

QUESTION 88

The Return of Forgiven Sins after Penance

Next we have to consider the return of forgiven sins after penance (*de reditu peccatorum post poenitentiam dimissorum*). And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Do sins that are forgiven through penance return, absolutely speaking, because of a subsequent sin? (2) Do forgiven sins return in some sense because of ingratitude and, more specifically, by means of certain sins? (3) Do forgiven sins return with an equal debt of punishment (*in aequale reatu*)? (4) Is the ingratitude because of which they return a specific sin?

Article 1

Do forgiven sins return because of a subsequent sin?

It seems that forgiven sins return because of a subsequent sin (*peccata dimissa redeant per sequens peccatum*):

Objection 1: In *De Baptismo* 1 Augustine says, “In the Gospel [Matthew 18:23-35] our Lord teaches very clearly that sins which have been forgiven return when fraternal charity does not exist, viz., in the case of that servant from whom his master exacted the payment of a debt that had already been forgiven because he himself had refused to forgive the debt of his fellow servant.” But fraternal charity is removed by any sort of mortal sin. Therefore, sins that have been previously forgiven return because of any sort of subsequent mortal sin.

Objection 2: In commenting on Luke 11:24 (“I will return to my house which I left”), Bede says, “This verse is to be feared and is not to be explained away, lest a sin which we thought to have been extinguished in us should oppress us unawares through carelessness.” But this would not be the case unless the sin in question returned. Therefore, a sin forgiven through penance may return.

Objection 3: In Ezekiel 17:24 the Lord says, “If a man turns away from his justice and does iniquity, then all the just deeds that he had done will no longer be remembered.” But among the other just deeds which he did there was also a prior act of penance; for it was explained above (q. 85, a. 3) that penance is a part of justice. Therefore, after a repentant individual sins, his prior act of penance, through which he attained forgiveness for his sins, is not imputed to him. Therefore, those sins return.

Objection 4: Past sins are covered by grace, as is clear from the Apostle in Romans 4:7 when he quotes Psalm 31:1 (“Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered”). But grace is removed by a subsequent mortal sin. Therefore, sins which had been previously forgiven remain uncovered. And so it seems that they return.

But contrary to this:

1. In Romans 11:29 the Apostle says, “God does not repent of His gifts and call.” But the sins of a penitent have been remitted through a gift of God. Therefore, forgiven sins do not return because of a subsequent sin, as if God were repenting of His gift of forgiving.

2. In *De Responionibus Prosperi* Augustine says, “An individual who withdraws from Christ and ends his life alienated from grace—where does he go except to perdition? But he does not recede into what has already been forgiven, and he will not be damned for original sin.”

I respond: As was explained above (q. 86, a. 4 and *ST* 1-2, q. 87, a. 4), there are two things involved in a mortal sin, viz., (a) a *turning away from God* and (b) a *turning toward some created good*.

Now in a mortal sin, whatever is involved in the *turning away*, considered by itself, is common to all mortal sins, since in every mortal sin a man is turned away from God. Thus, as a result, the *stain* (*macula*) that occurs through the privation of grace, along with the *debt of eternal punishment* (*reatus poenae aeternae*), are common to all mortal sins. And this is the way to understand what is said in James 2:10, “He who offends in one point has become guilty in all (*qui offendit in uno, factus est omnium reus*).”

By contrast, mortal sins are diverse and sometimes contrary to one another on the part of the *turning toward*. Hence, it is clear that on the part of the *turning toward*, a subsequent mortal sin does not bring it about that mortal sins which have been previously wiped away return. Otherwise, it would follow that through a sin of *prodigality* a man might be returned to a habit or disposition of *greed* that had been previously wiped away, and so a contrary would be a cause of its contrary—which is impossible. On the other hand, if we consider in mortal sins that which belongs to them on the part of the *turning away* taken by itself, then through a subsequent mortal sin a man comes to be deprived of grace and deserving of eternal punishment, just as he had been previously.

Nevertheless, since the *turning away* in a mortal sin takes on a certain sort of diversity from the *turning toward* in its relation to diverse *turnings toward* as diverse causes—with the result that a distinct *turning away* and a distinct *stain* and a distinct *debt of punishment* arise from each *act* of mortal sin—it follows that the matter before us turns on the question of whether or not the *stain* and the *debt of eternal punishment*, insofar as they had been caused by previously forgiven sins, *return* through a subsequent mortal sin.

Thus, it has seemed to some that the stain and the debt of eternal punishment do return, absolutely speaking, in the way in question.

However, this cannot be the case. For the work of God cannot be rendered void by the work of man. But the remission of the prior sins is a work of God’s mercy. Hence, it cannot be rendered void by a man’s subsequent sin—this according to Romans 3:3 (“Will their unbelief make void the fidelity of God?”).

And so others who posit that the sins return have claimed that God does not forgive the sins of a penitent whom He foreknows is going to sin at a later time; instead, He ‘forgives’ him only with respect to his present righteousness. For God foreknows that he is going to be eternally punished for his sins, and yet through grace makes him righteous in the present.

However, this position cannot stand. For if a cause is posited absolutely speaking (*absolute*), then its effect is likewise posited absolutely speaking. Therefore, if the remission of the sins was not effected absolutely speaking, but was instead effected, through grace and the sacraments of grace, with a condition dependent upon the future, it would follow that grace and the sacraments of grace were not a sufficient cause of the remission of the sins. But this is erroneous, since it detracts from God’s grace.

And so it cannot in any way be the case that the stain and debt that belonged to previous sins return insofar as they were caused by those acts.

Yet it is possible for a subsequent act of sin to *virtually* contain the debt that belonged to a previous sin, viz., insofar as, when the individual sins a second time, he seems by that very fact to sin in a more serious way than when he had sinned previously—this according to Romans 2:5: “... according to your hardness and your unrepentant heart you store up for yourself wrath on the day of wrath,” viz., by the sole fact that “you are despising God’s goodness,” which is waiting for your repentance. But God’s goodness is being despised much more if, after the forgiveness of the previous sin, the sin is repeated a second time. How much greater a gift it is to forgive the sin than to tolerate the sinner!

So, then, through a sin that follows repentance the debt that belongs to previously forgiven sins does

in a certain sense return—not in the sense that it is caused by those previously forgiven sins, but in the sense that it is caused by the last sin perpetrated, which is made more serious because of the previous sins (*quod aggravatur ex peccatis prioribus*). This is not for the forgiven sins to return *absolutely speaking*, but for them to return *in a certain respect*, viz., insofar as they are virtually contained in the subsequent sin.

Reply to objection 1: This passage from Augustine should, it seems, be understood to be talking about the return of sins with respect to their debt of eternal punishment considered in itself, viz., because the one who sins after penance incurs the debt of eternal punishment just as before, but not for altogether the same reason. Hence, in *De Responionibus Prosperi*, after Augustine has said, “He does not recede into what has been forgiven, and he will not be damned for original sin,” he adds, “Still, he is affected by that death which he deserved to suffer for the sins that had been forgiven”—viz., because he incurs eternal death, which he had merited for his previous sins.

Reply to objection 2: In the quoted words Bede intends to say that a previous forgiven sin will oppress a man not by the return of its past debt, but by the repetition of the act.

Reply to objection 3: Because of his subsequent sin, his previous just deeds are consigned to oblivion insofar as they were deserving of eternal life, but not insofar as they were obstacles to sin. Hence, if an individual commits a mortal sin after he has repaid his debt, he does not, as it were, become guilty of not having repaid that debt. And much less is penance previously done consigned to oblivion with respect to the remission of sin, since the remission of sin is more a work of God than a work of man.

Reply to objection 4: Absolutely speaking, grace *removes* the stain and the debt of eternal punishment, whereas it *covers* the past acts of sin, in order that (a) God might not, because of those acts, deprive the man of grace, and in order that (b) the man might not have a debt of eternal punishment. And the fact that grace has* done* this once remains forever.

Article 2

Do sins which have been forgiven return because of ingratitude, and does this happen specifically by means of four types of sin?

It seems that it is not the case that sins which have been forgiven return because of ingratitude, and it is likewise not the case that this happens specifically by means of four types of sin, viz., (a) hatred of one's brothers, (b) apostasy from the Faith, (c) contempt for confession, and (d) sorrow over having repented—in accord with the verse that some have recited: “He loathes his brothers, has become an apostate, hates confessing, regrets having repented: his earlier sin returns (*Fratres odit, apostata fit, spernitque confiteri, poenituisse piget: pristina culpa redit*).”

Objection 1: The greater the sin an individual commits against God after having received the gift of forgiveness, the greater the ingratitude. But there are sins that are more serious than the four listed above, e.g., blasphemy against God and the sin against the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it seems that forgiven sins do not return more because of the ingratitude committed through the four sins mentioned above than because of the ingratitude committed through other sins.

Objection 2: Rabanus says, “The reason why God delivered the wicked servant to the torturers until he should pay the whole debt [Matthew 18:23-35] was that a man will be deemed punishable not only for the sins he commits after baptism, but also for the [pre-baptismal] sins (*peccata originalia*) that were forgiven him in baptism.” But counted among our debts are also venial sins, for which we say, “Forgive us

our debts.” Therefore, they likewise return because of ingratitude. And it seems, by parity of reasoning, that previously forgiven sins return through venial sins and not just through the sins mentioned above.

Objection 3: Ingratitude is greater to the extent that one sins after having received a greater gift. But innocence itself, by which we avoid sin, is also a gift of God; for instance, in *Confessiones* 2 Augustine says, “I attribute to Your grace whatever sins I did not commit.” And innocence is a greater gift than even the remission of all one’s sins. Therefore, an individual who sins for the first time after innocence is no less ungrateful to God than an individual who sins after repenting. And so it seems that forgiven sins do not return to the greatest degree through ingratitude that is effected by the four sins mentioned above.

But contrary to this: In *Moralia* 18 Gregory says, “It is evident from what is said in the Gospels that if we do not forgive from our heart the offenses committed against us, what we were rejoicing in as having been forgiven us through [the sacrament of] penance has once again to be driven out.” And so forgiven sins return through ingratitude specifically because of the hatred of our brothers. And the same line of reason seems to hold for the other sins mentioned above as well.

I respond: As was explained above (a. 1), sins forgiven through penance are said to return insofar as their debt is, by reason of ingratitude, virtually contained in a subsequent sin. Now there are two ways in which [the sin of] ingratitude can be committed:

In one way, by the fact that something is done that is contrary to *the gift*. And, on this score, through every mortal sin by which a man offends God, he is rendered ungrateful to God, who has forgiven his sins. And so through every subsequent mortal sin the previously forgiven sins return by reason of ingratitude.

In the second way, [the sin of] ingratitude is committed not only by doing something that is contrary to the gift, but also by doing something contrary to *the form in which the gift is presented (sed etiam faciendo contra formam beneficii praestiti)*

If this form is considered on the part of the benefactor, it is *the remission of debts*. Hence, an individual acts contrary to this form if he does not forgive a brother who is asking for pardon, but instead *holds him in contempt (odium tenet)*.

On the other hand, if the form of the gift is considered on the part of the penitent who receives this gift, then one finds two movements of free choice. The first of these is (a) a movement of free choice with respect to God, which is an act of informed faith, and a man does something contrary to this by *apostasizing from the Faith*, whereas the second is (b) a movement of free choice with respect to the sin, which is an act of penance. As was explained above (q. 85, aa. 2-3), this involves, first, that the man detest his past sins, and an individual acts contrary to this if he is *sorry to have repented*. Second, an act of penance involves the penitent’s intending to submit himself to the keys of the Church through confession—this according to Psalm 31:5 (“I said: ‘I will confess against myself my injustice to the Lord’, and You have forgiven the wickedness of my sin”). And an individual acts against this by *having contempt for confessing*, insofar as he had intended to confess.

And this is why it is said that it is the ingratitude of the [four] sins in question that specifically makes previously forgiven sins return.

Reply to objection 1: What is being claimed about the [four] sins in question is not that they are *more serious* sins than others, but that they are *more directly opposed to the gift of the forgiveness of sins*.

Reply to objection 2: Venial sins and [pre-baptismal] (*peccatum originale*) sin also return in the way explained, just as mortal sins do, to the extent that the gift of God by which these sins are remitted is being held in contempt.

However, an individual does not incur ingratitude through venial sin, since by committing a venial sin an man acts *outside of* God (*praeter Deum*) and not *against* God. And so there is no way in which forgiven sins return *through* venial sins.

Reply to objection 3: There are two ways in which a gift has to weighed:

In one way, on the basis of *the quantity of the gift itself*. And on this score innocence is a greater gift on God's part than is penance, which is called "the second plank after a shipwreck" (cf. q. 84, a. 6).

In the second way, a gift can be weighed *on the part of the recipient*, who is less worthy and so a greater favor is being done for him. Hence, he is also more ungrateful if he holds this gift in contempt. And in this sense the gift of the remission of sins is greater to the extent that it is bestowed on one who is altogether unworthy of it. And so from this a greater ingratitude follows.

Article 3

Is the debt that arises from the ingratitude of a subsequent sin as great as the debt of the sins that had been previously forgiven?

It seems that the debt that arises through the ingratitude of a subsequent sin is as great as the debt of the sins that had been previously forgiven (*per ingratitudinem peccati sequentis consurgat tantus reatus quantus fuerat peccatorum prius dimissorum*):

Objection 1: The magnitude of the gift by which a sin is forgiven is in accord with the magnitude of the sin and, as a result, so is the magnitude of the ingratitude by which this gift is held in contempt. But the quantity of the consequent debt is in accord with the magnitude of the ingratitude. Therefore, the debt that arises from the ingratitude of a subsequent sin is as great as the debt of all the previous sins.

Objection 2: One sins more by offending God than by offending a man. But a servant who is freed by a master is led back into the same sort of servitude from which he had been liberated, or even into a worse servitude. Therefore, *a fortiori*, an individual who sins against God after his liberation from sin is led back to as great a debt of punishment as he previously had.

Objection 3: Matthew 18:34 says that "his lord, being angry, delivered him"—i.e., the one whose forgiven sins returned because of his ingratitude—"to the torturers, until he paid all the debt." But this would not be so unless as great a debt arose from the ingratitude as belonged to all his past sins.

But contrary to this: Deuteronomy 25:2 says, "According to the measure of the sin shall the measure also be of the stripes." From this it is clear that a large debt does not arise from a small sin. But sometimes a subsequent mortal sin is a much smaller sins than any of the sins that have been previously forgiven. Therefore, it is not the case that as great a debt returns because of a subsequent sin as belonged to the previously forgiven sins.

I respond: Some have claimed that from a subsequent sin, because of its ingratitude, there arises a debt (a) as great as was the debt of all the previously forgiven sins and (b) beyond the proper debt of the subsequent sin itself.

But this is not necessary. For it was explained above (a. 1) that the debt belonging to the previous sins returns through a subsequent sin insofar as it follows upon the act of the *subsequent* sin and not insofar as it followed from the acts of the *previous* sins. And so the quantity of the *returning* debt has to be in accord with the seriousness of the *subsequent* sin. Now it can happen that the seriousness of the subsequent sin is equal to the seriousness of all the previous sins, but this is not always necessary, whether (a) we are talking about the seriousness that it has *by its species*, since sometimes the

subsequent sin is simple fornication, whereas the past sins included a sin of homicide or adultery or sacrilege, or whether instead (b) we are talking about the seriousness which it has because of the added sin of ingratitude. For it is not necessary for the quantity of the ingratitude to be equal, absolutely speaking, to the quantity of the gift received, whose quantity has to do with the quantity of the previously forgiven sins. For it is possible that one individual is highly ungrateful for a certain gift, either with respect to the intensity of his contempt for the gift or with respect to the sin being committed against his benefactor, whereas another individual is less ungrateful, either because he holds the gift in less contempt or because he acts less intensely against his benefactor. On the other hand, the quantity of the ingratitude is equal to the quantity of gift in the sense that if we suppose an equal contempt for the gift or an equal offense against the benefactor, then the ingratitude will be more serious to the extent that the gift was greater.

Hence, it is clearly not necessary that, because of the ingratitude, as great a debt returns through a subsequent sin as belonged to the previous sins; instead, what is necessary is that to the extent that the previously forgiven sins were more numerous and more serious, the debt that returns through any sort of subsequent mortal sin will be proportionately greater.

Reply to objection 1: The gift of the remission of sin receives its absolute quantity in accord with the quantity of the forgiven sins. By contrast, as has been explained, the sin of ingratitude receives its absolute quantity not in accord with the quantity of the gift, but in accord with the quantity of the contempt or offense. And so the argument does not go through.

Reply to objection 2: A servant who has been freed is brought back to his first state not for just any sort of ingratitude, but for some sort of grave ingratitude.

Reply to objection 3: The ‘whole debt’ is rendered by him whose forgiven sins return because of his subsequent ingratitude in the sense that, as has been explained, the quantity of his previous sins is found to exist *proportionately* in his subsequent ingratitude, but not *absolutely speaking*.

Article 4

Is ingratitude, by reason of which a subsequent sin makes previously forgiven sins return, a specific sin?

It seems that ingratitude, by reason of which a subsequent sin makes previously forgiven sins return, is a specific sin (*ingratitude ratione cuius sequens peccatum facit redire peccata prius dimissa, sit speciale peccatum*):

Objection 1: The giving of thanks pertains to reciprocity (*pertinet ad contrapassum*), which, as is clear from the Philosopher in *Ethics* 5, is required in justice. But justice is a specific virtue. Therefore, ingratitude is a specific sin.

Objection 2: In *Rhetoric* 2 Tully claims that giving thanks (*gratia*) is a specific virtue. But ingratitude is opposed to giving thanks. Therefore, ingratitude is a specific sin.

Objection 3: A specific effect proceeds from a specific cause. But ingratitude has a specific effect, viz., that it in some sense makes previously forgiven sins return. Therefore, ingratitude is a specific sin.

But contrary to this: That which follows upon every sin is not a specific sin. But as it clear from what has come before (a. 1), through any sort of mortal sin an individual becomes ungrateful to God. Therefore, ingratitude is not a specific sin.

I respond: The ingratitude of a sinner is sometimes (a) a specific sin; sometimes it is (b) not a

specific sin but is instead a circumstance that generally follows upon every mortal sin that is committed against God.

For a sin receives its species from the intention of the sinner; hence, in *Ethics* 5 the Philosopher says, “He who commits adultery in order to steal is more a thief than an adulterer.” Therefore, if a sinner commits some sin out of contempt for God and for a gift received from Him, that sin is drawn toward the species of ingratitude, and this sort of ingratitude is a specific sin.

By contrast, if an individual who intends to commit some sin, e.g., homicide or adultery, is not kept back from this sin by the fact that it involves contempt for God, then the ingratitude will not be a specific sin, but will be drawn toward the species of the other sin as a certain particular circumstance of it. For as Augustine explains in *De Natura et Gratia*, not every sin is committed *out of* contempt, and yet in every sin God is held in contempt in His commandments.

Hence, it is clear that the ingratitude of a sinner is sometimes, but not always, a specific sin.

Reply to objection 1 and objection 2 and objection 3 and reply to the argument to the contrary: From this the reply to the objections is clear. For the first [three] arguments conclude that ingratitude is in its own right a certain species of sin (*secundum se sit quaedam species peccati*), whereas the last argument, [the argument to the contrary], concludes that insofar as ingratitude is found in every sin, it is not a specific sin.