

QUESTION 87

The Remission of Venial Sins

Next we have to consider the remission of venial sins. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Can venial sins be forgiven (*dimitti*) without penance? (2) Can they be forgiven without an infusion of grace? (3) Are venial sins forgiven through an individual's being sprinkled with holy water, and through beating his breast, and through the Lord's Prayer, and through other things of this sort? (4) Can a venial sin be forgiven without a mortal sin being forgiven?

Article 1

Can a venial sin be remitted without penance?

It seems that a venial sin can be remitted without penance (*veniale peccatum possit remitti sine poenitentia*):

Objection 1: As was explained above (q. 84, a. 10, ad 4), the notion of genuine penance involves not only a man's sorrowing over a past sin, but also his intending to avoid it in the future. But venial sins are wiped away without such an intention, since a man is certain that he is unable to live this present life without venial sins. Therefore, venial sins can be remitted without penance.

Objection 2: Penance does not occur without an act of displeasure with respect to one's sins. But venial sins can be forgiven without one's being displeased with them, as is clear in the case of someone who is killed in his sleep for the sake of Christ; for he would immediately ascend [to heaven] (*statim evolare*)—which is impossible if his venial sins remain. Therefore, venial sins can be remitted without penance.

Objection 3: As was explained in the Second Part (*ST* 2-2, q. 54, a. 3), venial sins are opposed to the fervor of charity. But one of two opposites is removed by the other. Therefore, the remission of venial sins is effected through the fervor of charity, which can exist without an act of being displeased with venial sin.

But contrary to this: In *De Poenitentia* Augustine says, "There is a type of penance which is done every day in the Church for venial sins." But this would be superfluous if venial sins could be forgiven without penance.

I respond: As has been explained (q. 86, a. 1), the remission of sin is effected by our being conjoined with God, from whom sin in a some way separates us. This separation is effected in a *complete way* (*perfecte*) by mortal sin, whereas it is effected in an *incomplete way* (*imperfecte*) by venial sin; for through a mortal sin a man's mind is turned away from God altogether, inasmuch as a mortal sin acts against charity, whereas through a venial sin a man's affections are held back from being moved promptly toward God. And so both sorts of sin are indeed remitted through penance, because through both sorts of sin a man's will is disordered by being turned in an immoderate way toward a created good; for just as a mortal sin cannot be remitted as long as the will adheres to that sin, so too it is with a venial sin, since as long as the cause remains, the effect remains.

However, a more perfect penance is required for the remission of a mortal sin, so that, more specifically, the man is required, insofar as it lies in his power, to actively detest the mortal sin that he has committed in such a way that he takes care to remember each individual mortal sin in order that each one might be detested as an individual sin.

On the other hand, this is not required for the remission of venial sins. However, the *habitual*

displeasure that is had through the habit of charity or through the habit of the virtue of penance is not suitable here, since in that case charity would not be compatible with venial sin—something that is clearly false. Hence, it follows that what is required is a sort of *virtual* displeasure; for instance, when an individual is being moved by his affections toward God and divine things in such a way that something happens with him that draws him back from this movement, this displeases him and he is sad to have done it, even if he is not actually thinking about it. By contrast, this is not sufficient for the remission of a mortal sin, except with respect to those mortal sins that, after a careful examination, one has forgotten about.

Reply to objection 1: A man who is in the state of grace (*in gratia constitutus*) is able to avoid each mortal sin and all mortal sins. And, as is clear from the things said in the Second Part (*ST* 1-2, q. 74, a. 3, ad 2 and q. 109), he is also able to avoid *each* venial sin, but *not all* venial sins. And so penance with respect to *mortal* sins requires that a man intend to abstain from *all* mortal sins and from *each particular* mortal sin. By contrast, what is required for penance with respect to venial sins is that he intend to abstain from *each* venial sin, but not that he intend to abstain from *all* venial sins, since the weakness that belongs to this life does not allow this. Still, he has to have the intention of preparing himself to reduce his venial sins in number; otherwise, he would be in danger of ending in failure, since he would be giving up his desire to make progress, i.e., to remove impediments to his spiritual progress, viz., his venial sins.

Reply to objection 2: As was explained above (q. 66, a. 11), suffering for the sake of Christ has the force of baptism. And so it purges every sin, both mortal and venial, unless it finds the will adhering to sin.

Reply to objection 3: As was just explained, the fervor of charity *virtually* includes being displeased with venial sin.

Article 2

Is an infusion of grace required for the remission of venial sins?

It seems that an infusion of grace is required for the remission of venial sins (*ad remissionem venialium peccatorum requiratur gratiae infusio*):

Objection 1: An effect does not exist without a proper cause. But the proper cause of the remission of sins is grace; for it is not by his own merits that a man's own sins are remitted; hence, Ephesians 2:4-5 says, "God, who is rich in mercy, because of the very great love with which He loved us even when we were dead by reason of our sins, brought us to life together with Christ, by whose grace you have been saved." Therefore, venial sins are not remitted without an infusion of grace.

Objection 2: Venial sins are not remitted without penance. But grace is infused in penance, just as it is in the other sacraments of the New Law. Therefore, venial sins are not remitted without an infusion of grace.

Objection 3: Venial sin leaves a certain stain on the soul. But this stain is removed only through grace, which is the spiritual comeliness of the soul. Therefore, it seems that venial sins are not remitted without an infusion of grace.

But contrary to this: As was established in the Second Part (*ST* 2-2, q. 24, a. 10), the advent of venial sin does not destroy grace or even diminish it. Therefore, by parity of reasoning, in order for venial sin to be remitted, an infusion of new grace is not required.

I respond: Each thing is removed by its opposite. Now as was established in the Second Part (*ST* 2-2, q. 24, a. 10), venial sin is not contrary to habitual grace or to charity, but instead it slows down

their act insofar as the man adheres too much to some created good, even though that good is not opposed to God. And so it is not the case that any [new] habitual grace is required in order for the sin to be taken away; instead, what is sufficient for the remission of the sin is some movement of grace or of charity.

However, since in the case of those who have the use of free choice—and in whom alone venial sins can exist—there cannot be an infusion of grace without an active movement of free choice with respect to both God and sin, it follows that whenever grace is indeed infused *de novo*, venial sins are remitted.

Reply to objection 1: The remission of venial sins is indeed an effect of grace, viz., through an act that grace elicits *de novo*, but not through anything *habitual* infused *de novo* into the soul.

Reply to objection 2: As was explained above (a. 1), venial sin is never remitted without an act of the *virtue* of penance, either explicit or implicit. However, venial sin can be remitted without the *sacrament* of penance, which, as was explained above (q. 84, a. 1, ad 2 and a. 3; and q. 86, a. 2), is brought to completion formally in the absolution by the priest. And so it does not follow that what is required for the remission of venial sins is an infusion of grace, which, even though it occurs in every sacrament, nonetheless does not occur in every act of virtue.

Reply to objection 3: Just as there are two ways in which a stain can come to exist in a body, viz., (a) through the *privation* of what is required for comeliness, e.g., the privation of the right color or of the right proportion among the body's members, and (b) through the *introduction* of something that impedes comeliness, e.g., the introduction of mud or of dust, so, too, a stain is imparted to the soul, in one way, through the *privation* of the comeliness of grace by a mortal sin, and, in a second way, through a *disordered inclination* of the affections toward something temporal; and the latter is effected by a venial sin. And so what is required to remove the stain of a mortal sin is an infusion of grace, whereas what is required to remove the stain of a venial sin is an act, proceeding from grace, through which the disordered adherence to a temporal entity is removed.

Article 3

Are venial sins remitted through a sprinkling with holy water and through an episcopal blessing and through other things of this sort?

It seems that venial sins are not remitted through a sprinkling with holy water and through an episcopal blessing and through other things of this sort (*peccata venialia non remittantur per aspersionem aquae benedictae, et episcopalem benedictionem, et alia huiusmodi*):

Objection 1: As has been explained (a. 1), venial sins are not remitted without penance. But penance is in its own right (*per se*) sufficient for the remission of venial sins. Therefore, the things in question contribute nothing to the remission of sins of this sort.

Objection 2: Each of the things in question has the* same* relation to *one* venial sin and to *all* venial sins. Therefore, if one of an individual's venial sins were remitted through any of them, it would follow by parity of reasoning that all his venial sins are remitted. And so through a single beating of his breast, or through a single sprinkling with holy water, a man would be rendered free of all his venial sins. But this seems absurd.

Objection 3: Venial sins involve a debt of some punishment, at least a temporal punishment; for 1 Corinthians 3:12,15 says of an individual who builds up "wood, hay, and stubble" that "he will be saved, but as through fire." By contrast, things of the sort in question here, through which a venial sin is said to

be remitted, involve in their own right either no punishment at all or a minimal punishment. Therefore, they are not sufficient for the full remission of an individual's venial sins.

But contrary to this: In *De Poenitentia* Augustine says that for our slight sins (*pro levis peccatis*) "we beat our breasts and say, 'Forgive us our trespasses'." And so it seems that the beating of the breast and the Lord's prayer are causes of the remission of sin. And the same line of reasoning seems to apply to the other things as well.

I respond: As has been explained (a. 2), an infusion of new grace is not required for the remission of a venial sin; instead, what suffices is an act, proceeding from grace, by which a man detests the sin either explicitly or at least implicitly, as when he is moved toward God with fervor.

And so there are three ways in which certain things cause the remission of venial sins:

In one way, insofar as *grace is infused* into individuals, since, as was explained above (a. 2), venial sins are removed by an infusion of grace. It is in this way that venial sins are remitted through the Eucharist and through extreme unction and, in general, through all the sacraments of the New Law.

Second, insofar as *the sins exist along with a movement of detesting them*. And it is in this way that a general confession (*confessio generalis*), a beating of the breast, and the Lord's prayer work toward the remission of venial sins. For instance, in the Lord's prayer we ask, "Forgive us our trespasses."

Third, insofar as *the sins exist along with a movement of reverence toward God and divine things*. And it is in this way that an episcopal blessing, a sprinkling with holy water, any sort of sacramental anointing, prayer in a church that has been dedicated, along with other things of this sort, operate to remit [venial] sins.

Reply to objection 1: All the things in question cause the remission of venial sins insofar as they incline the soul toward an act of penance, i.e., an act of detesting sin either implicitly or explicitly.

Reply to objection 2: All the things in question, taken in their own right (*quantum est de se*), operate toward the remission of *all* venial sins. However, the remission can be impeded with respect to certain venial sins to which the mind is actively adhering—in the same way that the effect of baptism is sometimes likewise impeded by deception (cf. q. 69, aa. 9-10).

Reply to objection 3: Through the things mentioned above venial sins are, to be sure, taken away with respect to their *guilt*, both by reason of a certain satisfaction* and also by the virtue of charity, the movement of which is stimulated by those things. However, it is not the case that the whole *debt of punishment* is always taken away through each of those things, since if that were so, then an individual who was entirely free of mortal sin would immediately ascend [to heaven] upon being sprinkled with holy water. Instead, the debt of punishment is remitted through the things in question because of a movement of fervor toward God that is stimulated by those things—sometimes more stimulated and sometimes less.

Article 4

Can a venial sin be remitted without a mortal sin being remitted?

It seems that a venial sin can be remitted without mortal sin being remitted (*veniale peccatum possit remitti sine mortali*):

Objection 1: A certain Gloss on John 8:7 ("Let him who is without sin among you be the first one to throw a stone") says, "They were all in mortal sin, since their venial sins were being forgiven them through their ceremonies." Therefore, venial sin can be remitted without mortal sin.

Objection 2: An infusion of grace is not required for the remission of venial sin. But an infusion of grace is required for mortal sin. Therefore, a venial sin can be remitted without a mortal sin being remitted.

Objection 3: A venial sin is more distant from a mortal sin than from another venial sin. But as was explained above (a. 3, ad 2), one venial sin can be remitted without another venial sin being remitted. Therefore, a venial sin can be remitted without a mortal sin being remitted.

But contrary to this: Matthew 5:26 says, “You will not come out from there”—viz., from prison, into which the man is cast for mortal sin—“until you repay the last penny,” by which venial sin is signified. Therefore, venial sin cannot be remitted without mortal sin.

I respond: As was explained above (q. 86, a. 3), the remission of any sin whatsoever is never brought about except through the power of grace; for as the Apostle explains in Romans 4:2-8, it is because of God’s grace that “He does not impute sin” to an individual—and a Gloss on that passage explains that it has to do with venial sin. But an individual who is in [a state of] mortal sin lacks God’s grace. Hence, no venial sin is forgiven him.

Reply to objection 1: What are being called ‘venial sins’ [in this Gloss] are the irregularities or forms of uncleanness that they had contracted according to the Law.

Reply to objection 2: Even though a *new infusion* of habitual grace is not required for the remission of a venial sin, an act *proceeding from grace* is nonetheless required. But such an act cannot exist in an individual who has a mortal sin (*in eo qui subiacet peccato mortali*).

Reply to objection 3: A venial sin does not exclude every act of grace through which all venial sins can be remitted. By contrast, a mortal sin totally excludes the habit of grace, without which no mortal or venial sin is remitted. And so the two lines of reasoning are not similar.