

QUESTION 152

Virginity

Next we have to consider virginity (*virginitas*). And on this topic there are five questions: (1) What does virginity consist in? (2) Is virginity licit? (3) Is virginity a virtue? (4) Is virginity more excellent than marriage? (5) Is virginity more excellent than the other virtues?

Article 1

Does virginity consist in the integrity of the flesh?

It seems that virginity does not consist in the integrity of the flesh:

Objection 1: In *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia ad Valerium* Augustine says that virginity “is a perpetual meditation about incorruption within corruptible flesh.” But meditation does not belong to the flesh. Therefore, virginity is not seated in the flesh.

Objection 2: Virginity implies a sort of modesty (*virginitas pudicitiam quandam importat*). But in *De Civitate Dei* 1 Augustine says that modesty is seated in the soul. Therefore, virginity does not consist in the incorruption of the flesh.

Objection 3: Integrity of the flesh seems to consist in the seal of virginal modesty (*videtur consistere in signaculo virginalis pudoris*). But in some cases this seal is broken without prejudice to virginity. For in *De Civitate Dei* 1 Augustine says, “The bodily organs in question can be wounded by suffering violence in different accidental ways. Sometimes physicians, in order to bring about health, do things in that area that make one shudder to see. Again, a midwife, exploring with her hand, has destroyed the integrity of a virgin while doing her examination.” And he adds, “I do not believe that anyone would be stupid enough to think that she has lost any of the sanctity even of her body, despite the fact that the integrity of the bodily part in question has already been lost.” Therefore, virginity does not consist in the incorruption of the flesh.

Objection 4: The corruption of the flesh consists especially in the emission of semen, which can occur without copulation when a man is either awake or asleep. But it seems that virginity cannot be lost without copulation. For in *De Virginitate* Augustine says, “Virginal integrity, along with freedom from all copulation through pious continence, is the portion of the angels.” Therefore, virginity does not consist in the incorruption of the flesh.

But contrary to this: In the same book Augustine says, “Virginity is continence by which the integrity of the flesh is vowed, consecrated, and preserved for the Creator Himself of both the soul and the flesh.”

I respond: The name *virginitas* [virginity] seems to be taken from *viror* [greenness, freshness]. And so just as something fresh is said to persist in its freshness when it is free from being scorched by excessive heat, so, too, virginity implies that the person in whom it exists is free from being scorched by excessive sentient desire, which seems to have its consummation in the greatest bodily pleasure—and this is sexual pleasure (*qualis est venereorum delectatio*.)” Hence, in *De Virginitate* Ambrose says, “Virginal chastity is an integrity devoid of contamination (*expers contagionis integritas*).”

Now there are three things to consider in the case of sexual pleasure. The first is *on the part of the body*, viz., *the violation of the virginal seal (violatio signaculi virginalis)*. The second is *that in which what belongs to the soul is joined to what belongs to the body*, viz., *the very emission of semen causing sensual pleasure (ipsa resolutio seminis delectationem sensibilem causans)*. And the third is *solely on the part of the soul*, viz., *the intention of arriving at such pleasure (propositum perveniendi ad talem delectationem)*.

Of these three things, the one that is posited first is related *incidentally* to the moral act (*per accidens se habet ad moralem actum*), which is thought of in its own right (*consideratur per se*) only

with respect to what belongs to the soul. On the other hand, the one that is posited second is related *materially* to the moral act, since sensible passions are the matter of moral acts. By contrast, the one that is posited third is related *formally* to the moral act and is its *completion* (*tertium se habet formaliter et completive*), since the nature of moral acts is brought to completion in what belongs to reason.

Therefore, since ‘virginity’ is predicated by negating the corruption mentioned above, it follows that the integrity of the bodily member in question is related *incidentally* to virginity. Freedom from the pleasure associated with the emission of semen is related *materially* to virginity. On the other hand, the intention of abstaining in perpetuity from such pleasure is related *formally* to virginity and *completes* it.

Reply to objection 1: This definition of Augustine’s correctly touches on what is *formal* in virginity, since by ‘meditation’ he means reason’s intention. What he adds, viz., “perpetual,” is not to be understood in such a way that a virgin must always be actually entertaining this sort of ‘meditation’; instead, it is to be understood in such a way that the virgin should carry on with the purpose of persevering perpetually in the intention.

Now what is *material* [in virginity] is touched upon in the oblique clause, when he says, “... about incorruption within corruptible flesh.” This is added to emphasize the difficulty of virginity, since if the flesh were unable to be corrupted, then it would not be difficult to have “the perpetual meditation about incorruption.”

Reply to objection 2: Modesty exists *essentially* within the soul, whereas it exists *materially* in the flesh—and the same holds for virginity. This is why, in *De Virginitate*, Augustine says, “Even though virginity is preserved in the flesh and is in this sense corporeal, the way in which the continence of piety vows and preserves virginity is nonetheless spiritual.

Reply to objection 3: As has been explained, the integrity of the bodily member is related *incidentally* to virginity, viz., insofar as the integrity of an individual’s bodily member remains intact because she is abstaining by a willful intention from sexual pleasure. Hence, if it happens that the integrity of the member in question is corrupted accidentally in some other way, this is no more prejudicial to virginity than the corruption of a hand or a foot would be.

Reply to objection 4: The pleasure that comes from the emission of semen can occur in two ways: In one way, insofar as it proceeds *from an intention of the mind*. And this way removes virginity, whether it happens with copulation or without. Augustine mentions copulation because this sort of emission is commonly and naturally caused by copulation.

In the second way, it can happen *outside the intention of the mind*, either (a) in sleep; or (b) through inflicted violence that the mind does not consent to, even though the flesh experiences pleasure; or even (c) because of an infirmity of nature, as is clear in the case of those who are subject to a discharge of semen. And virginity is not thereby lost, since such an emission does not occur through immodesty, which does exclude virginity.

Article 2

Is virginity illicit?

It seems that virginity is illicit:

Objection 1: Everything that is contrary to a precept of the law of nature is illicit. But just as there is a precept of the law of nature which is aimed at *preserving the individual* and which is touched upon in Genesis 2:16 (“You may eat from every tree that exists in Paradise”), so, too, there is a precept of the law of nature which is aimed at *preserving the species* and which is posited in Genesis 1:28 (“Grow and multiply, and fill the earth”). Therefore, just as someone would commit a sin if he were to abstain from all food, thereby doing something contrary to the good of the *individual*, so, too, someone commits a sin

by abstaining altogether from the act of generation, thereby doing something contrary to the good of the *species*.

Objection 2: What recedes from the mean of virtue seems to be sinful. But virginity recedes from the mean of virtue by abstaining from all sexual pleasures; for in *Ethics 2* the Philosopher says, “Someone who revels in every pleasure and does not draw away from even one, is intemperate, but someone who flees from all pleasures is uncultured and insensible.” Therefore, virginity is something sinful.

Objection 3: A punishment is due only for sin. But as Valerius reports, among the ancients, those who always led a celibate life were punished. And according to Augustine in *De Vera Religione*, even Plato “is said to have made sacrifices in order that his perpetual continence might, as a sin, be abolished.” Therefore, virginity is a sin.

But contrary to this: No sin rightfully falls under a counsel. But virginity rightfully falls under a counsel, since 1 Corinthians 7:25 says, “Concerning virgins I have no precept from the Lord, but I do give a counsel ...” Therefore, virginity is not something illicit.

I respond: Among human acts, the ones that are sinful are those that lie beyond the bounds of right reason. And right reason is such that the individual makes use of the means to an end according to the measure by which these means are appropriate for the end.

Now as *Ethics 1* explains, there are three sorts of human good. One sort consists in *exterior things*, e.g., riches; the second sort consists in *goods of the body*; and the third sort consists in *goods of the soul*, among which—as the Philosopher shows in *Ethics 10* and as our Lord explains in Luke 10:42 (“Mary has chosen the better part”)—the goods of the contemplative life are more important than the goods of the active life. Now among all these goods, the exterior goods are ordered toward the goods of the body, and the goods of the body are ordered toward the goods of the soul, and, further, the goods of the active life are ordered toward the goods of the contemplative life.

Therefore, rectitude of reason involves an individual’s making use of the exterior goods according to the measure in which they are fitting for the body—and similarly for the others. Hence, if an individual abstains from possessing certain things which it would otherwise be good to possess in order to accommodate his bodily health, or even the contemplation of truth, this would not be sinful, but would be in accord with right reason. And, similarly, if an individual abstained from bodily pleasures in order to free up more time for the contemplation of truth, then this belongs to the rectitude of reason.

Now a pious virginity abstains from all sexual pleasure in order free up more time for divine contemplation; for in 1 Corinthians 7:34 the Apostle says, “The woman who is unmarried and a virgin thinks about the things of the Lord in order that she might be holy in both body and in spirit, whereas a woman who is married thinks about the things of the world and about how she might please her husband.”

Hence, it follows that virginity is not something sinful but is instead praiseworthy.

Reply to objection 1: As was explained above (q. 44, a. 1 and *ST* 1-2, q. 100, a. 5), a precept has the character of a duty or of something that is owed. Now there are two ways in which something is a duty:

(a) In one way, it is to be fulfilled by *single individual*, and this sort of duty cannot be omitted without sin.

(b) The other sort duty is to be fulfilled by a *multitude*. And it is not the case that each individual of the multitude is obligated to fulfill this sort of duty. For there many things necessary for the multitude which are such that one individual is not sufficient to fulfill them; instead, they are fulfilled by the multitude as long one individual does *this* and another does *that*.

Thus the precept of the law of nature that was given to man concerning eating is such that it must be fulfilled by each individual, since otherwise the individual would not be able to be preserved.

By contrast, the precept that was given concerning generation looks to the whole multitude of men,

for which it is necessary not only that this multitude be multiplied corporeally, but also that it make progress spiritually. And so the human multitude is sufficiently provided for if some individuals contribute to carnal generation, while others, abstaining from this, free up time for the contemplation of divine things and for the beautification and salvation of the whole human race, just as, in an army, some individuals guard the camp, and some are standard-bearers, and some fight with swords—where all of these roles are necessary for the multitude, even though they cannot all be carried out by a single individual.

Reply to objection 2: Someone who abstains from all pleasures in a way that lies outside of right reason, abhorring all pleasures in their own right, is insensible like a country bumpkin (*agricola*). By contrast, virgins do not abstain from all pleasures, but abstain only from sexual pleasure, and, as has been explained, they abstain from this pleasure in accord with right reason. Hence, *Ethics* 4 says of the magnanimous individual that “he is extreme in magnitude, but moderate where this is called for.”

Reply to objection 3: Laws are drawn up in accord with that happens most frequently. But among the ancients it was rare that someone should abstain from all sexual pleasure because of his love for contemplating truth—something that Plato alone is said to have done. Hence, as Augustine explains in the same place, Plato was offering sacrifices not because he thought this a sin, “but as a way of yielding to the perverse opinion of his fellow citizens.”

Article 3

Is virginity a virtue?

It seems that virginity is not a virtue:

Objection 1: As the Philosopher says in *Ethics* 1, “No virtue exists in us by nature.” But virginity exists by nature, since all individuals are virgins as soon as they are born. Therefore, virginity is not a virtue.

Objection 2: As was established above (*ST* 1-2, q. 65, a. 1), if an individual has one virtue, then he has all the virtues. But some individuals have other virtues without having virginity; otherwise, since no one arrives at the kingdom of heaven without virtue, no one without virginity would be able to arrive there—which would condemn marriage. Therefore, virginity is not a virtue.

Objection 3: Every virtue is restored through repentance. But virginity is not repaired by repentance; hence, Jerome says, “Although God can do everything else, He cannot repair virgins after their downfall.” Therefore, it seems that virginity is not a virtue.

Objection 4: No virtue is lost without sin. But virginity is lost without sin, viz., through marriage. Therefore, virginity is not a virtue.

Objection 5: Virginity is divided off on the same level from widowhood (*viduitas*) and conjugal modesty (*pudicitia conjugalis*). But neither of the latter is posited as a virtue. Therefore, virginity is not a virtue.

But contrary to this: In *De Virginitate* Ambrose says, “Our love of virginity moves us to say something about virginity, lest by its being passed over, as it were, what is a principal virtue should seem to be slighted.”

I respond: As was explained above (aa. 1-2), in the case of virginity there is a *formal and completing intention* to abstain in perpetuity from sexual pleasure, and this intention is rendered praiseworthy by its end, i.e., insofar as this is done in order to free up time for divine things.

Now what is *material* in the case of virginity is integrity of the flesh without any experience of sexual pleasure. However, it is clear that where there is a special matter having a special excellence, one finds a *specific* nature of virtue; this is obvious in the case of *magnificence*, which has to do *with great*

sums of money, and because of this it is a specific virtue distinct from *generosity*, which itself has to do *generally* with any use of money. But preserving oneself free of *any* experience of sexual pleasure has a praiseworthy excellence beyond preserving oneself free of *disordered* sexual pleasure. And so *virginity* is a specific virtue which is related to *chastity* in the way that *magnificence* is related to *generosity*.

Reply to objection 1: From birth men have what is *material* in virginity, viz., integrity of flesh that is free of sexual experience. But they do not have what is *formal* in virginity, viz., having the intention of preserving integrity of the sort in question for the sake of God. And it is from this that virginity has the nature of a virtue. Hence, in *De Virginitate* Augustine says, “In the case of virgins, we praise them not because they are virgins, but because they are virgins dedicated to God by holy continence.”

Reply to objection 2: The connectedness of the virtues is understood with respect to what is *formal* in the virtues, i.e., with respect to *charity* or with respect to *prudence*, as was explained above (q. 129, a. 3), and not with respect to what is *material* in the virtues. For nothing prevents a virtuous individual from having at hand the matter of one virtue, but not the matter of another virtue—as, for instance, a poor man has the matter of *temperance*, but not the matter of *magnificence*. In the same way, an individual who has other virtues may lack the *matter* of virginity, i.e., he may lack the integrity of the flesh spoken of above.

But he can nonetheless have what is *formal* in virginity, i.e., he can have in his mental preparation the intention of preserving the aforementioned integrity if this turned out to be fitting for him—just as a poor man can have in his mental preparation the intention of making magnificent expenditures if this turned out to be fitting for him, and, similarly, just as an individual who is prosperous has in his mental preparation the intention of enduring adversities with equanimity. And without this sort of mental preparation an individual cannot be virtuous.

Reply to objection 3: A virtue can be repaired through repentance with respect to what is *formal* in the virtue, but not with respect to what is *material* in it. For instance, it is not the case that if a magnificent individual uses up his riches, then his riches are restored to him through repentance. And, similarly, if an individual loses virginity by sinning, then he cannot recuperate the *matter* of virginity through repentance, but he instead recuperates the intention of virginity (*propositum virginitatis*).

Now as for the *matter* of virginity, there is something that could be miraculously repaired by God, viz., the integrity of the bodily member, which we have claimed to be related incidentally to virginity. On the other hand, there is something else that cannot be repaired even by a miracle, viz., that an individual who has experienced sexual pleasure become such that he has not experienced it; for as was established in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 25, a. 4), God cannot bring it about that what has in fact occurred has not occurred.

Reply to objection 4: Insofar as virginity is a virtue, it implies the intention, firmed up by a vow, to preserve integrity in perpetuity. For in *De Virginitate* Augustine says, “Through virginity the integrity of the flesh is vowed, consecrated, and preserved for the Creator Himself of both the soul and the flesh.” Hence, insofar as it is a virtue, virginity is never lost except through sin.

Reply to objection 5: Conjugal chastity is praiseworthy solely because it abstains from illicit pleasures, and it does not have any excellence over and beyond chastity in general. Widowhood does, to be sure, add something over and beyond chastity in general, but it does not attain to what is perfect in this matter, viz., absolutely complete freedom from sexual pleasure; only virginity does this. And this is why virginity alone is posited as a specific virtue, surpassing chastity in the way that magnificence surpasses generosity.

Article 4

Is virginity more excellent than marriage?

It seems that virginity is not more excellent than marriage (*non sit excellentior matrimonio*):

Objection 1: In *De Bono Coniugali* Augustine says, “Continence was equally meritorious in John, who had no nuptial experience, and Abraham, who generated children.” But more merit belongs to a greater virtue. Therefore, virginity is not a more important virtue than conjugal chastity.

Objection 2: Praise for a virtuous individual depends on his virtue. Therefore, if virginity were preferable to conjugal continence, then it seems to follow that every virgin is more praiseworthy than any married woman. But this is false. Therefore, virginity is not preferable to marriage.

Objection 3: According to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 1, the common good is more important than a private good. But marriage is ordered toward the common good; for in *De Bono Coniugali* Augustine says, “What food is to the health of a man, marriage is to the health of the human race.” By contrast, virginity is ordered toward a specific good, viz., avoiding “the tribulation of the flesh” that married people undergo, as is clear from the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 7:28. Therefore, virginity is not more important than conjugal continence.

But contrary to this: In *De Virginitate* Augustine says, “By both solid reasoning and the authority of Sacred Scripture we find that marriage is not sinful, but neither do we equate it with the good of virginal continence or even with the good of the continence of widowhood.”

I respond: As is clear from Jerome in *Contra Jovinianum*, the error in question belonged to Jovinianus, who held that virginity is not preferable to marriage. This error was mainly undermined (a) by the example of Christ, who chose a virgin mother and preserved virginity himself, and also (b) by the teaching of the Apostle, who in 1 Corinthians 7:25ff. recommended virginity as the better good, and also (c) by reason—first, because the divine good is more important than the human good, and, second, because the good of the soul is preferable to the good of the body, and, third, because the good of the contemplative life is preferable to the good of the active life.

Now virginity is ordered toward the good of the soul in accord with the contemplative life, which involves thinking about the things of God. By contrast, marriage is ordered toward the good of the body, i.e., the bodily multiplication of the human race, and it involves the active life, since, as is clear from the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 7:33-34, a man and a woman living in the married state have to be thinking about the things of the world.

Hence, virginity is without a doubt preferable to conjugal continence.

Reply to objection 1: Merit is measured not only by the genus of the act, but still more by the mind (*animus*) of the agent. Now Abraham had a mind that was disposed in such a way that he would have been prepared to preserve virginity if the time had been fitting. Because of this, the merit of conjugal continence in him is equal to the merit of virginal continence in John with respect to his *substantial reward*, but not with respect to his *accidental reward*. Hence, in *De Bono Coniugali* Augustine says, “John’s celibate state and Abraham’s married state fought for Christ as the times were allotted; but John had continence in deed also, whereas Abraham had it only in habit.”

Reply to objection 2: Even though virginity is better than conjugal continence, a married individual can nonetheless be better than a virgin, and this for two reasons:

First, *on the part of chastity itself*, viz., if the individual who is married has a mind that is more prepared to preserve virginity should this become necessary than does the individual who is actually a virgin. Hence, in *De Bono Coniugali* Augustine instructs the virgin to say, “I am not better than Abraham, but celibate chastity is better than nuptial chastity.” And later on he adds the reason, saying, “What I am doing now, they would have done better if it had then been fitting for them to do it, but what they have done, I would not do even if it were now fitting to do it.”

Second, *because the individual who is not a virgin may have some more excellent virtue*. Hence, in *De Virginitate* Augustine explains, “Even if the virgin is solicitous for the things of the Lord, how does she know that there is not any weakness, unknown to her, because of which she is not ready for martyrdom, while the wife whom she delighted in preferring herself to is already capable of drinking the chalice of our Lord’s passion?”

Reply to objection 3: The common good is more important than a private good if it is of the same genus, but it can be the case that a private good is better with respect to its own genus. And it is in this way that virginity dedicated to God is preferable to carnal fecundity. Hence, in *De Virginitate* Augustine says, “Fecundity of the flesh—even in the case of those women who in these times seek in marriage nothing other than children whom they might offer up to Christ—cannot be thought to compensate for lost virginity.”

Article 5

Is virginity the greatest of the virtues?

It seems that virginity is the greatest of virtues:

Objection 1: In *De Virginitate* Cyprian says, “We address ourselves now to the virgins. Their glory is the more sublime by as much as their love (*cura*) is greater. Each is a flower of the Church’s sowing, the splendor and ornament of spiritual grace, a more illustrious portion of Christ’s flock.”

Objection 2: A greater reward is owed to greater virtue. But the greatest reward is owed to virginity, viz., the “hundredfold fruit,” as is clear from a Gloss on Matthew 13:23. Therefore, virginity is the greatest of the virtues.

Objection 3: The more an individual is conformed to Christ through a given virtue, the greater that virtue is. But an individual is conformed most of all to Christ through virginity; for Apocalypse 14:3-4 says of virgins that “they follow the Lamb wherever He goes,” and that “they sing a new song that no one else is able to mouth.” Therefore, virginity is the greatest of the virtues.

But contrary to this: In *De Virginitate* Augustine says, “As far as I know, no one has dared to prefer virginity to the monastic life.” And in the same book he says, “Clear testimony is given by the authority of the Church, which brings to the attention of the faithful the place wherein martyrs and holy women who have departed this life are mentioned by name in the Sacrament of the Altar.” One is given to understand by this that martyrdom and, similarly, the state of the monastic life are preferred to virginity.

I respond: There are two ways in which something can be said to be the most excellent:

(a) In the first way something is said to be the most excellent *in some genus*. And in this sense virginity is the most excellent *in the genus of chastity*, because it surpasses both the chastity of widowhood and conjugal chastity. And since comeliness (*decor*) is attributed antonomastically to chastity, it follows as a consequence that the most excellent beauty (*pulchritudo*) is attributed to virginity. Hence, in *De Virginitate* Ambrose says, “Can anyone think of a beauty greater than a virgin’s, given that she is loved by her King, approved of by her Judge, dedicated to her Lord, consecrated to her God?”

(b) In the second way something is said to be the most excellent *absolutely speaking*. And in this sense virginity is *not the most excellent of the virtues*. For it is always the case that the end excels the means to the end, and that the more efficaciously something is ordered toward the end, the better it is. Now as has been explained (aa. 2-3), the end by which virginity is rendered praiseworthy is freeing up time for divine things. Hence, the theological virtues themselves, along with the virtue of religion, the acts of which are the very occupation with divine things, are preferable to virginity. Similarly, the martyrs, who brush aside their own lives in order to adhere to God, along with those living in monasteries, who brush aside their own will and all that they can possess in order to adhere to God, act more strongly for the

sake of adhering to God than do the virgins, who brush aside sexual pleasure in order to do this. And so virginity is not, absolutely speaking, the greatest of the virtues.

Reply to objection 1: It is in comparison to those who are widowed or married that the virgins are a more illustrious portion of the flock of Christ, and that their glory is more sublime,.

Reply to objection 2: The hundredfold fruit is attributed to virginity according to Jerome because of the excellence that it has over widowhood, to which the sixtyfold fruit is attributed, and over marriage, to which the thirtyfold fruit is attributed. On the other hand, as Augustine says in *De Quaestionibus Evangeliorum*, “The hundredfold fruit belongs to the martyrs, the sixtyfold fruit to the virgins, and the thirtyfold fruit to those who are married.” Hence, from this it follows only that virginity is greater than the other levels of chastity and not that virginity is the greatest of all the virtues absolutely speaking.

Reply to objection 3: As St. Augustine explains in *De Virginitate*, virgins “follow the Lamb wherever He goes” in the sense that they imitate Christ not only in His integrity of mind but also in His integrity of the flesh. And so they follow the Lamb *in more than one way*.

However, the virgins do not necessarily have to be *closer* [to the Lamb], since it is through the imitation of His mind that other virtues make one adhere *more closely* to God.

On the other hand, the new song that only the virgins sing is the joy they have about having preserved the integrity of the flesh.