

SUPPLEMENT TO THE THIRD PART, QUESTION 18

Of the Effect of the Keys (In Four Articles)

We must now consider the effect of the keys under which head there are four points of inquiry:

- (1) Whether the power of the keys extends to the remission of guilt?
- (2) Whether a priest can remit sin as to the punishment?
- (3) Whether a priest can bind in virtue of the power of the keys?
- (4) Whether he can loose and bind according to his own judgment?

Whether the power of the keys extends to the remission of guilt?*

Suppl. q. 18 a. 1

Objection 1. It would seem that the power of the keys extends to the remission of guilt. For it was said to the disciples (Jn. 20:23): “Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them.” Now this was not said in reference to the declaration only, as the Master states (Sent. iv, D, 18), for in that case the priest of the New Testament would have no more power than the priest of the Old Testament. Therefore he exercises a power over the remission of the guilt.

Objection 2. Further, in Penance grace is given for the remission of sin. Now the priest is the dispenser of this sacrament by virtue of the keys. Therefore, since grace is opposed to sin, not on the part of the punishment, but on the part of the guilt, it seems that the priest operates unto the remission of sin by virtue of the keys.

Objection 3. Further, the priest receives more power by his consecration than the baptismal water by its sanctification. Now the baptismal water receives the power “to touch the body and cleanse the heart,” as Augustine says (Tract. lxxx in Joan.). Much more, therefore, does the priest, in his consecration, receive the power to cleanse the heart from the stain of sin.

On the contrary, The Master stated above (Sent. iv, D, 18) that God has not bestowed on the minister the power to co-operate with Him in the inward cleansing. Now if he remitted sins as to the guilt, he would co-operate with God in the inward cleansing. Therefore the power of the keys does not extend to the remission of guilt.

Further, sin is not remitted save by the Holy Ghost. But no man has the power to give the Holy Ghost, as the Master said above (Sent. i, D, 14). Neither therefore can he remit sins as to their guilt.

I answer that, According to Hugh (De Sacram. ii), “the sacraments, by virtue of their sanctification, contain an invisible grace.” Now this sanctification is sometimes essential to the sacrament both as regards the matter and as regards the minister, as may be seen in Confirmation,

and then the sacramental virtue is in both together. Sometimes, however, the essence of the sacrament requires only sanctification of the matter, as in Baptism, which has no fixed minister on whom it depends necessarily, and then the whole virtue of the sacrament is in the matter. Again, sometimes the essence of the sacrament requires the consecration or sanctification of the minister without any sanctification of the matter, and then the entire sacramental virtue is in the minister, as in Penance. Hence the power of the keys which is in the priest, stands in the same relation to the effect of Penance, as the virtue in the baptismal water does to the effect of Baptism. Now Baptism and the sacrament of Penance agree somewhat in their effect, since each is directly ordained against guilt, which is not the case in the other sacraments: yet they differ in this, that the sacrament of Penance, since the acts of the recipient are as its matter, cannot be given save to adults, who need to be disposed for the reception of the sacramental effect; whereas Baptism is given, sometimes to adults, sometimes to children and others who lack the use of reason, so that by Baptism children receive grace and remission of sin without any previous disposition, while adults do not, for they require to be disposed by the removal of insincerity. This disposition sometimes precedes their Baptism by priority of time, being sufficient for the reception of grace, before they are actually baptized, but not before they have come to the knowledge of the truth and have conceived the desire for Baptism. At other times this disposition does not precede the reception of Baptism by a priority of time, but is simultaneous with it, and then the grace of the remission of guilt is bestowed through the reception of Baptism. On the other hand, grace is never given through the sacrament of Penance unless the recipient be disposed either simultaneously or before. Hence the power of the keys operates unto the remission of guilt, either through being desired or through being actually exercised, even as the waters of Baptism. But just as Baptism acts, not as a principal agent but as an instrument,

* St. Thomas here follows the opinion of Peter Lombard, and replies in the negative. Later in life he altered his opinion. Cf. IIIa, q. 62, a. 1; IIIa, q. 64, a. 1; IIIa, q. 86, a. 6

and does not go so far as to cause the reception itself of grace, even instrumentally[†], but merely disposes the recipient to the grace whereby his guilt is remitted, so is it with the power of the keys. Wherefore God alone directly remits guilt, and Baptism acts through His power instrumentally, as an inanimate instrument, and the priest as an animate instrument, such as a servant is, according to the Philosopher (Ethic. viii, 11): and consequently the priest acts as a minister. Hence it is clear that the power of the keys is ordained, in a manner, to the remission of guilt, not as causing that remission, but as disposing thereto. Consequently if a man, before receiving absolution, were not perfectly disposed for the reception of grace, he would receive grace at the very time of sacramental confession and absolution, provided he offered no obstacle. For if the key were in no way ordained to the remission of guilt, but only to the remission of punishment, as some hold, it would not be necessary to have a desire of receiving the effect of the keys in order to have one's sins forgiven, just as it is not necessary to have a desire of receiving the other sacraments which are ordained, not to the remission of guilt, but against punishment. But this enables us to see that it is not ordained unto the remission of guilt, because the use of the keys, in order to be effective, always requires a disposition on the part of the recipient of the sacrament. And the same would apply to Baptism, were it never given save to adults.

Reply to Objection 1. As the Master says in the text (Sent. iv, D, 18), the power of forgiving sins was entrusted to priests, not that they may forgive them, by their own power, for this belongs to God, but that, as ministers, they may declare* the operation of God Who forgives. Now this happens in three ways. First, by a declaration, not of present, but of future forgiveness, without co-operating

therein in any way: and thus the sacraments of the Old Law signified the Divine operation, so that the priest of the Old Law did but declare and did not operate the forgiveness of sins. Secondly, by a declaration of present forgiveness without co-operating in it at all: and thus some say that the sacraments of the New Law signify the bestowal of grace, which God gives when the sacraments are conferred, without the sacraments containing any power productive of grace, according to which opinion, even the power of the keys would merely declare the Divine operation that has its effect in the remission of guilt when the sacrament is conferred. Thirdly, by signifying the Divine operation causing then and there the remission of guilt, and by co-operating towards this effect dispositively and instrumentally: and then, according to another and more common opinion, the sacraments of the New Law declare the cleansing effected by God. In this way also the priest of the New Testament declares the recipient to be absolved from guilt, because in speaking of the sacraments, what is ascribed to the power of the ministers must be consistent with the sacrament. Nor is it unreasonable that the keys of the Church should dispose the penitent to the remission of his guilt, from the fact that the guilt is already remitted, even as neither is it unreasonable that Baptism, considered in itself, causes a disposition in one who is already sanctified.

Reply to Objection 2. Neither the sacrament of Penance, nor the sacrament of Baptism, by its operation, causes grace, or the remission of guilt, directly, but only dispositively[†]. Hence the Reply to the Third Objection is evident.

The other arguments show that the power of the keys does not effect the remission of guilt directly, and this is to be granted.

Whether a priest can remit sin as to the punishment?

Suppl. q. 18 a. 2

Objection 1. It would seem that a priest cannot remit sin as to the punishment. For sin deserves eternal and temporal punishment. But after the priest's absolution the penitent is still obliged to undergo temporal punishment either in Purgatory or in this world. Therefore the priest does not remit the punishment in any way.

Objection 2. Further, the priest cannot anticipate the judgment of God. But Divine justice appoints the punishment which penitents have to undergo. Therefore the priest cannot remit any part of it.

Objection 3. Further, a man who has committed a slight sin, is not less susceptible to the power of the keys, than one who has committed a graver sin. Now if the pun-

ishment for the graver sin be lessened in any way through the priestly administrations, it would be possible for a sin to be so slight that the punishment which it deserves is no greater than that which has been remitted for the graver sin. Therefore the priest would be able to remit the entire punishment due for the slight sin: which is false.

Objection 4. Further, the whole of the temporal punishment due for a sin is of one kind. If, therefore, by a first absolution something is taken away from the punishment, it will be possible for something more to be taken away by a second absolution, so that the absolution can be so often repeated, that by virtue of the keys the whole punishment will be taken away, since the second absolution is not less

[†] See note at beginning of this article * See note at the beginning of this article [†] St. Thomas here follows the opinion of Peter Lombard, and replies in the negative. Later in life he altered his opinion. Cf. IIIa, q. 62, a. 1; IIIa, q. 64, a. 1; IIIa, q. 86, a. 6

efficacious than the first: and consequently that sin will be altogether unpunished, which is absurd.

On the contrary, The key is the power of binding and loosing. But the priest can enjoin a temporal punishment. Therefore he can absolve from punishment.

Further, the priest cannot remit sin either as to the guilt*, as stated in the text (Sent. iv, D, 18), or as to the eternal punishment, for a like reason. If therefore he cannot remit sin as to the temporal punishment, he would be unable to remit sin in any way, which is altogether contrary to the words of the Gospel.

I answer that, Whatever may be said of the effect of Baptism conferred on one who has already received grace, applies equally to the effect of the actual exercise of the power of the keys on one who has already been contrite. For a man may obtain the grace of the remission of his sins as to their guilt, through faith and contrition, previous to Baptism; but when, afterwards, he actually receives Baptism, his grace is increased, and he is entirely absolved from the debt of punishment, since he is then made a partaker of the Passion of Christ. In like manner when a man, through contrition, has received the pardon of his sins as to their guilt, and consequently as to the debt of eternal punishment, (which is remitted together with the guilt) by virtue of the keys which derive their efficacy from the Passion of Christ, his grace is increased and the temporal punishment is remitted, the debt of which remained after the guilt had been forgiven. However, this temporal punishment is not entirely remitted, as in Baptism, but only partly, because the man who is regenerated in Baptism is conformed to the Passion of Christ, by receiving into himself entirely the efficacy of Christ's Passion, which suffices for the blotting out of all punishment, so that nothing remains of the punishment due to his preceding actual sins. For nothing should be imputed to a man unto punishment, save what he has done himself, and in Baptism man begins a new life, and by the baptismal water becomes a new man, as that no debt for previous sin remains in him. on the other hand, in Penance, a man does not take on a new life, since therein he is not born again, but healed. Consequently by virtue of the keys which produce their effect in the sacrament of Penance, the punishment is not entirely remitted, but something is taken off the temporal punishment, the debt of which could remain after the eternal punishment had been remitted. Nor does this apply only to the temporal punishment which the penitent owes at the time of confession, as some hold, (for then confession and sacramental absolution would be mere burdens, which cannot be said of the sacraments of the New Law), but also to the punishment due in Purgatory, so that one who has been absolved and dies before making satisfaction, is less punished in Purgatory, than if he had died be-

fore receiving absolution.

Reply to Objection 1. The priest does not remit the entire temporal punishment, but part of it; wherefore the penitent still remains obliged to undergo satisfactory punishment.

Reply to Objection 2. Christ's Passion was sufficiently satisfactory for the sins of the whole world, so that without prejudice to Divine justice something can be remitted from the punishment which a sinner deserves, in so far as the effect of Christ's Passion reaches him through the sacraments of the Church.

Reply to Objection 3. Some satisfactory punishment must remain for each sin, so as to provide a remedy against it. Wherefore though, by virtue of the absolution some measure of the punishment due to a grave sin is remitted, it does not follow that the same measure of punishment is remitted for each sin, because in that case some sin would remain without any punishment at all: but, by virtue of the keys, the punishments due to various sins are remitted in due proportion.

Reply to Objection 4. Some say that at the first absolution, as much as possible is remitted by virtue of the keys, and that, nevertheless, the second confession is valid, on account of the instruction received, on account of the additional surety, on account of the prayers of the priest or confessor, and lastly on account of the merit of the shame.

But this does not seem to be true, for though there might be a reason for repeating the confession, there would be no reason for repeating the absolution, especially if the penitent has no cause to doubt about his previous absolution; for he might just as well doubt after the second as after the first absolution: even as we see that the sacrament of Extreme Unction is not repeated during the same sickness, for the reason that all that could be done through the sacrament, has been done once. Moreover, in the second confession, there would be no need for the confessor to have the keys, if the power of the keys had no effect therein.

For these reasons others say that even in the second absolution something of the punishment is remitted by virtue of the keys, because when absolution is given a second time, grace is increased, and the greater the grace received, the less there remains of the blemish of the previous sin, and the less punishment is required to remove that blemish. Wherefore even when a man is first absolved, his punishment is more or less remitted by virtue of the keys, according as he disposes himself more or less to receive grace; and this disposition may be so great, that even by virtue of his contrition the whole punishment is remitted, as we have already stated (q. 5, a. 2). Consequently it is not unreasonable, if by frequent confession

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even the whole punishment be remitted, that a sin remain its punishment. altogether unpunished, since Christ made satisfaction for

Whether the priest can bind through the power of the keys?

Suppl. q. 18 a. 3

Objection 1. It would seem that the priest cannot bind by virtue of the power of the keys. For the sacramental power is ordained as a remedy against sin. Now binding is not a remedy for sin, but seemingly is rather conducive to an aggravation of the disease. Therefore, by the power of the keys, which is a sacramental power, the priest cannot bind.

Objection 2. Further, just as to loose or to open is to remove an obstacle, so to bind is to place an obstacle. Now an obstacle to heaven is sin, which cannot be placed on us by an extrinsic cause, since no sin is committed except by the will. Therefore the priest cannot bind.

Objection 3. Further, the keys derive their efficacy from Christ's Passion. But binding is not an effect of the Passion. Therefore the priest cannot bind by the power of the keys.

On the contrary, It is written (Mat. 16:19): "Whosoever thou shalt bind on earth, shall be bound also in heaven."

Further, rational powers are directed to opposites. But the power of the keys is a rational power, since it has discretion connected with it. Therefore it is directed to opposites. Therefore if it can loose, it can bind.

I answer that, The operation of the priest in using the keys, is conformed to God's operation, Whose minister he is. Now God's operation extends both to guilt and to punishment; to the guilt indeed, so as to loose it directly. but to bind it indirectly, in so far as He is said to

harden, when He withholds His grace; whereas His operation extends to punishment directly, in both respects, because He both spares and inflicts it. In like manner, therefore, although the priest, in absolving, exercises an operation ordained to the remission of guilt, in the way mentioned above (a. 1), nevertheless, in binding, he exercises no operation on the guilt; (unless he be said to bind by not absolving the penitent and by declaring him to be bound), but he has the power both of binding and of loosing with regard to the punishment. For he looses from the punishment which he remits, while he binds as to the punishment which remains. This he does in two ways—first as regards the quantity of the punishment considered in general, and thus he does not bind save by not loosing, and declaring the penitent to be bound, secondly, as regards this or that particular punishment, and thus he binds to punishment by imposing it.

Reply to Objection 1. The remainder of the punishment to which the priest binds the penitent, is the medicine which cleanses the latter from the blemish of sin.

Reply to Objection 2. Not only sin, but also punishment is an obstacle to heaven: and how the latter is enjoyed by the priest, has been said in the article.

Reply to Objection 3. Even the Passion of Christ binds us to some punishment whereby we are conformed to Him.

Whether the priest can bind and loose according to his own judgment?

Suppl. q. 18 a. 4

Objection 1. It seems that the priest can bind and loose according to his own judgment. For Jerome* says: "The canons do not fix the length of time for doing penance so precisely as to say how each sin is to be amended, but leave the decision of this matter to the judgment of a discreet priest." Therefore it seems that he can bind and loose according to his own judgment.

Objection 2. Further, "The Lord commended the unjust steward, forasmuch as he had done wisely" (Lk. 16:5), because he had allowed a liberal discount to his master's debtors. But God is more inclined to mercy than any temporal lord. Therefore it seems that the more punishment the priest remits, the more he is to be commended.

Objection 3. Further, Christ's every action is our in-

struction. Now on some sinners He imposed no punishment, but only amendment of life, as in the case of the adulterous woman (Jn. 8). Therefore it seems that the priest also, who is the vicar of Christ, can, according to his own judgment, remit the punishment, either wholly or in part.

On the contrary, Gregory VII† says: "We declare it a mock penance if it is not imposed according to the authority of the holy fathers in proportion to the sin." Therefore it seems that it does not altogether depend on the priest's judgment.

Further, the act of the keys requires discretion. Now if the priest could remit and impose as much as he liked of a penance, he would have no need of discretion, because there would be no room for indiscretion. Therefore it does

* Cf. Can. 86, Mensuram, De Poenit. Dist. i † Cf. Act. Concil. Rom. v, Can. 5

not altogether depend on the priest's judgment.

I answer that, In using the keys, the priest acts as the instrument and minister of God. Now no instrument can have an efficacious act, except in so far as it is moved by the principal agent. Wherefore, Dionysius says (Hier. Eccl. cap. ult.) that "priests should use their hierarchical powers, according as they are moved by God." A sign of this is that before the power of the keys was conferred on Peter (Mat. 16:19) mention is made of the revelation vouchsafed to him of the Godhead; and the gift of the Holy Ghost, whereby "the sons of God are led" (Rom. 8:14), is mentioned before power was given to the apostles to forgive sins. Consequently if anyone were to presume to use his power against that Divine motion, he would not realize the effect, as Dionysius states (Hier. Eccl., cap. ult.), and, besides, he would be turned away from the Divine order, and consequently would be guilty of a sin. Moreover, since satisfactory punishments are medicinal, just as the medicines prescribed by the medical art are not suitable to all, but have to be changed according to the judgment of a medical man, who follows not his own will,

but his medical science, so the satisfactory punishments appointed by the canons are not suitable to all, but have to be varied according to the judgment of the priest guided by the Divine instinct. Therefore just as sometimes the physician prudently refrains from giving a medicine sufficiently efficacious to heal the disease, lest a greater danger should arise on account of the weakness of nature so the priest, moved by Divine instinct, some times refrains from enjoining the entire punishment due to one sin, lest by the severity of the punishment, the sick man come to despair and turn away altogether from repentance.

Reply to Objection 1. This judgment should be guided entirely by the Divine instinct.

Reply to Objection 2. The steward is commended also for having done wisely. Therefore in the remission of the due punishment, there is need for discretion.

Reply to Objection 3. Christ had the power of "excellence" in the sacraments, so that, by His own authority, He could remit the punishment wholly or in part, just as He chose. Therefore there is no comparison between Him and those who act merely as ministers.