

QUESTION 86

Oblations and First-fruits

Next we have to consider oblations and first-fruits. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Do any oblations fall under the necessity of a precept? (2) To whom are oblations due? (3) What sorts of things should be offered as oblations? (4) Specifically as regards oblations of first-fruits, are men obligated by necessity to hand over first-fruits?

Article 1

Are men obligated to offer oblations by a necessity of precept?

It seems that men are not obligated to offer oblations by a necessity of precept (*homines non teneantur ad oblationes ex necessitate praecepti*):

Objection 1: As was established above (*ST* 1-2, q. 103, aa. 3-4), during the time of the Gospel men are not obligated to observe the ceremonial precepts of the Old Law. But the offering of oblations is posited among the ceremonial precepts of the Old Law, since Exodus 23:14-15 says, “Three times a year you shall celebrate feasts for me,” and then it is added, “You shall not appear empty-handed in my sight.” Therefore, men are not now obligated to offer oblations by a necessity of precept.

Objection 2: Before oblations are offered, they are up to a man’s will (*in voluntate hominis consistunt*), as is seen by our Lord’s saying at Matthew 5:23, “If you are offering your gift at the altar”—as if this is left to the choice of those making the offerings. But once the oblations have been offered, there is no room left for offering them again. Therefore, there is no way in which anyone is obligated to offer oblations by a necessity of precept.

Objection 3: If anyone is obligated to give something to the Church, then if he does not give it, he can be compelled to do it by having the Church’s sacraments withheld from him (*potest ad id compelli per subtractionem ecclesiasticorum sacramentorum*). But it seems illicit to deny the sacraments of the Church to someone who does not want to make an offering—this according to the decree of the Sixth Synod 1, q. 1 (“No one who is giving out Holy Communion may demand anything from the one is receiving grace, and if he does demand something, he should be deposed”). Therefore, men are not obligated by necessity to offer oblations.

But contrary to this: Gregory says, “Let every Christian take care to offer something to God at the celebration of Mass (*ad Missarum solemnias*).”

I respond: As has been explained (q. 85, a. 3), the name ‘oblation’ is common to all the things that are offered for the worship of God.

The result is that if anything is offered in divine worship as something sacred that then has to be consumed, then it is both an *oblation* and a *sacrifice*; hence, Exodus 29:18, “You shall offer a whole ram for a burnt-offering upon the altar; it is an oblation to the Lord, a most sweet odor of the victim that belongs to the Lord,” and Leviticus 2:1 says, “When a soul offers an oblation of sacrifice to the Lord, his offering shall be fine flour.”

However, if anything is offered in such a way that it remains in its entirety, either to be allotted to divine worship or to be set aside for the use of the ministers, then it will be an *oblation* but *not a sacrifice*. Oblations of this sort are such by their nature that they are offered voluntarily—this according to Exodus 25:2 (“You shall accept them from a man who offers them of his own accord (*ultroneus*)”).

Still, there are four ways in which it can happen that someone is obligated to offer such oblations:

First, *because of a previous agreement*, as when a piece of Church land is granted to someone in order that he might make fixed oblations at set times—though this has the character of rent.

Second, *because of a previous assignation or promise*, as when someone offers a donation while he is still alive, or when someone leaves something in his will to the Church, whether liquid or non-liquid,

to be handed over at some future time.

Third, *because of necessity on the part of the Church*, e.g., if the ministers of the Church do not have enough to sustain themselves.

Fourth, *because of custom*. For instance, the faithful are obligated to make certain customary oblations on certain feast days.

However, in these last two cases the oblation remains in some sense voluntary, viz., with respect to the quantity or the type of the thing that is offered.

Reply to objection 1: In the New Law men are not obligated to make oblations because of legal solemn feast days, in the way that Exodus spells out. Instead, as has been explained, they are obligated to make oblations for other reasons.

Reply to objection 2: It is the case both that (a) some are obligated to offer oblations before they do it, as in the first and third and fourth ways explained above, and that (b) some are obligated even after they offer them through an assignation or promise—since they are obligated to exhibit in reality what had been offered to the Church by way of an assignation.

Reply to objection 3: Those who do not render the offerings they owe can be punished by having the sacraments withheld, not by the very priest to whom the offerings were to be made—lest he seem to be demanding something for administering the sacraments—but by some superior.

Article 2

Are oblations owed to priests alone?

It seems not to be the case that oblations are owed to priests alone:

Objection 1: We see that among oblations the main ones are those set aside for the sacrifice of victims (*quae hostiarum sacrificiis deputantur*). But things that are given to the poor are called ‘victims’ or ‘sacrifices’ (*hostiae*) in Sacred Scripture—this according to Hebrews 13:16 (“Do not forget to do good and to share, since such victims [or sacrifices] (*hostiis*) are pleasing to God”). Therefore, oblations are owed much more to the poor.

Objection 2: In many parishes monks take a part of the oblations. But as Jerome says, “The case of clerics is different from the case of monks.” Therefore, it is not the case that oblations are owed to priests alone.

Objection 3: With the approval of the Church lay people purchase oblations such as bread and other things of this sort, and they do this only in order to turn these things to their own use. Therefore, oblations can belong to the laity as well.

But contrary to this: Pope Damasus says (as quoted in *Hanc Consuetudinem* 10, q. 1), “Only the priests, who are seen serving the Lord every day, are permitted to eat and drink of the oblations which are offered within the holy Church. For in the Old Testament the Lord forbade the children of Israel to eat the sacred loaves, with the exception of Aaron and his sons.”

I respond: As one reads from Moses in Deuteronomy 5:5, a priest (*sacerdos*) is appointed in some sense as a “mediator and middleman (*sequester et medius*)” between the people and God. And so it is up to him to deliver God’s doctrine and sacraments (*divina dogmata et sacramenta*) to the people; and, by the same token, those things that belong to the people, e.g., prayers and sacrifices and oblations, have to be delivered by him to the Lord—this according to the Apostle in Hebrews 5:1 (“Every priest (*pontifex*) taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men for those matters that pertain to God, in order that he might offer gifts and sacrifices for their sins”). And so the oblations that are offered to God by the people belong to the priests, not only in order that they might turn them to their own use, but also in order that they might faithfully dispense them, in part (a) by expending them in matters that pertain to divine

worship, and in part (b) by expending them in those matters that pertain to their own sustenance—for as 1 Corinthians 9:13 says, “Those who serve at the altar partake with the altar”—and in part (c) by expending them for the use of the poor, who are to be sustained as much as possible by the resources of the Church. For as Jerome notes in his commentary on Matthew, our Lord likewise kept a purse for the use of the poor.

Reply to objection 1: Just as things given to the poor are not properly speaking sacrifices, and yet are called ‘sacrifices’ insofar as they are given for the sake of God, so, too, for the same reason they can be called oblations—and yet not properly speaking, since they are not offered immediately to God.

Still, oblations properly speaking do come into the use of the poor, not by being dispensed by those who offer them, but rather by being dispensed by the priests.

Reply to objection 2: There are three ways in which monks and other religious can receive oblations: (a) *as poor people*, through the dispensation of the Church; (b) if they are *ministers of the altar*, in which case they can accept oblations that are voluntarily offered to them; and (c) if there are *parishes that belong to them*, in which case they can accept oblations that are owed to them as rectors of the Church.

Reply to objection 3: After oblations have been consecrated, as in the case of sacred vessels and vestments, they cannot come into the use of the laity. And this is how to interpret the passage cited from Pope Damasus.

However, oblations that are not consecrated can come into the use of the laity through the dispensation of the priests, either in the manner of a gift or in the manner of a purchase.

Article 3

Can a man make oblations of whatever he licitly possesses?

It seems that a man cannot make oblations of whatever he licitly possesses (*non possit homo oblationes facere de omnibus rebus licite possessis*):

Objection 1: According to human laws, a prostitute (*meretrix*) acts shamefully in being a prostitute, but it is not shameful for her to receive her wages, and so she possesses the wages licitly. Yet it is not permissible for her to make an oblation from the money—this according to Deuteronomy 23:18 (“You shall not offer a prostitute’s wages in the house of the Lord your God”). Therefore, it is not the case that one is permitted to make an oblation of whatever he licitly possesses.

Objection 2: Likewise, it is forbidden to offer “the price of a dog” in the house of Lord. But it is clear that the price of a dog that has been justly sold is justly possessed. Therefore, it is not the case that one is permitted to make an oblation of whatever he justly possesses.

Objection 3: Malachi 1:8 says, “If you offer what is lame and sick, is this not bad?” But a lame and sick animal is justly possessed. Therefore, it seems that an oblation cannot be made of whatever is justly possessed.

But contrary to this: Proverbs 3:9 says, “Honor the Lord from your subsistence.” But what belongs to a man’s subsistence (*substantia*) is whatever he justly possesses. Therefore, an oblation can be made of whatever is justly possessed.

I respond: In *De Verbis Domini* Augustine says, “If you plundered someone weak and gave some of his spoils to a judge on the condition that judge rule in your favor, the force of justice is so great that even you would be displeased with the judge. Your God is not such as even you yourself ought not to be.” And Ecclesiasticus 34:21 says, “An oblation made by one who sacrifices something ill-gotten is stained.” Hence, it is clear that an oblation cannot be made of things that are acquired and held unjustly.

Now in the Old Law, in which prefigurement was fitting, certain things were thought of as unclean

because of their signification, and it was illicit to offer them. By contrast, in the New Law every creature of God is considered clean, as Titus 1:15 says. And so, absolutely speaking (*quantum est de se*), an oblation can be made of whatever is licitly possessed.

However, it happens incidentally (*per accidens*) that an oblation cannot be made of something that is licitly possessed, e.g., if the oblation tends toward the detriment of someone else, as with a son who offers to God the means by which he should be caring for his father—something that our Lord disapproves of in Matthew 15:5—or because of scandal, or because of contempt or something else of this sort.

Reply to objection 1: In the Old Law an oblation from the wages of a prostitute was prohibited because of uncleanness, whereas in the New Law the wages of a prostitute are prohibited because of scandal, lest the Church seem to be looking with favor on a sin by accepting an oblation of the profits of that sin.

Reply to objection 2: According to the Law, the dog is considered an unclean animal. Yet other unclean animals were bought back and their price could be offered—this according to Leviticus 27:27 (“If an animal is unclean, he who offers it shall buy it back”).

By contrast, dogs were neither offered nor bought back, both (a) because idolaters made use of dogs in their sacrifices to idols, and (b) because dogs signify rapaciousness, and an oblation cannot be made of this. But this prohibition ceases with the New Law.

Reply to objection 3: There were three reasons why the oblation of a blind or lame animal was considered illicit.

First, because of *that for which it was being offered*. This is why Malachi 1:8 says, “If you offer what is lame as a sacrifice, is this not bad?” For sacrifices had to be unblemished (*immaculata*).

Second, because of the *contempt*. Hence, in the same place it is added, “You have profaned my name by saying, ‘The table of the Lord is contaminated and what is placed upon it is contemptible.’”

Third, because of a *previous vow*, by which a man is obligated to render in its entirety what he had vowed. Hence, in the same place it is added, “Cursed is the deceitful man that has within his flock what is vigorous (*masculus*), and, making a vow, offers in sacrifice to the Lord what is feeble (*debile*).

These same reasons remain in the New Law, but when they do not apply, the oblation is not illicit.

Article 4

Are men obligated to hand over first-fruits?

It seems that men are not obligated to hand over first-fruits (*ad primitias solvendas homines non teneantur*):

Objection 1: In Exodus 13:9, after the law of primogeniture has been given, it is added, “It will be like a sign in your hand,”—and so it seems that this is a ceremonial precept. But the ceremonial precepts are not preserved in the New Law. Therefore, neither do first-fruits have to be handed over.

Objection 2: First-fruits were offered to the Lord for the special favor (*pro speciali beneficio*) that He had showed to that people; hence, Deuteronomy 26:2-3 says, “You shall take the first of all your fruits ... and you shall go to one who will be priest in those days and say to him, ‘I profess today before the Lord your God that I have come into the land before which He swore to our fathers that He would give it to us.’” Therefore, other nations are not obligated to hand over first-fruits.

Objection 3: That which someone is obligated to do should be determinate. But one does not find in either the New Law or the Old Law a determinate quantity of first-fruits. Therefore, men are not obligated by necessity to hand them over.

But contrary to this: *Decretals* 16, q. 7 says, “It is necessary to receive from all the people tithes

and first-fruits, which by law we decree to belong to the priests.”

I respond: First-fruits belong to a certain genus of oblations, since, as Deuteronomy 26:3 has it, they are offered to God along with a certain profession. Hence, in the same place it is added, “The priest takes the basket of first-fruits from the hand of the one who is bringing the first-fruits, and he puts the basket before the altar of the Lord your God.” And further on (Deuteronomy 26:10) he is ordered to say, “Therefore I now offer the first-fruits of the earth, which the Lord has given to me.”

Now the first-fruits were offered for a special reason, viz., in recognition of God’s beneficence (*in recognitionem divini beneficii*), in the sense that one professes that he perceives the fruits of the earth to be from God, and so he is obligated to offer something of them to God—this according to Paralipomenon 1 29:14 (“We have given to You what we have received from Your hand”). And since we should offer to God what is special, it was commanded that we offer to God first-fruits as something special from the fruits of the earth. And since a priest is appointed for the people in matters that have to do with God, the oblations were given over to the use of the priests. Hence, Numbers 18:8 says, “The Lord said to Aaron, ‘Behold, I have put you in charge of My first-fruits.’”

Now it is part of what is naturally right that a man should offer something in God’s honor from among the things that have been given to him by God. But that these things should be offered to such-and-such persons, or should be from the first-fruits, or should be offered in such-and-such a quantity, was something determined in the Old Law by divine right (*iure divino*), whereas in the New Law it is set by the determination of the Church, and men are obligated by the Church to hand over first-fruits according to the custom of their country and the needs of the Church’s ministers.

Reply to objection 1: The ceremonial precepts were a sign of the future, and so they ceased with the presence of the truth they had signified.

By contrast, the oblation of first-fruits was a sign of past beneficence, in light of which an obligation to recognize the beneficence is caused in accord with the dictate of natural reason. And an obligation of this sort remains at a general level.

Reply to objection 2: First-fruits were offered in the Old Law not only because of the favor of the promise of the land that was given over by God, but also because of the favor of the fruits of the earth that were given over by God. Hence, Deuteronomy 26:10 says, “I offer the land’s first fruits, which the Lord God has given to me.” And this latter reason is common to everyone.

An alternative reply is that just as God conferred the promised land as a sort of *special* favor, so, too, by a *general* favor He conferred dominion over the earth to the whole human race—this according to Psalm 113:16 (“He gave the earth to the children of men”).

Reply to objection 3: As Jerome says, “According to the tradition of the ancients, what was introduced was that those who had the most gave a 1/40th part to the priests in lieu of first-fruits, whereas those who had the least gave a 1/60th part.” Hence, it seems that, according to the custom of the country, first-fruits had to be offered between those two endpoints.

However, it is reasonable to think that the quantity of first-fruits was not fixed by the Law, because, as has been explained, first-fruits are given in the manner of an oblation, the nature of which is such that they are voluntary.