

QUESTION 14

Blasphemy, i.e., Sin, Against the Holy Spirit

Next we have to consider specifically the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (*blasphemia in spiritum sanctum*). And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, or a sin against the Holy Spirit, the same as a sin done committed from fixed malice? (2) What are the species of sin against the Holy Spirit? (3) Is a sin against the Holy Spirit unforgivable? (4) Can someone sin against the Holy Spirit at the beginning, before he commits any other sins?

Article 1

Is a sin against the Holy Spirit the same as a sin committed from fixed malice?

It seems that a sin against the Holy Spirit is not the same as a sin committed from fixed malice (*peccatum in spiritum sanctum non sint idem quod peccatum ex certa malitia*):

Objection 1: As is clear from Matthew 12:32, a sin against the Holy Spirit is a sin of blasphemy. But not every sin committed from fixed malice is a sin of blasphemy, since it is possible for other types of sin to be committed from fixed malice. Therefore, a sin against the Holy Spirit is not the same as a sin committed from fixed malice.

Objection 2: Sins committed from fixed malice are divided off from sins committed from ignorance and sins committed from weakness (cf. *ST* 1-2, qq. 75-78). But as is clear from Matthew 12:32, sins against the Holy Spirit are divided off from sins against the Son of Man. Therefore, sins against the Holy Spirit are not the same as sins committed from fixed malice; for sins whose opposites are diverse are themselves likewise diverse.

Objection 3: *Sin against the Holy Spirit* is a certain genus of sin whose species are determinately marked. But *sin committed from fixed malice* is not a special genus of sin; rather, it is a certain general condition or circumstance which can exist with respect to all genera of sins. Therefore, a sin against the Holy Spirit is not the same as a sin committed from fixed malice.

But contrary to this: In *Sentences* 2, dist. 43 the Master says, "One who sins against the Holy Spirit is such that the malice pleases him for its own sake." Therefore, a sin committed from fixed malice seems to be the same as a sin against the Holy Spirit.

I respond: There are three ways in which authors have talked about sin, or blasphemy, against the Holy Spirit.

The ancient doctors, viz., Athanasius, Hilary, Ambrose, Jerome and Chrysostom, claim that a sin against the Holy Spirit occurs when, literally, something blasphemous is said against the Holy Spirit, regardless of whether 'Holy Spirit' is taken as a name of the *essence* that belongs to the whole Trinity, each person of which is a spirit and holy, or as the *personal* name of one person in the Trinity. And it is in this sense that in Matthew 12 blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is distinguished from blasphemy against the Son of Man. For Christ did some things in a human way (*humanitus*), e.g., by eating and drinking and doing other things of this sort, and He did some things in a divine way (*divinitus*), e.g., by casting out demons, raising the dead, and other things of this sort that He did both by the power of His own divinity and through the operation of the Holy Spirit, with whom He was filled with respect to His humanity. Now the Jews at first uttered blasphemy against the Son of Man, when they claimed that He was "a glutton, a drinker of wine, and a lover of tax collectors" (Matthew 11:19). But afterwards they blasphemed against the Holy Spirit when they attributed to the prince of demons the works that Christ was doing by the power of His own divinity and through the operation of the Holy Spirit. And it is because of this that they are said to have blasphemed against the Holy Spirit.

However, in *De Verbis Domini* Augustine claims that blasphemy, or sin, against the Holy Spirit is final impenitence, viz., when someone persists in mortal sin right up until death. This is effected not

only by the spoken word, but also by the word of the heart and by the ‘word’ of action (*non solum verboris sed etiam verbo cordis et operis*)—not by just one word, but by many. Now this word, so understood, is said to be contrary to the Holy Spirit because it is contrary to the forgiveness of sins, which is effected by the Holy Spirit, who is the charity of the Father and the Son (*qui est caritas patris et filii*). Nor did our Lord say this to the Jews in the sense that they themselves were sinning against the Holy Spirit, since they were not at that time impenitent in their final moments (*nondum enim erant finaliter impenitentes*). Rather, He was admonishing them, lest, by talking in this way, they should arrive at the point at which they would be sinning against the Holy Spirit. And this is the way to understand Mark 3:29-30, where, after He had said, “Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit ...,” the evangelist adds, “For they were saying, ‘He has an unclean spirit’.”

By contrast, others have a different understanding. They claim that sin, or blasphemy, against the Holy Spirit occurs when someone sins against the appropriated goodness of the Holy Spirit (*appropriatum bonum spiritus sancti*), to whom *goodness* is appropriated in the way that *power* is appropriated to the Father and *wisdom* to the Son (cf. *ST* 1, q. 39, aa. 7-8). Hence, they claim that sin against the Father occurs when one sins from *weakness*, sin against the Son occurs when one sins from *ignorance*, and sin against the Holy Spirit occurs when one sins from *fixed malice*, i.e., from the very choice of evil, as was explained above (*ST* 1-2, q. 78, aa. 1 and 3). This happens in two ways:

(a) it happens because of the inclination of a vicious habit, which is called ‘malice’, and in this sense sinning from malice is not the same as sinning against the Holy Spirit;

(b) it happens because, out of contempt, what could have impeded the choice is rejected and removed; for instance, hope is rejected through despair, and fear is rejected through presumption, along with certain other things of this sort, as will be explained below (a. 2). For all these things that impede the choice of a sin are effects of the Holy Spirit in us. And so this is the sense in which sinning from malice is sinning against the Holy Spirit.

Reply to objection 1: Just as the act of confessing the Faith consists not only in bearing witness with one’s mouth but also in bearing witness with one’s action (*non solum consistit in protestatione oris, sed etiam in protestatione operis*), so, too, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can be considered in speech (*in ore*), in the heart (*in corde*), and in action (*in opere*).

Reply to objection 2: According to the third explanation, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is distinguished from blasphemy against the Son of Man insofar as the Son of Man is also the Son of God, i.e., the power of God and the wisdom of God. Hence, on this score sin against the Son of Man is sin from ignorance or sin from weakness.

Reply to objection 3: Insofar as it proceeds from the inclination of a habit, sin from fixed malice is not a special sin but a certain general condition of sin. However, insofar as it proceeds from special contempt for the Holy Spirit’s effect in us, it has the character of a special sin; and in this way *sin against the Holy Spirit* is likewise a special genus of sin.

Something similar can be said according to the first explanation.

On the other hand, according to the second explanation, *sin against the Holy Spirit* is not a special genus of sin, since final impenitence can be a circumstance of any genus of sin.

Article 2

Is it appropriate to assign six species of sin against the Holy Spirit?

It seems that it is not appropriate to assign six species of sin against the Holy Spirit, viz., despair (*desperatio*), presumption (*praesumptio*), impenitence (*impenitentia*), obstinacy (*obstinatio*), impugning acknowledged truth (*impugnatio veritatis agnitae*), and envy of fraternal grace (*invidentia fraternae*

gratiae)—which are the species posited by the Master in *Sentences* 2, dist. 43:

Objection 1: To deny (*negare*) God’s justice or mercy belongs to unbelief. But it is through despair that one rejects (*reiicit*) God’s mercy, whereas it is through presumption that one rejects His justice. Therefore, each of the two is a species of unbelief rather than a species of sin against the Holy Spirit.

Objection 2: Impenitence seems to have to do with past sin, whereas obstinacy seems to have to do with future sin. But *past* and *future* do not diversify species of virtue or vice; for instance, it is by the same faith that we believe that Christ *has been* born and that the ancients believed that He *would be* born. Therefore, obstinacy and impenitence should not be posited as two species of sin against the Holy Spirit.

Objection 3: As John 1:17 says, “Truth and grace came through Jesus Christ.” Therefore, it seems that impugning acknowledged truth and envy of fraternal grace belong more to blasphemy against the Son of Man than to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Objection 4: In *De Dispensatione et Praecepto* Bernard says, “To will not to obey is to resist the Holy Spirit.” Likewise, a Gloss on Leviticus 10:16 says, “Simulated repentance is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.” Again, schism seems to be directly opposed to the Holy Spirit, through whom the Church is united. And so it seems that not enough species of sin against the Holy Spirit are listed here.

But contrary to this: In *De Fide ad Petrum* Augustine says, “Those who despair of forgiveness for their sins, or who presume upon God’s mercy without merits, sin against the Holy Spirit.” And in *Enchiridion* he says, “One who closes out his last day in obstinacy of mind is guilty of a sin against the Holy Spirit.” And in *De Sermone Domini in Monte* he says, “To impugn fraternity with faces of envy is to sin against the Holy Spirit.” And in *De Unico Baptismo* he says, “Anyone who despises the truth is either ill-willed toward his brothers, to whom the truth is revealed, or ungrateful to God, by whose inspiration the Church is instructed,” and so, it seems, he sins against the Holy Spirit.

I respond: If we interpret *sin against the Holy Spirit* in the third way (cf. a. 1), then the species mentioned above are appropriately assigned to it. They are distinguished by the removal of, or contempt for, the things through which a man can be impeded from choosing sin. These things exist either on the part of *God’s judgment*, or on the part of *His gifts*, or also on the part of *the sin itself*.

For in considering *God’s judgment*, which combines justice with mercy, a man is turned away from choosing sin both (a) through hope, which arises from considering that mercy forgives sins and rewards what is good, and this hope is removed by *despair*, and also (b) through fear, which arises from considering that God’s justice punishes sin, and this fear is removed by *presumption*, viz., when someone presumes that he will attain glory without merits or forgiveness without repentance.

On the other hand, there are two *gifts of God* by which we are drawn away from sin. One of them is acknowledgment of the truth (*agnitio veritatis*), against which is posited *impugning acknowledged truth*, viz., when someone impugns the acknowledged truth of the Faith in order that he might sin in a more unrestrained way (*licentius*). The second gift is the assistance of interior grace, against which is posited *envy of fraternal grace*, viz., when someone not only envies the person of his brother, but also envies God’s grace increasing in the world.

Now on the part of *sin itself* there are two things that can draw a man away from sin. One of them is the disorder and shamefulness of the act, a consideration of which tends to induce in a man repentance for the sins he has committed. And against this is posited *impenitence*—not, to be sure, in the sense in which ‘impenitence’ implies persistence in sin right up to death, in the way that it was understood above (a. 1), since this would be not a special sin but a certain circumstance of sin. Rather, ‘impenitence’ is being understood here to imply the resolve not to repent (*importat propositum non poenitendi*). The second thing is the triviality and transitoriness of the good one seeks in sinning (*parvitas et brevitatis boni quod quis in peccato quaerit*)—this according to Romans 6:21 (“What fruit did you have in those things of which you are now ashamed?”). The consideration of this point tends to induce a man to be less firm in his will to sin (*inducere solet hominem ad hoc quod eius voluntas in peccato non firmetur*). And this

is removed through *obstinacy*, viz., when a man firms up his resolve to adhere to sin. Of these two sins Jeremiah 8:6 says, with respect to the first, “There is no one who does penance for his sin, saying, ‘What have I done?’” and, with respect to the second, “They have all turned to their own course like a horse rushing into battle.”

Reply to objection 1: The sins of despair and presumption consist not in disbelieving in God’s justice or mercy, but in disdaining them.

Reply to objection 2: Obstinacy and impenitence differ not only with respect to *past* and *future*, but also, as has been explained, with respect to certain formal characteristics stemming from diverse ways of thinking about the things that can be considered in sins.

Reply to objection 3: Christ effects grace and truth through the gifts of the Holy Spirit that He gave to men.

Reply to objection 4: Willing not to obey belongs to obstinacy; simulating repentance belongs to impenitence; and schism belongs to the envy of fraternal grace, through which the members of the Church are united.

Article 3

Is a sin against the Holy Spirit unforgivable?

It seems that a sin against the Holy Spirit is not unforgivable (*non sit irremissibile*):

Objection 1: In *De Verbis Domini* Augustine says, “We should despair of no one, as long our Lord’s patience is leading him toward repentance.” But if any sin were unforgivable, then we would have to despair of some sinners. Therefore, a sin against the Holy Spirit is not unforgivable.

Objection 2: No sin is forgiven except by a soul’s being healed by God. But as a Gloss on Psalm 102:3 (“Who heals all your diseases”) says, “For the omnipotent physician no disease is incurable.” Therefore, a sin against the Holy Spirit is not unforgivable.

Objection 3: Free choice is related to what is good and what is bad. But as long as the state of the present life remains, someone can fall from any virtue, since even angels fell from heaven; hence, Job 4:18-19 says, “In His angels He found wickedness; how much more in those who dwell in clay houses?” Therefore, by parity of reasoning, one can return to the state of justice from any sin whatsoever. Therefore, a sin against the Holy Spirit is not unforgivable.

But contrary to this: Matthew 12:32 says, “If anyone speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this world or in the world to come.” And in *De Sermone Domini in Monte* Augustine says, “The downfall involved in this sin is so great that one cannot submit to the humiliation of asking for pardon.”

I respond: Corresponding to the different understandings of a sin against the Holy Spirit (cf. a. 1), there are different senses in which such a sin is unforgivable.

For instance, if one claims that the sin against the Holy Spirit is final impenitence, then it is called unforgivable because it is not forgiven in any way. For since a mortal sin which a man persists in until death is not forgiven through his repentance, it will not be remitted in the future, either.

By contrast, on the other two understandings of a sin against the Holy Spirit it is called unforgivable not because it is in no way forgiven, but because, taken in its own right, it deserves not to be forgiven (*quantum est de se habet meritum ut non remittatur*)—and this in two ways:

In one way, with respect to the *punishment*. For when someone sins from ignorance or weakness, he merits a lesser punishment, whereas someone who sins from fixed malice does not have any excuse in light of which his punishment might be lessened. Similarly, even someone who blasphemed against the Son of Man when His divinity had not yet been revealed could have had an excuse in light of the

weakness of the flesh which he saw in the Son of Man, and in such a case he merited a lesser punishment. By contrast, someone who blasphemed the divine nature itself, attributing the works of the Holy Spirit to the devil, had no excuse in light of which his punishment might be diminished. And this is why it is said, according to Chrysostom's explanation, that this sin is not forgiven the Jews either in this world or in the future, because they have suffered punishment for it both in the present life at the hands of the Romans and in the future world in the punishment of hell. Athanasius likewise cites the example of their ancestors, who at first contended with Moses because they lacked bread and water, and the Lord patiently tolerated this because they had an excuse based on the weakness of the flesh. But afterwards they sinned more gravely and blasphemed, as it were, against the Holy Spirit, by attributing to their idol the favors of the God who had led them out of Egypt, when they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who led you out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 32:4). And so the Lord both (a) punished them temporally, for "about three thousand men died on that day" (Exodus 32:28). and (b) threatened them with future punishment, saying, "On the day of vengeance I will visit this sin of theirs" (Exodus 32:34).

In a second way, the point in question can be understood with respect to *guilt*. For just as a disease is called incurable by the nature of the disease, because it destroys that by which a disease can be cured—for instance, because the disease destroys the power of the nature or because it induces a loathing of food and drink—even though God can cure even this sort of disease, so, too, a sin against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable by its nature insofar as it excludes the things through which the forgiveness of sin is effected. Yet a way of forgiving and healing is not thereby closed off to God's omnipotence and mercy, through which such individuals are sometimes spiritually healed by a miracle, as it were.

Reply to objection 1: Taking into account God's omnipotence and mercy, we should despair of no one in this life. But when we consider the nature of the sin, some individuals are called "children of disobedience," as Ephesians 2:2 puts it.

Reply to objection 2: This argument proceeds on the basis of God's omnipotence and not according to the nature of the sin.

Reply to objection 3: To be sure, in the present life free choice always remains open to change. Yet sometimes it casts off from itself, as much as it can, that through which it can be turned toward the good. Hence, on its own part the sin is unforgivable, even though God can forgive it.

Article 4

Can a man sin first against the Holy Spirit, with no other sins presupposed?

It seems that a man cannot sin first against the Holy Spirit, with no other sins presupposed:

Objection 1: A natural ordering is such that one moves from what is imperfect to what is perfect (*ab imperfecto ad perfectum quis moveatur*). And this is obvious in the case of goods—this according to Proverbs 4:18 ("The path of the just, as a shining light, goes forward and increases even unto the perfect day"). But as is clear from the Philosopher in *Metaphysics* 5, in the case of bad things the 'perfect' is the greatest evil. Therefore, since a sin against the Holy Spirit is the gravest sin, it seems that a man arrives at this sin by means of other lesser sins.

Objection 2: To sin against the Holy Spirit is to sin from fixed malice, i.e., by choosing to. But a man cannot do this immediately, before he has sinned many times; for in *Ethics* 5 the Philosopher says, "Even though a man can do unjust things, he is not immediately able to act as the unjust man does," i.e., by choosing what is unjust. Therefore, it seems that a sin against the Holy Spirit cannot be committed until after other sins have been committed.

Objection 3: Repentance and impenitence have to do with the same thing. But repentance has to do only with past sins. Therefore, impenitence, which is a species of sin against the Holy Spirit, has

likewise to do only with past sins. Therefore, a sin against the Holy Spirit presupposes other sins.

But contrary to this: As Ecclesiasticus 11:23 says, “In the sight of God it is easy to make a poor man rich all of a sudden.” Therefore, conversely, it is possible, given the malice of a demon suggesting it, that someone should be immediately induced to commit the gravest sin, i.e., a sin against the Holy Spirit.

I respond: As has been explained (a. 1), to sin against the Holy Spirit is, in one sense, to sin from fixed malice. But as has likewise been explained (a. 1), there are two ways in which one can sin from fixed malice:

In one way, because of the inclination of a habit, which is not properly speaking to sin against the Holy Spirit. And it is impossible to sin from fixed malice at the beginning in this way, since there have to be previous acts of sin by which a habit inclining one to sin is caused.

In the second way, someone can sin from fixed malice by rejecting through contempt those things through which a man is held back from sin—and this, as has been explained (a. 1) is properly speaking to sin against the Holy Spirit. In the vast majority of cases (*plerumque*), this likewise presupposes other sins, since, as Proverbs 18:3 puts it, “When the wicked man arrives at the depths of his sins, he shows disdain.” Yet it can happen that someone sins through contempt against the Holy Spirit in his first sinful act, because of free choice and also because of many previous dispositions, or even because of a strong movement toward evil accompanied by the man’s weak affection for the good.

And so in perfected men it is scarcely or never possible for them to sin against the Holy Spirit right at the beginning. Hence, in *Periarchon* 1 Origen says, “I do not think that anyone who is in the highest and perfect grade leaves it or falls away all of a sudden; rather, he must fall away little by little or one part at a time.”

The same line of reasoning holds if ‘sin against the Holy Spirit’ is taken literally for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. For blasphemy of the sort our Lord is talking about always proceeds from the contempt associated with malice.

On the other hand, if by ‘sin against the Holy Spirit’ one means final impenitence in the way that Augustine understands it, then the question does not arise (*questionem non habet*), because a sin against the Holy Spirit requires persistence in sin right up the end of one’s life.

Reply to objection 1: In the case of both good and evil, it almost always (*ut in pluribus*) goes from the imperfect to the perfect, in the way that a man makes progress either in good or in evil. And yet in both cases, one individual can start from a greater [good or evil] than another does. And so that from which someone starts can be perfect by its genus in good or in evil—even though it is imperfect with respect to the sequence of a man’s movement as he progresses toward becoming better or worse.

Reply to objection 2: This argument is talking about a sin committed from fixed malice when this happens because of the inclination of a habit.

Reply to objection 3: If ‘final impenitence’ is being taken in the way that Augustine understands it, so that it implies a persistence in sinning right up to the end, then it is obvious that impenitence presupposes previous sins, just as repentance does.

However, if we are speaking of habitual impenitence insofar as it is posited as a sin against the Holy Spirit, then it is clear that impenitence can exist even before other sins. For someone who has never sinned can have either the resolve to repent or the resolve not to repent if it should happen that he sins.