

## QUESTION 89

### Venial Sin in its own Right

Next we have to consider venial sin in its own right (*secundum se*). And on this topic there are six questions: (1) Does a venial sin cause a stain in the soul (*maculam in anima*)? (2) Are venial sins distinguished figuratively by “wood, hay, and straw” (1 Corinthians 3:12)? (3) Was man in the state of innocence able to commit a venial sin? (4) Is a good or bad angel able to commit a venial sin? (5) Are the first movements of non-believers venial sins? (6) Can venial sin exist in someone together with just original sin?

#### Article 1

##### Does a venial sin cause a stain in the soul?

It seems that venial sin causes a stain in the soul:

**Objection 1:** In *De Poenitentia* Augustine says that if venial sins are multiplied, they destroy our beauty (*decorem nostrum exterminant*) to such a degree that they separate us from the embraces of our heavenly Spouse. But the stain is nothing other than a loss of beauty (*detrimentum decoris*). Therefore, venial sins cause a stain in the soul.

**Objection 2:** A mortal sin causes a stain in the soul because of the disorder in the act and in the affections of the sinner himself. But in venial sin there is a certain sort of disorder in the act and in the affections. Therefore, a venial sin causes a stain in the soul.

**Objection 3:** As was explained above (q. 86, a. 1), the stain in the soul is caused by contact with a temporal thing through love. But in a venial sin the soul touches a temporal thing with a disordered love. Therefore, a venial sin introduces a stain in the soul.

**But contrary to this:** Ephesians 5:27 says, “... so that He might present to Himself a glorious Church without stain or wrinkle,” and a Gloss comments, “That is, without any criminal offense (*peccatum criminale*).” Therefore, it seems proper to a mortal sin that it should cause a stain in the soul.

**I respond:** As is clear from what was said above (q. 86, a. 1), ‘stain’ implies a loss of luster because some sort of contact. This is clear in the case of corporeal things, and the name ‘stain’ is transferred by way of similarity from corporeal things to the soul. Now just as there are two sorts of luster in a body, (a) one from the intrinsic disposition of the parts of the body and of the colors and (b) the other from an exterior supervening brightness, so, too, there are two sorts of luster in the soul, (a) one a *habitual* and, as it were, intrinsic luster (*nitor habitualis quasi intrinsicus*) and (b) the other an *actual* and, as it were, exterior splendor (*actualis quasi exterior fulgor*).

Now a venial sin poses an obstacle to the *actual* luster but not to the *habitual* luster, since it does not diminish the *habit* of charity and the other virtues, but instead, as will be explained below (*ST* 2-2, q. 24, a. 10), impedes only their *act*.

‘Stain’, on the other hand, implies something that remains in the stained thing, and so it seems to be more relevant to the *habitual luster* than to the *actual luster*. Hence, properly speaking, venial sin does not cause a stain in the soul. And if it is claimed anywhere that venial sin does cause a stain, this is so relatively speaking (*hoc est secundum quid*), insofar as venial sin impedes the luster that comes from the *acts* of the virtues.

**Reply to objection 1:** Augustine is talking here about a case in which many venial sins cause a disposition toward a mortal sin (*dispositive inducunt ad mortale*). For otherwise they would not separate one from the embrace of the heavenly Spouse.

**Reply to objection 2:** In the case of a mortal sin, but not in the case of a venial sin, the disorder in the act corrupts the habit of a virtue.

**Reply to objection 3:** In the case of a mortal sin the soul, through love, touches a temporal thing

as an end, and this totally blocks the flow of the splendor of the grace that enters into those who adhere to God as their ultimate end through charity. By contrast, in the case of a venial sin a man does not adhere to a creature as his ultimate end. Hence, there is no parallel between the two cases.

## Article 2

### Are venial sins appropriately designated as “wood, hay, and straw”?

It seems that venial sins are not appropriately designated as “wood, hay, and straw” (*lignum, faenum, stipula*) (1 Corinthians 3:12):

**Objection 1:** Wood, hay, and straw are said to be built upon the spiritual foundation (*superaedificari spirituali fundamento*). But venial sins lie outside of the spiritual edifice, in the same way that false opinions likewise lie outside of scientific knowledge. Therefore, venial sins are not appropriately designated as wood, hay, and straw.

**Objection 2:** He who builds with wood, hay, and straw “will be saved as if by fire” (1 Corinthians 3:15). But sometimes the one who commits venial sins will not be saved even by fire—as when the venial sins are found in someone who has died with mortal sin. Therefore, venial sins are not appropriately designated by wood, hay, and straw.

**Objection 3:** According to the Apostle, there are (a) some who build with gold, silver, and precious stones, i.e., with the love of God and neighbor and with good works, and (b) others who build with wood, hay, and straw (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). But even those who love God and neighbor commit venial sins; for 1 John 1:8 says, “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves.” Therefore, it is inappropriate to designate venial sins by the three things in question.

**Objection 4:** Venial sins have many more specific differences, and many more grades, than just three. Therefore, it is inappropriate for all venial sins to be included under these three designations.

**But contrary to this:** The Apostle is saying of someone who builds upon the foundation with wood, hay, and straw that “he will be saved as if by fire” and so suffer some punishment, though not an eternal punishment. But as has been explained (q. 87, a. 5), it belongs properly to venial sin to be deserving of a temporal punishment. Therefore, venial sins are being designated by these three names.

**I respond:** Some have understood the relevant passage (1 Corinthians 3:12-15) to mean that the foundation is faith informed [by charity], and that upon this foundation some build with good works, which are signified by gold, silver, and precious stones, whereas others build with sins, including mortal sins, which are signified by wood, hay, and straw.

However, Augustine disproves this interpretation (*hanc expositionem disprobat*) in *De Fide et Operibus*. For as the Apostle says in Galatians 5:21, he who does works of the flesh “will not attain the kingdom of God,” which is what it is to be saved, whereas the Apostle says here that he who builds with wood, hay, and straw “will be saved as if by fire.” Hence, wood, hay, and straw cannot be understood to be designating mortal sins.

By contrast, others claim that wood, hay, and straw signify good works that are built on the spiritual edifice, but that venial sins mix themselves in with them. For instance, when someone is charged with taking care of his family (*quando aliquis habet curam rei familiaris*), which is a good thing, excessive love for his wife or children or possessions might mix itself in, yet in a way subordinated to God, so that the man does not will to do anything contrary to God for their sake.

But, once again, it does not seem correct to say this. For it is clear that all good works are referred back to the love of God and neighbor (*ad caritatem Dei et proximi*), and so they pertain to “gold, silver, and precious stones”—and therefore not to “wood, hay, and straw.”

And so one should reply that what is signified by wood, hay, and straw are the venial sins

themselves which mix themselves in with those who are charged with the care of earthly things. For just as these items pile up in a house but do not belong to the substance of the edifice and can be burned off while the edifice remains, so, too, venial sins are multiplied in a man while his spiritual edifice remains, and for them he suffers either the fire of temporal tribulation in this life or the fire of Purgatory after this life, and yet attains eternal salvation.

**Reply to objection 1:** Venial sins are said to build upon (*superaedificari*) the spiritual foundation not in the sense that are placed upon it directly, but rather in the sense that are placed next to it—just as it says in that place (Psalm 136:1), “Upon (*super*) the waters of Babylon ...,” meaning “next to the waters.” For as has been explained, venial sins do not destroy the spiritual edifice.

**Reply to objection 2:** It is not said of everyone who builds with wood, hay, and straw that “he will be saved as if by fire.” Instead, this is said only of one who builds upon the foundation. The foundation is not, as some think, unformed faith, but instead faith informed by charity—this according to Ephesians 3:17 (“Rooted and founded in charity”). Therefore, someone who dies with mortal sin and venial sins does, to be sure, have wood, hay, and straw, but they have not been built upon a spiritual foundation. And so he will not “be saved as if by fire.”

**Reply to objection 3:** Those who are free of caring for temporal things, even if they sometimes commit venial sins, nonetheless commit less serious venial sins and are frequently purified by the fervor of charity. Hence, such people do not build with venial sins, since the sins remain moderate in them. By contrast, the venial sins of those who are occupied with earthly affairs remain for a longer time, since they are not able to return frequently to erasing such sins through the fervor of charity.

**Reply to objection 4:** As the Philosopher says in *De Caelo* 1, “All things are contained under three, viz., the beginning, the middle, and the end.” In accord with this, all the grades of venial sins are traced back to three, viz., (a) wood, which remains in the fire for a longer time; (b) straw, which is consumed the quickest; and (c) hay, which is in the middle between them. For venial sins are more quickly or less quickly purged by fire according to whether they involve greater or lesser adherence or seriousness.

### Article 3

#### Was man in the state of innocence able to commit a venial sin?

It seems that man in the state of innocence was able to commit a venial sin:

**Objection 1:** A Gloss on 1 Timothy 2:14 (“Adam was not seduced”), says, “Having had no experience of God’s severity, he could have mistakenly believed that he had committed a venial sin.” But he would not have believed this if he had not been able to commit a venial sin. Therefore, he was able to commit a venial sin without committing a mortal sin.

**Objection 2:** In *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 11 Augustine says, “One should not think that the tempter would have overcome the man if the man had not first had in his soul a sort of excitement (*elatio*) which should have been held in check.” But the excitement that preceded his downfall, which was itself effected by a mortal sin, could only have been a venial sin.

Similarly, in the same book Augustine says, “The man was allured by a desire to experiment, once he saw that the woman was not dead after having eaten the forbidden fruit.” In the case of Eve, there seems also to have been a movement of unbelief, since she doubted the Lord’s words, as is clear from the fact that she said, “Lest *perhaps* we die,” as Genesis 3:3 has it. But these seem to be venial sins. Therefore, man was able to commit a venial sin before committing a mortal sin.

**Objection 3:** A mortal sin is more opposed to the integrity of the original state (*magis opponitur integritati primi status*) than a venial sin is. But the man was able to commit a mortal sin despite the

integrity of the original state. Therefore, he was likewise able to commit a venial sin.

**But contrary to this:** For each sin some punishment is due. But as Augustine says in *De Civitate Dei* 14, there could not have been any punishment in the state of innocence (*nihil poenale esse potuit in statu innocentiae*). Therefore, man could not have sinned by any sin that would not result in his being ejected from the state of integrity. But a venial sin does not change man's state. Therefore, he was not able to commit a venial sin.

**I respond:** It is commonly claimed that man in the state of innocence was unable to commit a venial sin.

This should not be understood to mean that a sin which is venial for us is such that if he had committed it, it would have been a mortal sin because of the loftiness of his status. For the dignity of the person is a circumstance which, while it aggravates a sin, nonetheless does not transform it into another species—except perhaps because of some supervening deformity involving disobedience or a vow or something of that sort, which cannot be claimed in the present case. Hence, what is of itself a venial sin (*id quod est de se veniale*) could not have been transformed into a mortal sin because of the dignity of the original state.

Therefore, the claim in question should be understood to mean that he was unable to commit a venial sin in the sense that before he lost the integrity of the original state by committing a mortal sin, he was not able to commit a sin that was of itself venial. The reason for this is that venial sin occurs in our case either (a) because of the *imperfection of the act*, as with sudden movements in the genus of mortal sin, or (b) because of a *disorder that exists with respect to the means to the end* while the due ordering to the end is preserved.

Both of these happen because of some lack of order stemming from what is lower not being held firmly in check by what is higher. For instance, the fact that a sudden movement of the sentient appetite (*subitus motus sensualitatis*) rises up in us stems from the fact that the sentient appetite is not altogether subject to reason. On the other hand, the fact that a sudden movement arises in reason itself stems in our case from the fact, explained above (q. 74, a. 10), that the execution of reason's act is not subject to a deliberation based on a higher good. And the human mind's being disordered with respect to the means to the end, even while the due ordering to the end is preserved, stems from the fact that the means to the end are not infallibly subordinated to the end (*non ordinantur infallibiliter sub fine*), which, as has been explained (q. 10, aa. 1 and 2), holds the highest place in the sense of being the principle among desirable things.

However, as was established in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 95, a. 1), in the state of innocence there was an infallible firmness of order, so that the lower was always subordinated to the higher (*contineretur sub superiori*) as long as man's highest good was subordinated to God—as Augustine likewise points out in *De Civitate Dei* 14. And so it had to be the case that there would be no disorder in man unless it began with man's highest good not being subject to God; but this is effected by a mortal sin. From this it is clear that a man in the state of innocence could not have committed a venial sin before he had committed a mortal sin.

**Reply to objection 1:** 'Venial sin' is being taken here not in the sense in which we are presently speaking of venial sin, but in the sense according to which a sin is called venial because it is easily forgivable.

**Reply to objection 2:** The excitement that preceded in the man's mind was the man's first mortal sin, and it is said to have preceded his fall into an exterior sin. What followed the excitement was an avid desire to experiment in the man and doubt in the woman. She erupted into this excitement solely upon hearing the serpent mention the precept, as if she were willing not to be held in check by the precept (*quasi nollet sub praecepto contineri*).

**Reply to objection 3:** Mortal sin is opposed to the integrity of the original state to such a degree that it corrupts that state—something that venial sin is unable to do. And since no disorder at all can

exist together with the integrity of the original state, it follows that the first man was unable to commit a venial sin before he had committed a mortal sin.

#### Article 4

##### Can a good angel or bad angel commit a venial sin?

It seems that a good angel or bad angel can commit a venial sin:

**Objection 1:** Man agrees with the angels in the higher part of the soul, which is called the mind—this according to Gregory in *Homilia* (“Man understands with the angels”). But man can commit a venial sin with the higher part of the soul. Therefore, so can an angel.

**Objection 2:** If anyone is able to do more, then he is able to do less as well. But an angel was able to love a created good more than he loves God—which he did by committing a mortal sin. Therefore, he was likewise able to love a created good less than God but in a disordered way, thereby committing a venial sin.

**Objection 3:** The bad angels seem to do some things that are by their genus venial sins, viz., provoke men to laughter and other less serious things of this sort. But as has been explained (a. 3), the circumstance of who the person is (*circumstantia personae*) does not make a mortal sin out of a venial sin, unless some special prohibition is added—which does not occur in the case under discussion. Therefore, an angel is able to commit a venial sin.

**But contrary to this:** An angel’s perfection is greater than man’s perfection in the original state. But man in the original state was not able to commit a venial sin. Therefore, *a fortiori*, neither is an angel able to commit a venial sin.

**I respond:** As was explained in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 58, a. 3 and q. 79, a. 8), an angel’s understanding is not discursive in the sense of proceeding from principles to conclusions and understanding both principles and conclusions separately from one another, as occurs with us. Hence, it must be the case that whenever an angel considers the conclusions, he considers them insofar as they exist in the principles. Now as has been explained many times above (q. 8, a. 2 and q. 10, a. 1 and q. 72, a. 5), among desirable things the ends are like principles and the means to the end are like conclusions. Hence, an angel’s mind is directed toward the means to an end only insofar as the means correspond to the order of the end (*constant sub ordine finis*). Because of this, an angel is by his nature such that there cannot be a disorder in him with respect to the means to the end without there being simultaneously a disorder with respect to the end itself—a disorder that exists through mortal sin.

Now the good angels are not moved toward the means to an end except in relation to a fitting end, which is God. And because of this all their acts are acts of charity. And so venial sin cannot exist in them.

The bad angels, on the other hand, are moved to nothing except in relation to the end of their sin of pride. And so they commit mortal sins in all things whatsoever that they do *by their own will*. However, as was explained in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 63, a. 4 and q. 64, a. 2), things stand otherwise with respect to the *natural desire for the good* that exists in them.

**Reply to objection 1:** A man agrees with the angels in mind or intellect, but, as has been explained, differs from them in the manner in which he understands.

**Reply to objection 2:** For the reason already explained, an angel is unable to love a creature less than he loves God unless either (a) he simultaneously refers the creature to God as to his ultimate end or (b) he simultaneously refers the creature to a disordered end.

**Reply to objection 3:** The demons exercise care for all the things that seem to be venial in order that they might draw men into becoming accustomed to them (*ad sui familiaritatem*) and so lead them

into mortal sin. Hence, in all such matters the devils commit mortal sin because of the end that they intend (*propter intentionem finis*).

## Article 5

### Are the first movements of the sentient appetite in non-believers mortal sins?

It seems that the first movements of the sentient appetite in non-believers are mortal sins:

**Objection 1:** In Romans 8:1 the Apostle says, “There is no condemnation for those are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh,” and he is speaking here of the desires of the sentient appetite (*de concupiscentia sensualitatis*), as is clear from the preceding verses. Therefore, the reason why sense desire is not damnable in those who do not walk according to the flesh, i.e., those who do not consent to sense desire, is that they “are in Christ Jesus.” But non-believers are not in Christ Jesus. Therefore, in non-believers sense desire is damnable. Therefore, its first movements in non-believers are mortal sins.

**Objection 2:** In *De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio* Anselm says, “When those who are not in Christ sense the flesh, they are pursuing damnation, even if they do not walk not according to the flesh.” But damnation is due only for mortal sin. Therefore, since a man “senses the flesh” because of the first movement of sense desire (*secundum primum motum concupiscentiae*), it seems that the first movement of concupiscence in non-believers is a mortal sin.

**Objection 3:** In the same book Anselm says, “Man was made in such a way that he had a duty not to feel sense desire (*concupiscentiam sentire non deberet*).” But this duty seems to be remitted through baptismal grace, which non-believers do not have. Therefore, whenever a non-believer experiences sense desire (*concupiscit*), even if he does not consent, he commits a mortal sin because he is doing something contrary to his duty.

**But contrary to this:** Acts 10:34 says, “God is not a respecter of persons.” Therefore, what He does not impute to one for condemnation, he does not impute to another for condemnation. But He does not impute the first movements [of the sentient appetite] to believers for condemnation. Therefore, neither does He impute them to non-believers for condemnation.

**I respond:** It is unreasonable to claim that the first movements [of the sentient appetite] in non-believers are mortal sins if they are not consented to. There are two reasons why this is clear.

First of all, as was established above (q. 74, a. 4), the sentient appetite cannot itself be the subject of a mortal sin. But the same nature of sentient appetite exists in both non-believers and believers. Hence, it cannot be the case that only the movement of the sentient appetite in non-believers is a mortal sin.

Second, it is clear from the status of the sinner himself. For it is never the case that the dignity of the person diminishes the sin; instead, it increases the sin, as is clear from what was said above (q. 73, a. 10). Hence, neither is it the case that the sin is lesser in a believer than in a non-believer; instead, it is much greater in the believer. For the sins of non-believers deserve more leniency, because of their ignorance—this according to 1 Timothy 1:13 (“I obtained God’s mercy, because I acted ignorantly in my unbelief”)—whereas the sins of believers are aggravated because of the sacraments of grace—this according to Hebrews 10:29 (“How much more, do you think, he deserves worse punishments who has considered unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified”).

**Reply to objection 1:** The Apostle is talking about the condemnation due for original sin, which is taken away through the grace of Jesus Christ, even though the stimulant to sense desire remains (*quamvis maneat concupiscentiae fomes*). Hence, the fact that believers have sense desire is not in them a sign of the damnation of original sin, as it is in the case of non-believers.

**Reply to objection 2:** This is likewise the way in which the passage from Anselm should be understood. Hence, the reply to the second objection is clear.

**Reply to objection 3:** The duty not to have sense desire came with original justice. Hence, what is opposed to this duty is relevant to original sin and not to actual sin.

## Article 6

### Can venial sin exist in someone who has original sin alone?

It seems that venial sin can exist in someone who has original sin alone [and is without mortal sin]:

**Objection 1:** The disposition precedes the habit. But as was explained above (q. 88, a. 3), a venial sin is a disposition toward a mortal sin. Therefore, in a non-believer, for whom original sin is not remitted, venial sin is found before mortal sin. And so in some cases non-believers have venial sins along with original sin, but without mortal sins.

**Objection 2:** A venial sin has less connection with and agreement with a mortal sin than one mortal sin has with another mortal sin. But a non-believer subject to original sin is able to commit one mortal sin and not another. Therefore, he is likewise able to commit a venial sin and not a mortal sin.

**Objection 3:** One can determine a time at which a child is first able to be the agent of an actual sin. When he comes to that time, he is able to persist for at least a brief interval without committing a mortal sin, since this is possible even in the case of the worst criminals. But in that interval, no matter how brief it is, he is able to commit a venial sin. Therefore, venial sin is able to exist in someone who has original sin, but is without mortal sin.

**But contrary to this:** As will be explained below (*Supplement*, q. 69, a. 6), men are punished for original sin in the limbo of children, where there is no pain of the senses (*ubi non est poena sensus*). But men are thrust into hell solely for mortal sin. Therefore, there will not be a place in which to punish someone who has venial sin along with just original sin.

**I respond:** It is impossible that venial sin should exist in someone who has original sin but is without mortal sin.

The reason for this is that before an individual comes to the age of discretion (*antequam ad annos discretionis perveniat*), his young age, which prevents the use of reason, excuses him from mortal sin and hence all the more excuses him from venial sin if he does something that is by its genus a venial sin.

However, when he begins to have the use of reason, he is not altogether excused from venial sin or from mortal sin. But the first thing that occurs to a man to think about at that time is to deliberate about himself. And if he orders himself to his fitting end, he will receive the remission of original sin through grace. On the other hand, if he does not order himself to his fitting end, then to the extent that he is capable of discretion at that age, he will commit a mortal sin because he fails to do what he is capable of doing (*non faciens quod in se est*). And from then on venial sin will not exist in him without mortal sin, unless at some later time all his sins are remitted through grace.

**Reply to objection 1:** A venial sin is a disposition that precedes a mortal sin not by necessity but contingently—in the way that hard work sometimes disposes one for a fever, but not in the way that heat disposes a thing for the form of fire.

**Reply to objection 2:** As has been explained, it is because of the absence of the use of reason that venial sin is prevented from existing together with just original sin, and not because of venial sin's distance from or agreement with [mortal sin].

**Reply to objection 3:** A child who is starting to have the use of reason can abstain from other mortal sins for some time, but he is not free from the sin of omission explained above—unless he turns himself toward God as quickly as he can. For the first thing that occurs to a man who has discretion is

that he think, with respect to himself, what end he should order other things toward. For the end is prior in intention. And so this is the time for which he is obligated by the affirmative precept of God by which the Lord says, "Turn toward me, and I will turn toward you" (Zachariah 1:3).