

SUNDAY CATECHISM / 18

Sins against the virtue of hope

ECCLESIA

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Today we focus on **SINS AGAINST THE VIRTUE OF HOPE.**

Once again, the Theological Sum, II-II, questions 20 and 21, is our point of reference as we concentrate on the two main sins against Hope: **DESPAIRING OF SALVATION AND THE PRESUMPTION OF SALVATION**, that is the presumption of saving oneself without

merit. These two sins against Hope are elements of the **SIX SINS AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT**; the others are: resisting the known truth, envy of another's spiritual good, obstinacy in sin and final impenitence. These are the sins against the Holy Spirit which, Jesus says in the Gospel, will not be forgiven.

1. DESPAIRING OF SALVATION

To understand what it means to despair of salvation, we must recall what hope is.

Hope is that theological virtue which depends on the will and which leads us to God, because God is our beatitude and He wants to give us the means to reach this beatitude. Hope adheres to God as the supreme good and nourishes an unshakable trust that it can reach Him, because it knows that God wants to save us and give us the means for salvation, by which there is the forgiveness of sins for those who ask God's forgiveness and repent. This is a fundamental means of reaching God for our beatitude.

- What then gives rise to the act of despair?

It is to believe that God does not forgive or does not provide the means by which it can be reached or does not give the benefit of sanctifying grace. Despair tends to affect this aspect in two ways: God as our beatitude, who is no longer hoped for and expected as our beatitude; God who cannot or does not want to grant us the means to achieve it and specifically the forgiveness of sins.

This is the summary of the first article. In the second article, however, St. Thomas wonders if despair is possible without unbelief. One might think that a person who falls into despair, fundamentally, does not believe that God is his beatitude and that God can or wants to save him. In truth, St. Thomas tells us with greater precision, that despair is not so much an abstract unbelief that God cannot or does not want to forgive in the Church - this is precisely Novatian's heresy in the third century - but that it is at a concrete level. St. Thomas says:

"A man, while having right faith, in the universal, fails in an appetitive movement, in regard to some particular, his particular estimate being corrupted by a habit or a passion" (q. 20, a. 2).

Therefore, he concludes that in desperation, faith may not fail.

The person who falls into the despair of salvation, in fact, is the one who in his particular concrete case, believes that God does not want him or cannot forgive him. Sin in this case is not a sin of faith in general, that is, that God does not forgive generically, but in particular: that God does not forgive him, in his situation.

- What are the passions which are rooted in the soul and which, while keeping the faith, corrupt the judgment specifically, to the point of leading to despair?

"The fact that spiritual goods taste good to us no more, or seem to be goods of no great account, is chiefly due to our affections being infected with the love of bodily pleasures, among which, sexual pleasures hold the first place: for the love of those pleasures leads man to have a distaste for spiritual things, and not to hope for them as arduous goods. In this way despair is caused by lust. " (q. 20, a. 4).

When the passions of lust, gluttony and avarice take root in a person, despair lurks around the corner, because mankind is no longer attracted by spiritual goods, by the happiness that is God, but by what it brings him pleasure.

"The fact that a man deems an arduous good impossible to obtain, either by himself or by another, is due to his being over downcast, because when this state of mind dominates his affections, it seems to him that he will never be able to rise to any good. And since sloth is a sadness that casts down the spirit, in this way despair is born of sloth. Now this is the proper object of hope---that the thing is possible, because the good and the arduous regard other passions also. Hence despair is born of sloth in a more special way:" (q. 20, a. 4).

St. Thomas tells us that sloth - that which the fathers considered the most feared of demons, the meridian demon - attaches itself to the soul, sucks it up, makes it fall into prostration and sadness to the point that the soul despairs of attaining bliss.

2. PRESUMPTION OF SAVING ONESELF WITHOUT MERIT

What is presumption?

In question 21, St. Thomas speaks of an excess of hope, even if it is not possible to exceed in the theological virtues. But when St Thomas uses this term, he means a flawed hope. In the first article of question 21, he states that this presumption exists according to two typologies and modalities.

- The first is less directly linked to the virtue of hope and is an **EXCESSIVE TRUST IN ONE'S ABILITIES**, to achieve a good that instead surpasses human abilities. It would be

like saying that mankind counts on its virtues, on its works, on its abilities, to achieve the infinite good that is God. It is a presumption, because God exceeds mankind's abilities.

- The second type of presumption - which instead pertains precisely to hope - concerns the possibility of **REACHING GOOD THROUGH THE MERCY OF GOD, BUT BY PURSUING AS GOOD SOMETHING THAT IS NOT GOOD.**

"But as to the hope whereby a man relies on the power of God, there may be presumption through immoderation, in the fact that a man tends to some good as though it were possible by the power and mercy of God, whereas it is not possible, for instance, if a man hope to obtain pardon without repenting, or glory without merits" (q. 21, a. 1).

And then he specifies:

"Presumption on God's mercy implies both conversion to a mutable good, in so far as it arises from an inordinate desire of one's own good, and aversion from the immutable good, in as much as it ascribes to the Divine power that which is unbecoming to it, for thus man turns away from God's power. " (q. 21, a. 1, ad 3).

What is attributed to God that is unbecoming to Him?

Forgiveness without repentance. Assuming that God forgives the unrepentant sinner does not mean having a stronger hope in God's mercy, instead it means having a flawed hope, that is, attributing to God what is not attributable to God.

Therefore presumption is a sin as it is a flawed hope:

"Now presumption is an appetitive movement, since it denotes an inordinate hope. Moreover it is conformed to a false intellect, just as despair is: for just as it is false that God does not pardon the repentant, or that He does not turn sinners to repentance, so is it false that He grants forgiveness to those who persevere in their sins, and that He gives glory to those who cease from good works: and it is to this estimate that the movement of presumption is conformed. Consequently presumption is a sin" (q. 21 a. 2).

And shortly afterwards he further specifies that it is a disorder, not an excess of hope:

"Presumption does not denote excessive hope, as though man hoped too much in God; but through man hoping to obtain from God something unbecoming to Him; which is the same as to hope too little in Him, since it implies a depreciation of His power." (q. 21 a. 2, ad 2).

Why is God's virtue diminished? Because we pretend to obtain something from God that is not good (forgiveness without repentance).

There is a final clarification in the fourth article. Just as despair develops due to some passions that cling to the soul, also due to presumption we have passions that bind to the soul and lead it to the sin against hope.

What are these passions?

The first presumption, caused by an excess of self-confidence, *"clearly arises from vainglory; for it is owing to a great desire for glory, that a man attempts things beyond his power."*

"The other presumption is an inordinate trust in the Divine mercy or power, consisting in the hope of obtaining glory without merits, or pardon without repentance. Such like presumption seems to arise directly from pride, as though man thought so much of himself as to esteem that God would not punish him or exclude him from glory, however much he might be a sinner. " (q. 21, a. 4).