

Objection 1. It would seem that not all perjury is a mortal sin. It is laid down (Extra, De Jurejur, cap. Verum): “Referring to the question whether an oath is binding on those who have taken one in order to safeguard their life and possessions, we have no other mind than that which our predecessors the Roman Pontiffs are known to have had, and who absolved such persons from the obligations of their oath. Henceforth, that discretion may be observed, and in order to avoid occasions of perjury, let them not be told expressly not to keep their oath: but if they should not keep it, they are not for this reason to be punished as for a mortal sin.” Therefore not all perjury is a mortal sin.

obj. 2. Further, as Chrysostom* says, “it is a greater thing to swear by God than by the Gospels.” Now it is not always a mortal sin to swear by God to something false; for instance, if we were to employ such an oath in fun or by a slip of the tongue in the course of an ordinary conversation. Therefore neither is it always a mortal sin to break an oath that has been taken solemnly on the Gospels.

Objection 3. Further, according to the Law a man incurs infamy through committing perjury (VI, qu. i, cap. Infames). Now it would seem that infamy is not incurred through any kind of perjury, as it is prescribed in the case of a declaratory oath violated by perjury†. Therefore, seemingly, not all perjury is a mortal sin.

On the contrary, Every sin that is contrary to a divine precept is a mortal sin. Now perjury is contrary to a divine precept, for it is written (Lev. 19:12): “Thou shalt not swear falsely by My name.” Therefore it is a mortal sin.

I answer that, According to the teaching of the Philosopher (Poster. i, 2), “that which causes a thing to be such is yet more so.” Now we know that an action which is, by reason of its very nature, a venial sin, or even a good action, is a mortal sin if it be done out of contempt of God. Wherefore any action that of its nature, implies contempt of God is a mortal sin. Now perjury, of its very nature implies contempt of God, since, as stated above (a. 2), the reason why it is sinful is because it is an act of irreverence towards God. Therefore it is manifest that perjury, of its very nature, is a mortal sin.

Reply to Objection 1. As stated above (q. 89, a. 7, ad 3), coercion does not deprive a promissory oath of its binding force, as regards that which can be done lawfully. Wherefore he who fails to fulfil an oath which he took under coercion is guilty of perjury and sins mortally. Nevertheless the Sovereign Pontiff can, by his authority, absolve a man from an obligation even of an oath, especially if the latter should have been coerced into taking the oath through such fear as may overcome a high-principled man.

When, however, it is said that these persons are not to be punished as for a mortal sin, this does not mean that they are not guilty of mortal sin, but that a lesser punishment is to be inflicted on them.

Reply to Objection 2. He that swears falsely in fun is nonetheless irreverent to God, indeed, in a way, he is more so, and consequently is not excused from mortal sin. He that swears falsely by a slip of tongue, if he adverts to the fact that he is swearing, and that he is swearing to something false, is not excused from mortal sin, as neither is he excused from contempt of God. If, however, he does not advert to this, he would seem to have no intention of swearing, and consequently is excused from the sin of perjury.

It is, however, a more grievous sin to swear solemnly by the Gospels, than to swear by God in ordinary conversation, both on account of scandal and on account of the greater deliberation. But if we consider them equally in comparison with one another, it is more grievous to commit perjury in swearing by God than in swearing by the Gospels.

Reply to Objection 3. Not every sin makes a man infamous in the eye of the law. Wherefore, if a man who has sworn falsely in a declaratory oath be not infamous in the eye of the law, but only when he has been so declared by sentence in a court of law, it does not follow that he has not sinned mortally. The reason why the law attaches infamy rather to one who breaks a promissory oath taken solemnly is that he still has it in his power after he has sworn to substantiate his oath, which is not the case in a declaratory oath.

* Hom. xliv in the Opus Imperfectum on St. Matthew, falsely ascribed to St. John Chrysostom † Cap. Cum dilectus, de Ord. Cognit.