

QUESTION 75

Derision

Next we have to consider derision (*derisio*). And on this topic there are two questions: (1) Is derision a special sin distinct from the other sins through which harm is inflicted on one's neighbor by words? (2) Is derision a mortal sin?

Article 1

Is derision a special sin distinct from the other sins just discussed?

It seems that derision (*derisio*) is not a special sin distinct from the other sins just discussed:

Objection 1: Laughing someone to scorn (*subsannatio*) seems to be the same thing as derision. But laughing someone to scorn seems to belong to vilification (*contumelia*). Therefore, derision does not seem to be distinct from vilification.

Objection 2: One mocks (*irridetur*) only something shameful by which a man is embarrassed. But sins of this sort belong to vilification (*contumelia*) if they are said of someone openly, whereas they belong to detraction (*detractio*) or gossiping (*susurratio*) if they are said of someone furtively. Therefore, derision is not a vice distinct from the sins just discussed.

Objection 3: Sins of the sort in question are distinguished by the harms that are inflicted on one's neighbor. But no harm other than harm with respect to his honor or his reputation or a loss of friendship is inflicted on one's neighbor by derision. Therefore, derision is not a sin distinct from the sins just discussed.

But contrary to this: Mocking is done for fun (*irrisio fit ludo*); hence, it is called 'making fun of' (*illusio*). But none of the sins just discussed is done for fun; rather, they are done in all seriousness (*serio*). Therefore, derision differs from all the sins just discussed.

I respond: As was explained above (q. 72, a. 2), sins involving words are judged mainly according to the intention of the speaker. And so sins of this sort are distinguished by the different things the speaker intends against another individual.

Now just as someone who *vilifies* intends to deflate the honor of the one being vilified, and just as someone who *detracts* intends to diminish the good reputation of the one being detracted, and just as someone who *gossips* intends to destroy a friendship, so, too, someone who *mocks* intends that the one being mocked should be embarrassed. And since this end is distinct from the others, it follows that the sin of derision is likewise distinct from the sins just discussed.

Reply to objection 1: Mocking (*irrisio*) and derision (*derisio*) agree in their end but differ in their mode, since, as a Gloss on Psalm 2:4 ("He who lives in heaven will mock them"), explains, derision is done with the mouth, i.e., by words and by jeers, whereas laughing someone to scorn (*subsannatio*) is done with a wrinkled nose. Still, this sort of difference does not diversify the species.

However, both of them differ from vilification, in the way that embarrassment differs from being dishonored, since, as Damascene says, embarrassment is "the fear of being dishonored."

Reply to objection 2: For a virtuous act one merits respect and a good reputation in the eyes of others, and the glory of a good conscience in his own eyes—this according to 2 Corinthians 1:12 ("Our glory is this: the testimony of our conscience ...").

Hence, conversely, by a shameful, i.e., vicious, act a man's honor and reputation are destroyed in the eyes of others, and it is in service of this goal that the vilifier and the detractor speak out about another individual. But in his own eyes he loses, by the shameful things that are spoken about, the glory of conscience through a certain confusion and embarrassment, and this is why one who derides speaks of shameful things. And so it is clear that derision shares in the same subject matter as the vices already discussed, but differs in its end or goal.

Reply to objection 3: The security of conscience and its peacefulness (*quies*) are a great good—this according to Proverbs 15:15 (“A secure mind is like a continual feast”). And so one who disquiets an individual’s conscience by confounding him inflicts a special sort of harm on him. Hence, derision is a special sin.

Article 2

Is derision a mortal sin?

It seems that derision cannot be a mortal sin:

Objection 1: Every mortal sin is contrary to charity. But derision does not seem to be contrary to charity, since derision is sometimes acted out for fun among friends and so is also called ‘kidding’ (*delusio*). Therefore, derision cannot be a mortal sin.

Objection 2: The sort of derision that is the greatest is that which is done to insult God. But not every instance of derision that verges on insulting God is a mortal sin. Otherwise, anyone who fell back into a venial sin of which he had repented would commit a mortal sin; for Isidore says, “One who still does what he is repenting of is a mocker and not a penitent.” Similarly, it would follow that every instance of pretending (*simulatio*) is a mortal sin, since, as Gregory explains in *Moralia*, ‘ostrich’ (*struthio*) signifies the pretender who is mocking the horse (*equum*), i.e., the just man, and its rider (*ascensor*), i.e., God.

Objection 3: Vilification and detraction seem to be more serious sins than derision, since it is more significant to do something in all seriousness than to do it in jest. But not every instance of detraction or vilification is a mortal sin. Therefore, *a fortiori*, not every instance of derision is a mortal sin.

But contrary to this: Proverbs 3:34 says, “He scoffs at the scoffers (*ipse deridet illusores*).” But as is clear from what is said in Psalm 2:4 (“He who lives in heaven will mock them”), God’s scoffing is equivalent to punishing someone eternally for mortal sin. Therefore, derision is a mortal sin.

I respond: Mocking (*irrisio*) is done only with respect to someone’s bad points or defects. Now if a bad point is significant (*magnum*), then it is taken seriously and not in jest. Hence, if one turns to kidding (*lusum*) or laughter (*risum*)—from which the names ‘mock’ (*irrisio*) and ‘make fun of’ (*illusio*) are taken)—this is because the defect in question is being taken as something insignificant (*parvum*).

Now there are two ways in which a bad point can be taken to be insignificant, (a) in its own right (*secundum se*) or (b) by reason of the person (*ratione personae*):

(a) When someone mocks or makes fun of another person’s bad point or defect (*malum vel defectum in ludum vel risum ponit*) that is insignificant *in its own right*, then this by its genus is a venial and slight sin.

(b) But when a bad point is taken to be insignificant *by reason of the person*—in the way that we normally think of the defects of children and of those who are mentally slow (*sicut defectus puerorum et stultorum*)—then to mock or make fun of someone is to belittle him altogether and to think him so inferior that his bad points are not worth caring about, but should instead be held up to ridicule. And in such a case derision is a mortal sin. Indeed, it is worse than vilification, which is done similarly in the open, since vilification seems to take the other individual’s bad points seriously, whereas the mocker makes fun of them, and so the contempt and the dishonoring seem to be greater.

Accordingly, to mock someone is a grave sin, and it is more grave to the extent that more respect is due to the person who is being mocked. This is why it is most grievous to mock God and the things of God—this according to Isaiah 37:23: “Whom have you reproached? And whom have you blasphemed? And against whom have you raised your voice?” And later it adds: “Against the Holy One of Israel.”

Next in line is mocking one's parents. Hence, Proverbs 30:17 says, "Let the eye that mocks his father and despises his mother's giving birth to him be gouged out by the ravens of the rapids and eaten by the children of the eagle."

Next in gravity is deriding the just, since honor is the reward of virtue. And against derision of this sort Job 12:4 says, "The simplicity of the just man is laughed to scorn." Indeed, this kind of derision is especially harmful, since men are hindered by it from doing good—this according to Gregory ("... who, when they see good things arising in the acts of others, immediately pluck them out with the hand of a destructive reproach").

Reply to objection 1: Fun (*ludus*) does not imply anything contrary to charity with respect to an individual with whom one is having fun (*cum quo luditur*), and yet, as has been explained, it can imply something contrary to charity with respect to an individual whom one is making fun of out of contempt (*de quo luditur propter contemptum*).

Reply to objection 2: An individual who falls back into a sin of which he has repented, and an individual who is a pretender, are mocking God not expressly, but, as it were, interpretively, viz., insofar as they behave in the manner of one who is deriding. Nor is it the case that by committing a venial sin one is falling back or pretending absolutely speaking; rather, he is doing it dispositively and incompletely (*dispositive et imperfecte*).

Reply to objection 3: By its nature derision is something less serious than detraction or vilification, since it implies playfulness and not contempt. However, as has been explained, sometimes it contains more contempt than even vilification does. And in such a case it is a grave sin.