems that martyrdom is not an act of maximal perfection:

Objection 1: Perfection of life seems to involve what falls under a *counsel* and not what falls under a *precept*, since it is not necessary for salvation. But martyrdom seems to be necessary for salvation. For in Romans 10:10 the Apostle says, "With the heart we believe unto justice; but with the mouth confession is made unto salvation," and 1 John 3:16 says, "We ought to lay down our lives for our brethren." Therefore, martyrdom does not pertain to perfection.

Objection 2: It seems to involve a greater perfection for an individual to give his life to God, which occurs through obedience, than for him to give his body to God, which occurs through martyrdom. Hence, in *Moralia* 35 Gregory says, "Obedience is preferred to all sacrifices." Therefore, martyrdom is not an act of maximal perfection.

Objection 3: It seems better to benefit others than to preserve oneself in the good, since, according to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 1, the good of the nation is better than the good of a particular man. But someone who endures martyrdom benefits only himself, whereas someone who is a teacher benefits many. Therefore, the act of teaching and governing subordinates is more perfect than the act of martyrdom.

But contrary to this: In *De Sancta Virginitate* Augustine prefers martyrdom to virginity, which pertains to perfection. Therefore, it seems that martyrdom pertains to perfection the most of all.

I respond: There are two ways in we can speak about the act of a virtue:

In one way, according to the species of the act itself *insofar as it is related to the virtue that proximately elicits the act*. And on this score it is impossible for martyrdom, which consists in a fitting endurance of death, to be the most perfect act of virtue. For to endure death is not praiseworthy in its own right, but only insofar as it is ordered toward some good that consists in an act of virtue, e.g., toward an act of *faith in and love of God*. Hence, this latter act of virtue, since it is an end, is better.

In the second way, an act of virtue can be considered *insofar as it is related to its primary mover*,

i.e., to the love that belongs to charity. And on this score an act principally possesses what pertains to the perfection of one's life, since, as the Apostle puts it in Colossians 3:14, "Charity is the bond of perfection."

Now among all virtuous acts, martyrdom demonstrates the perfection of charity to the highest degree. For the more an individual loves what he disdains for the sake of a given thing, and the more he hates what he chooses to suffer for the sake of that thing, he thereby shows how much more he loves that thing. Now it is obvious that among all the goods of the present life, a man loves his life itself most of all and, on the other side, he hates his death itself most of all—and especially when it is accompanied by the pains of bodily torture, the fear of which, as Augustine points out in *83 Quaestiones*, "drives even brute animals away from the greatest pleasures." Accordingly, it is clear that martyrdom is more perfect than other human acts in the sense that it is a sign of the greatest charity—this according to John 15:13 ("A greater love no one has than to lay down his life for his friends").

Reply to objection 1: There is no act of perfection falling under a counsel that does not in some circumstances fall under a precept in the sense of being necessary for salvation; for instance, in *De Adulterinis coniugiis* Augustine points out that an individual falls into the necessity of preserving his continence because of the absence or illness of his wife.

And so it does not count against the perfection of martyrdom if in some cases martyrdom becomes necessary for salvation. For there are cases in which it is not necessary for salvation to prefer martyrdom, e.g., the many times we read of that holy martyrs have freely offered themselves for martyrdom out of zeal for the Faith and out of fraternal charity.

Now the precepts that are cited should be understood as having to do with the preparation of one's mind.

Reply to objection 2: Martyrdom includes something that is able to be the summit of obedience, viz., that an individual should be obedient unto death—in the way that Philippians 2:8 says of Christ that "He became obedient unto death." Hence, it is clear that martyrdom is more perfect in its own right than is obedience absolutely speaking.

Reply to objection 3: This argument goes through for martyrdom according to the proper species of the act, from which it does not have the highest place among all the acts of the virtues—just as fortitude is not more excellent than all the other virtues.

Article 4

Is death part of the concept of martyrdom?

It seems that death is not part of the concept of martyrdom (*mors non sit de ratione martyrii*):

Objection 1: In his sermon *De Assumptione* Jerome says, "I have correctly stated that the virgin mother of God was also a martyr, even though her life ended in peace." And Gregory says, "Even though an occasion for persecution is at present lacking, peace has its own sort of martyrdom, since even if we do not submit our necks to the sword, we do nonetheless slaughter the carnal desires in our mind with a spiritual sword." Therefore, martyrdom can exist without one's suffering death.

Objection 2: We read of certain women who are praised for disdaining their own lives in order to preserve their bodily integrity, and so it seems that the bodily integrity of their chastity is being preferred to their bodily life. But as is clear in the cases of Agnes and Lucy, sometimes bodily integrity is itself lost—or at least someone threatens that it will be removed—on the occasion of one's confessing the Christian Faith. Therefore, it seems that one should call it martyrdom if a woman loses her bodily integrity for the sake of faith in Christ even more than if she loses her bodily life. Hence, as Lucy said, "If you cause me to be violated against my will, my chastity will double my crown."

Objection 3: Martyrdom is an act of fortitude. But as Augustine explains in *De Musica* 6, fortitude involves not only not fearing death but also not fearing other adversities. And as is clear from Hebrews 10:34, there are many other adversities besides death that some individuals are able to endure for the sake of faith in Christ, e.g., imprisonment, exile, one's goods being plundered. Hence, we celebrate the martyrdom of Pope Marcellus, even though he died in prison. Therefore, it is not required for martyrdom that one endure the penalty of death.

Objection 4: As has been said (aa, 2-3), martyrdom is a meritorious act. But a meritorious act cannot occur after death. Therefore, it occurs before death. And so death is not part of the notion of martyrdom.

But contrary to this: In a homily Maximus says of a martyr, "He who would be conquered by living without his faith conquers by dying for his faith."

I respond: As has been explained (a. 2), being a martyr means being a witness to the Christian Faith, through which, as Hebrews 11 explains, it is proposed to us that visible things should be disdained in favor of invisible things. Therefore, martyrdom involves a man's giving witness to the Faith, showing by his deed that he disdains all present things in order to attain future and invisible goods.

Now as long as a man has his bodily life, he has not yet shown in deed that he despises the totality of temporal things, since men commonly disdain both their blood relatives and all the goods they possess—and even suffer bodily pain—in order to preserve their life. Hence, Satan himself made this case against Job: "Skin for skin, and all that a man has he will give for his soul"—that is, for his bodily life (Job 2:4). And so it is required for the complete concept of martyrdom that an individual sustain death for the sake of Christ.

Reply to objection 1: These passages, along with any similar passages that might be found, are speaking of martyrdom by way of a certain similitude.

Reply to objection 2: In the case of a woman who loses her bodily integrity—or is condemned to lose it—supposedly because of her Christian Faith (*occasione fidei Christianae*), it is not clear in the eyes of men whether the woman suffered this because of her love for the Christian Faith or instead because of [someone else's] contempt for chastity. And so in the eyes of men her testimony is not thereby rendered sufficient. Hence, this does not properly satisfy the concept of martyrdom.

However, in the eyes of God, who scrutinizes hearts, it can be counted as worthy of the reward, just as Lucy claimed.

Reply to objection 3: As was explained above (q. 123, a. 4), fortitude has to do principally (*principaliter*) with the danger of death and secondarily (*consequenter*) with other things. And so martyrdom is not attributed properly speaking just for undergoing imprisonment or exile or the plundering of one's wealth, except perhaps insofar as death follows from one of these.

Reply to objection 4: A martyr's *merit* comes to exist not after his death but in the voluntary endurance itself of the death, that is, insofar as the individual voluntarily suffers death's being inflicted on him. However, it sometimes happens that a man lives for some time after having received mortal wounds for the sake of Christ, or after any other sort of tribulations which continue to the point of death and which he suffers at the hands of persecutors for his faith in Christ. The act of martyrdom is meritorious while a man is in this state, and also at the very time at which he is undergoing afflictions of the sort in question.

Article 5

Is faith alone the reason for martyrdom?

It seems that faith alone is the reason for martyrdom (*quod sola fides sit causa martyrii*):

Objection 1: 1 Peter 4:15-16 says, “Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or anything of that sort. But if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this name.” But one is called a Christian because he holds to faith in Christ. Therefore, only faith in Christ gives the glory of martyrdom to the one who suffers.

Objection 2: A martyr is a kind of witness. Now witness is given only to the truth. But one is called a martyr not because of his witness to just any truth, but only because of his witness to *divine* truth. Otherwise, if someone were to die for confessing the truth of geometry or the truth of some theoretical science, he would be a martyr—which seems ridiculous. Therefore, faith alone is the reason for martyrdom.

Objection 3: According to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 1, among the works of virtue the most important ones seem to be those that are ordered toward the common good, since the good of the nation is better than the good of an individual man. Therefore, if there were some other good that was a reason for martyrdom, it would especially seem to be the case that those who die in defense of the republic would be martyrs. But the Church’s practice is not consonant with this, since there is no celebration of the martyrdoms of soldiers who die in a just war.

But contrary to this: Matthew 5:10 says, “Blessed are those who suffer persecution for the sake of justice ..,” and as a Gloss on this passage notes, this pertains to martyrdom. Yet it is not just faith that pertains to justice, but the other virtues as well. Therefore, other virtues can be a reason for martyrdom.

I respond: As has been said (a. 4), those who are called martyrs are witnesses, since by their bodily suffering unto death they give witness to the truth—not to just any truth, but to the truth which accords with piety and which was made known to us by Christ; and this is why they are called martyrs of Christ in the sense of being witnesses to Him. Now the truth of the Faith is of the sort in question, and so the reason for every martyrdom is the truth of the Faith.

However, the truth of the Faith involves not only believing with the heart but also professing exteriorly, which is accomplished not only through the words by which one confesses the Faith but also through the deeds by which one shows that he has faith—this according to James 2:18 (“I will show you my faith from my works”). Hence, Titus 1:16 says of certain individuals, “They confess that they know God, but they deny it with their deeds.”

And so the works of all the virtues, insofar as they are directed toward God, are professions of the Faith through which it is known to us that God requires works of this sort from us and rewards us for them. And on this score the works of all the virtues can be reasons for martyrdom. Hence, the Church celebrates the martyrdom of St. John the Baptist, who endured death not for professing the Faith (*non pro neganda fide*) but for objecting to [an instance of] adultery.

Reply to objection 1: ‘Christian’ means one who belongs to Christ. But someone is said to belong to Christ not only because he has faith in Christ but also because he engages in virtuous works by the Spirit of Christ—this according to Romans 8:9 (“If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ”) and also according to Galatians 5:24 (“Those who belong to Christ have crucified their flesh, with its vices and disordered desires”). And so one suffers *as a Christian* not only insofar as he suffers for confessing the Faith, which is done with words, but also insofar as he suffers for doing any sort of good work, or for avoiding any sin, for the sake of Christ, since professing the Faith involves all of this.

Reply to objection 2: The worship of God does not involve the truth of the other sciences. And so such truth is not said to “accord with piety.” Hence, neither can the profession of such truth be a reason for martyrdom, speaking directly.

However, since, as was established above (q. 110, a. 3), every lie is a sin, the avoidance of a lie, no matter what sort of truth it is opposed to, can be a reason for martyrdom insofar as the lie is a sin contrary to divine law.

Reply to objection 3: The good of the republic is the principal human good. But the divine good,

which is the proper reason for martyrdom, is more important than the human good. Still, since the human good can be made divine by being referred to God, it is possible for any human good to be a reason for martyrdom insofar as it is referred to God.