

QUESTION 39

Schism

We next have to consider the vices that are opposed to peace and that involve deeds: schism (*schisma*) (question 39); strife (*rixa*) (question 41); sedition (*seditio*) (question 42); and war (*bellum*) (question 40).

On the first topic there are four questions: (1) Is schism a special sin? (2) Is schism a more serious sin than unbelief? (3) Do schismatics have any power? (4) Are schismatics appropriately punished with excommunication?

Article 1

Is schism a special sin?

It seems that schism is not a special sin:

Objection 1: As Pope Pelagius says, “Schism (*schisma*) sounds like scissor (*scissura*).” But every sin effects some sort of cutting off—this according to Isaiah 59:2 (“Your sins have cut you off from your God”). Therefore, schism is not a special sin.

Objection 2: Schismatics seem to be individuals who do not obey the Church. But a man becomes disobedient to the precepts of the Church through every sin, since sin, according to Ambrose, “is disobedience with respect to the celestial commandments.” Therefore, every sin is an instance of schism.

Objection 3: Heresy likewise cuts a man off from the unity of the Faith. Therefore, if the name ‘schism’ implies being cut off, then schism does not seem to differ as a special sin from the sin of unbelief.

But contrary to this: In *Contra Faustum* Augustine distinguishes schism from heresy as follows: “Schism is believing the same things as the others and worshiping with the same rites, but being content merely to split the congregation, whereas heresy is believing things that are diverse from what the Catholic Church believes.” Therefore, schism is not a general sin.

I respond: As Isidore says in *Etymologia*, the name ‘schism’ “comes from a division of minds” (*scissura animorum*). But division is opposed to unity. Hence, the sin of schism is directly and *per se* opposed to unity. For just as what is *per accidens* does not constitute a species among natural entities, so, too, neither does it constitute a species among moral entities, in the case of which what is intended is *per se*, whereas what follows outside of the intention is, as it were, *per accidens*. And so the sin of schism is properly speaking a special sin by the fact that one intends to separate himself from the unity effected by charity, which not only unites one person to another by the spiritual bond of love, but also unites the Church as a whole in a unity of the Spirit (*in unitate spiritus*). And so, properly speaking, schismatics are those who by their own will and intention separate themselves from the unity of the Church, which is the most important unity. For the particular unity of individuals with one another is ordered toward the unity of the Church, just as the composition of the individual members in a natural body is ordered toward the unity of the whole body.

Now the unity of the Church is thought of in two ways, viz., in the connection, or common life, of the members of the Church with one another, and, again, in the ordering of all the members of the Church to the one Head—this according to Colossians 2:18-19 (“... puffed up by the sense of his flesh, and not holding closely to the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and bonds, achieves the growth that comes from God”). Now this Head is Christ Himself, in whose stead the supreme Pontiff acts within the Church. And so schismatics are those who refuse to be subject to the supreme Pontiff and who refuse to be in communion with the members of the Church subject to him.

Reply to objection 1: A man who sins does not intend to be cut off from God through his sin; instead, this happens outside of his intention because he turns toward a mutable good in a disordered

way. And so he is not a schismatic, properly speaking.

Reply to objection 2: The character of schism is constituted by refusing to obey the precepts with a certain rebelliousness (*cum rebellione quadam*). Now I say ‘with a certain rebelliousness’, since a schismatic stubbornly scorns the precepts of the Church and refuses to submit to her judgment. And this is not done by just any sinner. Hence, it is not the case that every sin is an instance of schism.

Reply to objection 3: Heresy and the schism are distinguished by what each is opposed to *per se* and directly. For heresy is opposed *per se* to faith, whereas schism is opposed *per se* to the ecclesiastical unity of charity. And so just as faith and charity are diverse virtues, even though anyone who lacks faith lacks charity, so, too, schism and heresy are diverse vices, even though anyone who is a heretic is also a schismatic, though not vice versa. And this is view that Jerome expounds in *In Epistolam ad Galatas*: “I think that the difference between schism and heresy is that heresy has perverted doctrine, whereas schism separates from the Church.”

Yet just as the loss of charity is a path to losing faith—this according to 1 Timothy 1:6 (“From these things [read: charity and other virtues of this sort] some are straying and being turned toward vain babbling”)—so, too, schism is a path to heresy. Hence, in the same place Jerome adds, “At the beginning schism can in some way be understood to be different from heresy, and yet there is no schism that does not invent some heresy for itself in order to make it seem that it was right to have withdrawn from the Church.”

Article 2

Is schism a more serious sin than unbelief?

It seems that schism is a more serious sin than unbelief:

Objection 1: A greater sin is punished with a more severe punishment—this according to Deuteronomy 25:2 (“According to the measure of the sin shall the measure also of the stripes be”). But the sin of schism is punished more severely than even the sins of unbelief or idolatry. For Exodus 32:27-28 says that because of idolatry some individuals were killed by the sword with human hands, whereas Numbers 16:30 says, “If the Lord does something new, and the earth opens her mouth and swallows them up along with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into hell, you will know that they have blasphemed the Lord.” Now, as 4 Kings 17:20ff. relates, the ten tribes that withdrew from David’s kingdom though the vice of schism were punished most severely of all. Therefore, the sin of schism is more serious than the sin of unbelief.

Objection 2: As is clear from the Philosopher in *Ethics* 8, the good of the multitude is greater and more divine than the good of a single individual. But schism is contrary to the good of the multitude, i.e., contrary to ecclesiastical unity, whereas unbelief is contrary to the particular good of one individual, i.e., the faith of one single man. Therefore, it seems that schism is a more serious sin than unbelief.

Objection 3: As is clear from the Philosopher in *Ethics* 8, a greater good is opposed to a greater evil. But schism is opposed to charity, which, as is clear from what was said above (q. 23, a. 6), is a greater virtue than faith, which unbelief is opposed to. Therefore, schism is a more serious sin than unbelief.

But contrary to this: What is related as an addition to something else is greater than that thing either in goodness or in evil. But heresy is related to schism as an addition. For as is clear from the passage cited above from Jerome, it adds perverted doctrine. Therefore, schism is a less serious sin than unbelief.

I respond: The seriousness of a sin can be thought of in two ways, either in terms of the *species of the sin* or in terms of the *circumstances of the sinful act*. And since the circumstances are particular and

can vary in infinitely many ways, when one asks in general which of two sins is the more serious, the question should be understood to be asking about the seriousness that attends the sin's genus.

Now as is clear from what has been said above (*ST* 1-2, q. 72, a. 1 and q. 73, a. 3), the genus or species of a sin depends on its object. And so the sin that is contrary to a greater good is by its genus more serious, e.g., a sin against God is more serious than a sin against one's neighbor. Now it is clear that unbelief is a sin against God Himself, insofar as He is in His own right the first truth that faith relies on. By contrast, schism is a sin against ecclesiastical unity, which is a certain participated good and so is something less than God Himself. Hence, it is clear that the sin of unbelief is by its genus more serious than the sin of schism—even though it can happen that a given schismatic sins more grievously than a given unbeliever, either because of greater contempt, or because of the greater danger that he induces, or because of some other circumstance of this sort.

Reply to objection 1: It was already clear to that people through the Law they had received that there was one God and that other gods were not to be worshiped, and this was confirmed in their sight by many signs. And so it was unnecessary for those who sinned against faith by idolatry to be punished by any unusual or extraordinary punishment; just ordinary punishment was enough. By contrast, it was not as obvious to them that Moses should always be their leader. And so those who rebelled against his leadership had to be punished by unusual and miraculous punishments.

An alternative reply is that the sin of schism was sometimes more severely punished among that people because that people was quick to undertake sedition and schism; for 1 Esdra 4:19 says, "From days of old this city has rebelled against its king and stirred up sedition and battles within itself." Now as was established above (*ST* 1-2, q. 105, a. 2), sometimes a more severe punishment is inflicted for a more customary sin, since punishments are a sort of medicine for curbing men from sin. Hence, where there is a stronger tendency to sin, a more severe punishment should be applied.

Moreover, as is explained in the same place, the ten tribes were punished not only for the sin of schism but also for the sin of idolatry.

Reply to objection 2: Just as the good of the multitude is greater than the good of an individual who is part of that multitude, so the good of the multitude is less than the extrinsic good to which the multitude itself is ordered; for instance, the good of an army's order is less than the good of the leader. Similarly, the good of ecclesiastical unity, which schism is opposed to, is less than the good of divine truth, which unbelief is opposed to.

Reply to objection 3: Charity has two objects: (a) a principal object, viz., the divine goodness, and (b) another, secondary, object, viz., the good of our neighbor. Now schism and the other sins committed against our neighbor are opposed to charity as regards the secondary good, which is a lesser good than the object of faith, which is God Himself. And so these sins are lesser sins than unbelief. However, the hatred of God, which is opposed to charity as regards its principal object, is not a lesser sin than unbelief.

Yet among the sins that are committed against one's neighbor, the sin of schism seems to be the greatest, since it is contrary to the spiritual good of the multitude.

Article 3

Do schismatics have any power?

It seems that schismatics do have some power:

Objection 1: In *Contra Donatistas* Augustine says, "Just as those returning to the Church who were baptized before they left are not re-baptized, so those returning to the Church who were ordained before they left are not once again ordained." But Holy Orders (*ordo*) are a sort of power. Therefore, schismatics have some power, since they retain Holy Orders.

Objection 2: In *De Unico Baptismo* Augustine says, “One who is separated can confer a sacrament, just as he can receive a sacrament.” But the power to confer the sacraments is the greatest power of all. Therefore, schismatics, who are separated from the Church, have spiritual power.

Objection 3: Pope Urban says, “As for those who have been consecrated by bishops who were at one time ordained as Catholics but are in schism, separated from the Roman Church: when they return to the unity of the Church, we command that they be received mercifully, with their own Holy Orders preserved, as long as their knowledge and way of life commend them.” But this would not be the case if spiritual power did not remain in the schismatics. Therefore, schismatics have spiritual power.

But contrary to this: As Cyprian writes in a certain letter, and as is contained in *Decreta* 7, q. 1: “Novatian, who does not observe either the unity of the Spirit or the concord of peace, and who separates himself from the bond of the Church and the college of priests, cannot have either the power or honor of a bishop.”

I respond: There are two kinds of spiritual power: (a) *sacramental* power and (b) *jurisdictional* power.

Sacramental power is what is conferred by a consecration. Now all of the Church’s consecrations are unchanging as long as the entity that is consecrated remains in existence. This is clear in the case of inanimate entities; for instance, once an altar is consecrated, it is not consecrated again, unless it has been broken up. And so this sort of power by its essence remains in a man who has obtained it by a consecration for as long as he lives, regardless of whether or not he falls into schism or heresy. This is clear from the fact that when he returns to the Church, he is not consecrated again. However, since, as is clear in the case of natural entities, a lower power ought not to proceed into act (*non debet exire in actum*) unless it is moved by a higher power, it follows that such individuals lose the *use* of their power, so that they are not permitted to use their power. Still, if they do indeed use it, their power has its effect in sacramental contexts, since in those contexts a man operates only as God’s instrument. Hence, the sacramental effects are not excluded by any sin on the part of the one who confers the sacrament.

On the other hand, *jurisdictional power* is conferred on a man by a simple injunction. And such power does not inhere in an individual unchangeably. Hence, this sort of power does not remain in schismatics or heretics, and so they cannot absolve or excommunicate or effect indulgences or other things of this sort, and if they were to do them, their actions would amount to nothing.

Therefore, when it is claimed that schismatics and heretics do not have spiritual power, this must either be understood of the second sort of power or, if it is referring to the first sort of power, then it must be referring to the *legitimate use* of the power and not to the very *essence* of the power.

Reply to objection 1 and objection 2 and objection 3: From this the reply to the objections is clear.

Article 4

Is it an appropriate punishment for schismatics that they be excommunicated?

It seems that it is not an appropriate punishment for schismatics that they be excommunicated:

Objection 1: Excommunication above all separates a man from sharing in the sacraments. But in *Contra Donatistas* Augustine says that baptism can be received from a schismatic. Therefore, it seems that excommunication is not an appropriate punishment for schism.

Objection 2: It belongs to Christ’s faithful that they should bring back those who have been dispersed; hence, Ezechiel 34:4 says against certain individuals, “You have not brought back again what departed, you have not sought after what was lost.” But schismatics are more appropriately brought back by someone who is in communion with them. Therefore, it seems that they should not be

excommunicated.

Objection 3: Two punishments should not be inflicted for the same sin—this according to Nahum 1:9 (“God will not judge the same thing a second time”). But some individuals are punished with a temporal punishment for schism; this is set down in *Decreta* 23, q. 5., where it says, “Divine and worldly laws have decreed that those who are separated from unity with the Church and disturb her peace should be held in check by the secular powers.” Therefore, they should not be punished by excommunication.

But contrary to this: Numbers 16:26 says, “Withdraw from the tents of impious men”—viz., those who have created a schism—“and do not touch anything that has to do with them, lest you be drawn into their sins.”

I respond: As Wisdom 11:17 says, one ought to be punished by the things through which he sins. Now as is clear from what has been said, a schismatic sins in two ways:

In one way, he sins because he separates himself from the communion that belongs to the members of the Church. And on this score, an appropriate punishment for schismatics is that they be excommunicated.

In the other way, he sins because he refuses to be subject to the head of the Church. And so, since they do not wish to be coerced by the spiritual power of the Church, it is just for them to be coerced by the temporal powers.

Reply to objection 1: It is not permitted to receive baptism from schismatics except in the case of necessity, since it is better to leave this life with the sign of Christ, no matter who it is given by—even if it be a Jew or a pagan—than to leave this life without the sign of Christ, which is conferred through baptism.

Reply to objection 2: Excommunication does not prohibit the sort of communion by which someone might, by wholesome warnings, bring back into unity with the Church those who have been separated. Yet the very separation itself in some sense leads them back, when, confounded by their own separation, they are sometimes led to repent.

Reply to objection 3: The punishments of this life are medicinal, and so when one punishment is not enough to coerce a man, another is added to it, just as physicians use other corporeal medicines when a given medicine is not effective. And so when certain individuals are not sufficiently repressed by excommunication, the Church applies the coercion of the secular arm. But if the one punishment is sufficient, then another should not be applied.