

QUESTION 72

Vilification

Next we have to consider injuries that are inflicted by means of words outside of judicial proceedings (questions 72-76): first, vilification (*contumelia*) (question 72); second, detraction (*detractio*) (question 73); third, gossiping (*susurratio*) (question 74); fourth, derision (*derisio*) (question 75); and, fifth, cursing (*maledictio*) (question 76).

On the first topic there are four questions: (1) What is vilification? (2) Is every instance of vilification a mortal sin? (3) Should one resist those who vilify him (*utrum oporteat contumeliosos reprimere*)? (4) What is the source of vilification?

Article 1

Does vilification consist in words?

It seems that vilification does not consist in words (*contumelia non consistat in verbis*):

Objection 1: Since vilification (*contumelia*) involves injustice, it implies a certain harm inflicted on one's neighbor. But words seem to inflict no harm at all on one's neighbor, either in his possessions or in his person (*nec in rebus nec in persona*). Therefore, vilification does not consist in words.

Objection 2: Vilification seems to involve a sort of dishonoring. But someone can be dishonored or vituperated more by deeds than by words. Therefore, it seems that vilification consists in deeds rather than in words.

Objection 3: Dishonor that is effected by words is called reproaching (*convicium*) or reviling (*improperium*). But vilifying someone seems to differ from reproaching or reviling him. Therefore, vilification does not consist in words.

But contrary to this: Nothing is perceived by hearing except words. But vilification is perceived by hearing—this according to Jeremiah 20:10 (“I have heard their reproaches ... on every side”). Therefore, vilification consists in words.

I respond: Vilification involves dishonoring someone (*contumelia importat dehonorationem alicuius*). Now there are two ways in which someone can be dishonored:

(a) Since honor follows upon some excellence, the first way in which one dishonors another is to deprive him of the excellence because of which he had the honor. This way of dishonoring someone is accomplished by the sorts of sinful deeds that were explained above (qq. 64-66).

(b) An individual is dishonored in a second way when someone brings to his attention and to the attention of others something that is contrary to his honor. And this is what vilification properly involves. To be sure, this is accomplished by means of certain signs. But as Augustine points out in *De Doctrina Christiana* 2, “Compared with words, there are very few other signs, since among men words have attained the most important place in signifying whatever the mind conceives.”

And so vilification, properly speaking, consists in words. Hence, in *Etymologia* Isidore says that someone is called a vilifier (*contumeliosus*) “because he is quick-witted and ready to burst out with injurious words (*velox est et tumet verbis iniuriae*).”

However, since something is likewise signified by certain deeds that have the force of meaningful words in what they signify, vilification is said in an extended sense to consist in deeds as well as in words. Hence, a Gloss on Romans 1:30 (“... vilifiers, proud ...”) says that the vilifiers are those “who inflict reproaches and foul abuse by word and deed.”

Reply to objection 1: Words by their essence, i.e., insofar as they are certain audible sounds, inflict no harm on another—except perhaps by injuring the hearing, as when someone speaks in an excessively high voice. However, insofar as they are signs that bring something to the attention of others, words are capable of inflicting many harms. One of them is that a man is harmed by damage to his honor

or by damage to the respect (*reverentia*) that should be shown to him by others.

And so the vilification is greater if one berates someone for his defects in the presence of others. However, there can still be an instance of vilification even if one speaks to him alone, to the extent that the one who is speaking is acting in a way that conflicts with his having respect for the listener.

Reply to objection 2: One dishonors an individual with deeds insofar as those deeds either (a) *do* something that is contrary to that individual's honor or (b) *signify* something that is contrary to that individual's honor.

The first of these has to do with the other species of injustice discussed above (qq. 64-66) and not with vilification. By contrast, the second has to do with vilification insofar as the deeds have the force of words in what they signify.

Reply to objection 3: Reproaching (*convicium*) and reviling (*improperium*) consist in words, just as vilification does, since all three of them exhibit (*representatur*) a defect in an individual to the detriment of that individual's honor. Now there are three kinds of defects:

(a) *defects of sin*, which are presented through the words of vilification (*contumelia*).

(b) *defects of sin and punishment in general*, which are exhibited through reproaching (*convicium* or *convitium*), since 'defect' (*vitium*) is commonly said not only of defects of the soul, but also of defects of the body. Hence, if one says injuriously that someone is blind, this is reproaching and not vilifying, whereas if one says injuriously to someone else that he is a thief, this involves not only reproaching but also vilifying.

(c) By contrast, one at times exhibits an individual's *defects of lowliness or neediness* (*repraesentat alicui alicui defectum minorationis sive indigentiae*), which likewise detracts from the honor that follows upon some excellence. And this is effected by words of reviling (*per verbum improprii*), which occurs, properly speaking, when someone injuriously brings to mind the assistance that he had given that individual when the latter was suffering some need. Hence, Ecclesiasticus 20:15 says, "He will give a few things and then he will revile a lot."

However, all these words are such that one of them is sometimes used for another.

Article 2

Is vilifying or reproaching a mortal sin?

It seems that vilifying (*contumelia*), or reproaching (*convicium*), is not a mortal sin:

Objection 1: No mortal sin is the act of a virtue. But reproaching is the act of a virtue, viz., the virtue of *eutrapelia*, which, according to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 4, involves witty reproaching (*bene conviciari*). Therefore, reproaching, or vilifying, is not a mortal sin.

Objection 2: There is no mortal sin in perfect men. But as is clear from the Apostle, who in Galatians 3:1 said, "O stupid (*insensati*) Galatians," perfect men sometimes utter reproaches or vilifications. And in Luke 24:25 our Lord says, "O foolish (*stulti*), and slow of heart to believe." Therefore, reproaching, or vilifying, is not a mortal sin.

Objection 3: As was established above (*ST* 1-2, q. 88, aa. 4 and 6), even though something that is a venial sin by its genus can become a mortal sin, it is not the case that something that is a mortal sin by its genus can become a venial sin. Therefore, if reproaching or vilifying were a mortal sin by its genus, then it would follow that it is always a mortal sin. But this seems false, as is clear in the case of someone who engages in vilifying speech lightheartedly and without deliberation (*leviter et ex subreptione*), or out of slight anger (*ex levi ira*). Therefore, it is not the case that vilifying or reproaching is a mortal sin by its genus.

But contrary to this: Nothing except mortal sin merits the eternal punishment of hell. But

reproaching or vilifying merits the punishment of hell—this according to Matthew 5:22 (“Whoever says to his brother ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the fire of Gehenna”). Therefore, reproaching or vilifying is a mortal sin.

I respond: As was explained above (a.1), words are harmful to others not insofar as they are certain sounds, but insofar as they signify something; and this signification proceeds from an interior disposition (*ex interiori affectu procedit*). And so in the case of verbal sins, it seems that one especially needs to consider the sort of disposition with which someone produces his words.

Therefore, given that reproaching (*convicium*), or vilifying (*contumelia*), implies by its definition a certain type of dishonoring, if the speaker’s intention is that someone should withhold honor from another because of the words that the speaker produces, then this is properly and *per se* an instance of what is called reproaching or vilifying. And this is a mortal sin, no less than theft or robbery is, because a man loves his own honor no less than the things that he possesses.

On the other hand, if someone speaks to another words of reproach or vilification, and yet not with the intention of dishonoring him, but perhaps for the sake of correcting him or for some such reason, then what he says counts as a reproach or as an instance of vilification not *formally* and *per se*, but [only] *materially* and *per accidens*, viz., insofar as he says something that *could be* a reproach or an instance of vilification. Hence, sometimes this can be a venial sin, and sometimes it involves no sin at all (*quandoque absque omni peccato*).

Still, in these matters discretion is necessary, in order that a man might use words of the relevant sort with moderation. For his reproach could be so serious that, because of a lack of caution in his speech, he destroys the honor of the individual against whom he speaks. And in such a case a man could commit a mortal sin even if he had not intended to dishonor individual in question—in the same way that if someone, incautiously striking another in a game, seriously injured him, he would not be without fault.

Reply to objection 1: *Eutrapelia* involves saying something slightly reproachful, not in order to dishonor or hurt the one to whom it is spoken, but instead for the sake of pleasure and amusement (*causa delectationis et ioci*). This can occur without sin if the required circumstances are observed. However, as the Philosopher points out in the same place, if someone is such that, as long as he might make others laugh, he is not worried about hurting the individual against whom a joking reproach of this sort is made, then this is vicious.

Reply to objection 2: Just as, for the sake of discipline, it is licit to chastise someone or to make him lose his property, so, too, one can, for the sake of discipline, deliver a verbal reproach to someone whom he has an obligation to correct (*quem debet corrigere*). And it is in this way that our Lord called the disciples foolish and that the Apostle called the Galatians stupid.

Still, as Augustine puts it in *De Sermone Domini in Monte*, “Reproaches should be resorted to rarely and out of great necessity, and in these instances let us insist that it is the Lord who is being served and not ourselves.”

Reply to objection 3: Since the sin of reproaching or vilifying depends on the intention of the speaker, it is possible for there to be a venial sin if the reproach is slight, not dishonoring the man very much, and if it is spoken lightheartedly or out of slight anger, without the firm intention of dishonoring anyone—as, for instance, when one intends that the individual be slightly pained because of these words.

Article 3

Should one put up with being vilified?

It seems that one should not put up with being vilified (*non debeat contumelias sibi illatas sustinere*):

Objection 1: One who puts up with being vilified feeds the audacity of the vilifier. But this should not be done. Therefore, a man should not put up with being vilified, but should rather reply to the vilifier.

Objection 2: A man should love himself more than he loves another. But one should not put up with someone else's being reproached (*non debet sustinere quod alteri convicium inferatur*); hence, Proverbs 26:10 says, "Imposing silence on a fool mitigates his anger." Therefore, one should likewise not put up with being vilified himself.

Objection 3: One is not permitted to avenge himself—this according to Hebrews 10:30 ("Vengeance belongs to me, I will repay"). But one avenges himself by not resisting vilification—this according to Chrysostom ("If you wish to avenge yourself, be silent and you have given him a deadly wound"). Therefore, one ought not to put up with vilifying remarks by remaining silent; rather, one should reply.

But contrary to this: Psalm 37:13 says, "Those who were seeking evil for me said vain things." And afterwards (37:14) it adds, "But I, like a deaf man, did not hear them, and, like a dumb man, did not open my mouth."

I respond: Just as patience is necessary in those things that are *done* against us, so, too, patience is necessary in those things that are *said* against us. Now the precepts of patience in those things that are done against us have to do with the preparedness that the soul should have—in the sense in which Augustine, in *De Sermone Domini in Monte*, expounds our Lord's command, "If someone hits you on one cheek, turn to him the other cheek," viz., that a man should be *prepared to do this* if it is necessary, but he is not always *obligated to do it in actuality*. For our Lord Himself did not do it; rather, as John 10:23 reports, after He had received a blow, He asked, "Why do you strike me?"

And so we should likewise think the same way about words of vilification that are spoken against us. For we are obligated to have a mind prepared to put up with vilification if this is expedient. However, at times it is necessary for us to repel the vilification that is inflicted on us, and this for two reasons especially:

(a) *for the good of the one who inflicts the vilification*, so that, namely, his audacity might be curbed and he not try such a thing on anyone else (*et de cetero talia non attentet*)—this according to Proverbs 26:5 ("Respond to a fool immediately upon his display of foolishness, lest he seem wise to himself").

(b) *for the good of the many*, whose progress might be impeded by the vilification inflicted on us. Hence, in *Super Ezechiel*, homily 9, Gregory says, "Those whose lives are put forward as examples for emulation should, if they can, curb the words of their detractors, lest the individuals who might possibly have listened to their teaching do not listen to it and, remaining in their corrupt morals, disdain living a good life."

Reply to objection 1: Someone should curb the audacity of the reproachful vilifier *in a moderate way*, i.e., because of the duty imposed by charity and not because of a disordered desire for one's own private honor (*scilicet propter officium caritatis, non propter cupiditatem privati honoris*). Hence, Proverbs 26:4 says, "Do not respond to a fool immediately upon his display of foolishness, lest you become like him."

Reply to objection 2: When one curbs vilification directed against someone else, an excessive desire for his own private honor is not to be feared to such a degree as when he repels vilification directed against himself; instead, his action seems to arise from the affection of charity (*ex caritatis affectu*).

Reply to objection 3: If someone were to remain silent with the intention that, by remaining silent, he might provoke the vilifier to anger, then this would indeed involve avenging himself. However, if he remains silent while "willing to make room for anger" (Romans 12:19), then this is praiseworthy. Hence, Ecclesiasticus 8:4 says, "Do not argue with a man who is loud of mouth, and do not heap wood on his fire."

Article 4

Does vilification arise from anger?

It seems that vilification (*contumelia*) does not arise from anger (*ex ira*):

Objection 1: Proverbs 11:2 says, “Where there is pride (*superbia*), there is vilification.” But anger is a vice distinct from pride. Therefore, vilification does not arise from anger.

Objection 2: Proverbs 20:3 says, “All fools meddle with reproaches.” But as was established above (q. 46, a. 1), foolishness (*stultitia*) is a vice opposed to wisdom, whereas anger is opposed to mildness (*mansuetudo*). Therefore, vilification does not arise from anger.

Objection 3: No sin is diminished by its cause. But the sin of vilifying is diminished if the words are spoken out of anger. For one sins more gravely if he inflicts vilification out of hatred than if he does it out of anger. Therefore, vilification does not arise from anger.

But contrary to this: In *Moralia* 31 Gregory says that vilification arises from anger.

I respond: Even though one sin can arise from diverse sources, the sin is said to have its most fundamental source (*dicitur principalius habere originem*) in that from which it customarily proceeds, because of that source’s proximity to the sin’s end.

Now vilification has a close proximity to the end of anger, which is vengeance, since no sort of vengeance is closer at hand to an angry individual than to inflict vilification on the other. And so vilification arises especially from anger.

Reply to objection 1: Vilification is not ordered toward the end of pride, which is loftiness (*celsitudo*), and so vilification does not arise directly from pride. Still, pride disposes one toward vilification insofar as those who think of themselves as superior are more ready to disdain others and to inflict injuries on them. They are also more easily angered, judging as intolerable whatever is done contrary to their will.

Reply to objection 2: According to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 7, anger does not perfectly listen to reason, and so an angry individual suffers from a defect in reason, on which score anger shares something in common with foolishness. And this is why vilification arises from foolishness in accord with the affinity it has with anger.

Reply to objection 3: According to the Philosopher in *Rhetoric* 2, an angry individual intends a public offense—something that a hateful individual does not care about. And so vilification, which involves a manifest injury, belongs more to anger than to hatred.