

SUPPLEMENT TO THE THIRD PART, QUESTION 3

Of the Degree of Contrition (In Three Articles)

We must now consider the degree of contrition: under which head there are three points of inquiry:

- (1) Whether contrition is the greatest possible sorrow in the world?
- (2) Whether the sorrow of contrition can be too great?
- (3) Whether sorrow for one sin ought to be greater than for another?

Whether contrition is the greatest possible sorrow in the world?

Suppl. q. 3 a. 1

Objection 1. It would seem that contrition is not the greatest possible sorrow in the world. For sorrow is the sensation of hurt. But some hurts are more keenly felt than the hurt of sin, e.g. the hurt of a wound. Therefore contrition is not the greatest sorrow.

Objection 2. Further, we judge of a cause according to its effect. Now the effect of sorrow is tears. Since therefore sometimes a contrite person does not shed outward tears for his sins, whereas he weeps for the death of a friend, or for a blow, or the like, it seems that contrition is not the greatest sorrow.

Objection 3. Further, the more a thing is mingled with its contrary, the less its intensity. But the sorrow of contrition has a considerable admixture of joy, because the contrite man rejoices in his delivery, in the hope of pardon, and in many like things. Therefore his sorrow is very slight.

Objection 4. Further, the sorrow of contrition is a kind of displeasure. But there are many things more displeasing to the contrite than their past sins; for they would not prefer to suffer the pains of hell rather than to sin. nor to have suffered, nor yet to suffer all manner of temporal punishment; else few would be found contrite. Therefore the sorrow of contrition is not the greatest.

On the contrary, According to Augustine (De Civ. Dei xiv, 7, 9), "all sorrow is based on love." Now the love of charity, on which the sorrow of contrition is based, is the greatest love. Therefore the sorrow of contrition is the greatest sorrow.

Further, sorrow is for evil. Therefore the greater the evil, the greater the sorrow. But the fault is a greater evil than its punishment. Therefore contrition which is sorrow for fault, surpasses all other sorrow.

I answer that, As stated above (q. 1, a. 2, ad 1), there is a twofold sorrow in contrition: one is in the will, and is the very essence of contrition, being nothing else than displeasure at past sin, and this sorrow, in contrition, surpasses all other sorrows. For the more pleasing a thing is, the more displeasing is its contrary. Now the last end is above all things pleasing: wherefore sin, which turns us away from the last end, should be, above all things, displeasing. The other sorrow is in the sensitive part, and is caused by the former sorrow either from natural necessity, in so far as the lower powers follow the movements of the higher, or from choice,

in so far as a penitent excites in himself this sorrow for his sins. In neither of these ways is such sorrow, of necessity, the greatest, because the lower powers are more deeply moved by their own objects than through redundancy from the higher powers. Wherefore the nearer the operation of the higher powers approaches to the objects of the lower powers, the more do the latter follow the movement of the former. Consequently there is greater pain in the sensitive part, on account of a sensible hurt, than that which redounds into the sensitive part from the reason; and likewise, that which redounds from the reason when it deliberates on corporeal things, is greater than that which redounds from the reason in considering spiritual things. Therefore the sorrow which results in the sensitive part from the reason's displeasure at sin, is not greater than the other sorrows of which that same part is the subject: and likewise, neither is the sorrow which is assumed voluntarily greater than other sorrows—both because the lower appetite does not obey the higher appetite infallibly, as though in the lower appetite there should arise a passion of such intensity and of such a kind as the higher appetite might ordain—and because the passions are employed by the reason, in acts of virtue, according to a certain measure, which the sorrow that is without virtue sometimes does not observe, but exceeds.

Reply to Objection 1. Just as sensible sorrow is on account of the sensation of hurt, so interior sorrow is on account of the thought of something hurtful. Therefore, although the hurt of sin is not perceived by the external sense, yet it is perceived to be the most grievous hurt by the interior sense or reason.

Reply to Objection 2. Affections of the body are the immediate result of the sensitive passions and, through them, of the emotions of the higher appetite. Hence it is that bodily tears flow more quickly from sensible sorrow, or even from a thing that hurts the senses, than from the spiritual sorrow of contrition.

Reply to Objection 3. The joy which a penitent has for his sorrow does not lessen his displeasure (for it is not contrary to it), but increases it, according as every operation is increased by the delight which it causes, as stated in Ethic. x, 5. Thus he who delights in learning a science, learns the better, and, in like manner, he who rejoices in his displeasure, is the more intensely dis-

pleased. But it may well happen that this joy tempers the sorrow that results from the reason in the sensitive part.

Reply to Objection 4. The degree of displeasure at a thing should be proportionate to the degree of its malice. Now the malice of mortal sin is measured from Him against Whom it is committed, inasmuch as it is offensive to Him; and from him who sins, inasmuch as it is hurtful to him. And, since man should love God more than himself, therefore he should hate sin, as an offense against God, more than as being hurtful to himself. Now it is hurtful to him chiefly because it separates him from God; and in this respect the separation from God which is a punishment, should be more displeasing than the sin itself, as causing this hurt (since what is hated on account of something else, is less hated), but less than the sin, as an offense against God. Again, among all the punishments of malice a certain order is observed according to the degree of the hurt. Consequently, since this is the greatest hurt, inasmuch as it consists in privation of the greatest good, the greatest of all punishments will be separation from God.

Again, with regard to this displeasure, it is necessary to observe that there is also an accidental degree of malice, in respect of the present and the past; since what is past, is no more, whence it has less of the character of malice or goodness. Hence it is that a man shrinks from suffering an evil at the present, or at some future time, more than he shudders at the past evil: wherefore also, no passion of the soul corresponds directly to the past, as sorrow corresponds to present evil, and fear to future evil. Consequently, of two past evils, the mind

shrinks the more from that one which still produces a greater effect at the present time, or which, it fears, will produce a greater effect in the future, although in the past it was the lesser evil. And, since the effect of the past sin is sometimes not so keenly felt as the effect of the past punishment, both because sin is more perfectly remedied than punishment, and because bodily defect is more manifest than spiritual defect, therefore even a man, who is well disposed, sometimes feels a greater abhorrence of his past punishment than of his past sin, although he would be ready to suffer the same punishment over again rather than commit the same sin.

We must also observe, in comparing sin with punishment, that some punishments are inseparable from offense of God, e.g. separation from God; and some also are everlasting, e.g. the punishment of hell. Therefore the punishment to which is connected offense of God is to be shunned in the same way as sin; whereas that which is everlasting is simply to be shunned more than sin. If, however, we separate from these punishments the notion of offense, and consider only the notion of punishment, they have the character of malice, less than sin has as an offense against God: and for this reason should cause less displeasure.

We must, however, take note that, although the contrite should be thus disposed, yet he should not be questioned about his feelings, because man cannot easily measure them. Sometimes that which displeases least seems to displease most, through being more closely connected with some sensible hurt, which is more known to us.

Whether the sorrow of contrition can be too great?

Suppl. q. 3 a. 2

Objection 1. It would seem that the sorrow of contrition cannot be too great. For no sorrow can be more immoderate than that which destroys its own subject. But the sorrow of contrition, if it be so great as to cause death or corruption of the body, is praiseworthy. For Anselm says (Orat. lii): "Would that such were the exuberance of my inmost soul, as to dry up the marrow of my body"; and Augustine* confesses that "he deserves to blind his eyes with tears." Therefore the sorrow of contrition cannot be too great.

Objection 2. Further, the sorrow of contrition results from the love of charity. But the love of charity cannot be too great. Neither, therefore, can the sorrow of contrition be too great.

Objection 3. On the contrary, Every moral virtue is destroyed by excess and deficiency. But contrition is an act of a moral virtue, viz. penance, since it is a part of justice. Therefore sorrow for sins can be too great.

I answer that, Contrition, as regards the sorrow in the reason, i.e. the displeasure, whereby the sin is displeasing through being an offense against God, cannot

be too great; even as neither can the love of charity be too great, for when this is increased the aforesaid displeasure is increased also. But, as regards the sensible sorrow, contrition may be too great, even as outward affliction of the body may be too great. In all these things the rule should be the safeguarding of the subject, and of that general well-being which suffices for the fulfillment of one's duties; hence it is written (Rom. 12:1): "Let your sacrifice be reasonable†."

Reply to Objection 1. Anselm desired the marrow of his body to be dried up by the exuberance of his devotion, not as regards the natural humor, but as to his bodily desires and concupiscences. And, although Augustine acknowledged that he deserved to lose the use of his bodily eyes on account of his sins, because every sinner deserves not only eternal, but also temporal death, yet he did not wish his eyes to be blinded.

Reply to Objection 2. This objection considers the sorrow which is in the reason: while the Third considers the sorrow of the sensitive part.

* De Contritione Cordis, work of an unknown author † Vulg.: 'Present your bodies... a reasonable sacrifice'

Objection 1. It would seem that sorrow for one sin need not be greater than for another. For Jerome (Ep. cviii) commends Paula for that “she deplored her slightest sins as much as great ones.” Therefore one need not be more sorry for one sin than for another.

Objection 2. Further, the movement of contrition is instantaneous. Now one instantaneous movement cannot be at the same time more intense and more remiss. Therefore contrition for one sin need not be greater than for another.

Objection 3. Further, contrition is for sin chiefly as turning us away from God. But all mortal sins agree in turning us away from God, since they all deprive us of grace whereby the soul is united to God. Therefore we should have equal contrition for all mortal sins.

On the contrary, It is written (Dt. 25:2): “According to the measure of the sin, shall the measure also of the stripes be.” Now, in contrition, the stripes are measured according to the sins, because to contrition is united the purpose of making satisfaction. Therefore contrition should be for one sin more than for another.

Further, man should be contrite for that which he ought to have avoided. But he ought to avoid one sin more than another, if that sin is more grievous, and it be necessary to do one or the other. Therefore, in like manner, he ought to be more sorry for one, viz. the more grievous, than for the other.

I answer that, We may speak of contrition in two ways: first, in so far as it corresponds to each single sin, and thus, as regards the sorrow in the higher appetite, a man ought to be more sorry for a more grievous sin, because there is more reason for sorrow, viz. the offense against God, in such a sin than in another, since the more inordinate the act is, the more it offends God. In like manner, since the greater sin deserves a greater punishment, the sorrow also of the sensitive part, in so far as it is voluntarily undergone for sin, as the punishment thereof, ought to be greater where the sin is greater. But in so far as the emotions of the lower appetite result from the impression of the higher appetite,

the degree of sorrow depends on the disposition of the lower faculty to the reception of impressions from the higher faculty, and not on the greatness of the sin.

Secondly, contrition may be taken in so far as it is directed to all one’s sins together, as in the act of justification. Such contrition arises either from the consideration of each single sin, and thus although it is but one act, yet the distinction of the sins remains virtually therein; or, at least, it includes the purpose of thinking of each sin; and in this way too it is habitually more for one than for another.

Reply to Objection 1. Paula is commended, not for deploring all her sins equally, but because she grieved for her slight sins as much as though they were grave sins, in comparison with other persons who grieve for their sins: but for graver sins she would have grieved much more.

Reply to Objection 2. In that instantaneous movement of contrition, although it is not possible to find an actually distinct intensity in respect of each individual sin, yet it is found in the way explained above; and also in another way, in so far as, in this general contrition, each individual sin is related to that particular motive of sorrow which occurs to the contrite person, viz. the offense against God. For he who loves a whole, loves its parts potentially although not actually, and accordingly he loves some parts more and some less, in proportion to their relation to the whole; thus he who loves a community, virtually loves each one more or less according to their respective relations to the common good. In like manner he who is sorry for having offended God, implicitly grieves for his different sins in different ways, according as by them he offended God more or less.

Reply to Objection 3. Although each mortal sin turns us away from God and deprives us of His grace, yet some remove us further away than others, inasmuch as through their inordinateness they become more out of harmony with the order of the Divine goodness, than others do.