QUESTION 30

Mercy

We next have to consider mercy or pity (*misericordia*). And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Is the cause of mercy or pity something bad that belongs to the one on whom we have mercy or pity? (2) Over what sorts of things does one have mercy or pity (*quorum sit misereri*)? (3) Is mercy a virtue? (4) Is mercy the greatest of the virtues?

Article 1

Is something bad properly speaking the motive for mercy?

It seems that something bad is not properly speaking the motive for mercy or pity (*misericordia*):

Objection 1: As was shown above (q. 19, a.1 and q. 48, a.6), sin is a greater evil than punishment. But sin evokes indignation rather than mercy or pity. Therefore, it is not what is bad that evokes mercy or pity.

Objection 2: What is cruel or detestable (*crudelia seu dira*) seems to have a certain excess of evil. But in *Rhetoric* 2 the Philosopher says that what is detestable is different from what is pitiable and expels pity. Therefore, what is bad is not as such a motive for mercy or pity.

Objection 3: Indications of bad things are not themselves genuinely bad. But as is evident from *Rhetoric* 2, indications of bad things evoke pity. Therefore, it is not what is bad that properly speaking evokes mercy or pity.

But contrary to this: In *De Fide Orthodoxa* 2 Damascene says that mercy or pity is a species of sadness. But the motive for sadness is something bad. Therefore, the motive for mercy or pity is something bad.

I respond: As Augustine says in *De Civitate Dei* 9, "Mercy or pity (*misericordia*) is compassion in our heart for another's unhappiness (*alienae miseriae in nostro corde compassio*), by which we are compelled to help if we are able to." For it is called '*misericordia*' from the fact that one has a saddened heart (*miserum cor*) over the unhappiness of another (*super miseria alterius*). But misery or unhappiness (*miseria*) is opposed to happiness (*felicitas*), and it is of the nature of beatitude or happiness (*de ratione beatitudinis sive felicitatis*) that one gets what he wants. For as Augustine says in *De Trinitate* 13, "The one who is happy (*beatus*) has all that he wants and wants nothing bad." And so, contrariwise, it belongs to misery or unhappiness that a man undergoes something that he does not want to undergo.

Now there are three ways in which someone wants something: In one way, he wants it by a *natural desire*, in the way that all men want to exist and to live. In a second way, he wants something by *choice stemming from premeditation*. In a third way, a man *wants something not in its own right but in its cause*; for instance, when someone wants to eat what is harmful to him, we say that he in some sense wants to be sick.

So, then, the motive for mercy or pity, insofar as it pertains to unhappiness, is in the first instance what is contrary to the natural desire of the one who is doing the willing, viz., corruptive and sorrowful evils whose contraries men desire naturally. Hence, in *Rhetoric* 2 the Philosopher says, "Pity is a certain sadness over an apparent corruptive or sorrowful evil."

Second, bad things of this sort are more effective in evoking pity when they are contrary to choices one has willed. Hence, in the same place the Philosopher says that bad things make for unhappiness "when their cause is fortune, as when something bad occurs where something good was being hoped for."

Third, bad things cause still more unhappiness when they are contrary to whatever someone wills (*contra totam voluntatem*), e.g., when a particular individual has always pursued good things, and bad things keep happening to him. And so in the same book the Philosopher says, "The greatest degree of

pity is over evils that someone suffers undeservedly."

Reply to objection 1: It is part of the nature of sin that it is voluntary, and on this score it has the character of something to be punished rather than the character of something *miserable*. But since sin can in some sense itself be a punishment, viz., insofar as it has something joined to it that is contrary to the sinner's will, it can on this score have the character of something miserable. Accordingly, we pity sinners and have compassion for them; as Gregory says in a homily, "Genuine justice has compassion for sinners and not disdain." And Matthew 9:36 says, "Jesus, seeing the crowds, had compassion on them, because they were troubled and lying about, like sheep without a shepherd."

Reply to objection 2: Since mercy or pity is compassion over another's unhappiness, it is properly directed toward another and not toward oneself, except by a sort of similitude—just like justice, insofar as the diverse parts are thought of within a man, as *Ethics* 5 points out. Accordingly, Ecclesiasticus 30:24 says, "Have pity on your own soul, pleasing God."

Therefore, just as it is pain or sorrow (*dolor*)—and not pity or mercy—that is properly speaking directed toward oneself, as when we suffer something detestable within ourselves, so, too, if certain persons are so closely connected to us that they are, as it were, part of ourselves, e.g., children or parents, then we feel pain at their evils and not pity, just as we do in the case of our own wounds. And this is the sense in which the Philosopher says that what is detestable drives out pity.

Reply to objection 3: Just as pleasure follows upon the expectation of good things and the memory of good things, so, too, sadness follows upon the expectation of bad things and the memory of bad things—though not as vehemently as from sensing them in the present. And so insofar as indications of bad things represent unhappy bad things as present to us, they move us to have pity.

Article 2

Is some defect on the part of the one who has mercy a reason for his having mercy?

It seems that a defect (*defectus*) on the part of the one who has mercy or pity is not a reason for having mercy or pity:

Objection 1: It is proper to God to have mercy; hence, Psalm 144:9 says, "His tender mercies are over all His works." But there are no defects in God. Therefore, a defect cannot be a reason for having mercy.

Objection 2: If some defect is a reason for having pity, then those who have the biggest defects should especially have pity. But this is false; for in *Rhetoric* 2 the Philosopher says, "Those who have been totally ruined have no pity." Therefore, it is not the case that a defect on the part of the one who has pity is a reason for having pity.

Objection 3: Sustaining some sort of abuse involves a defect. But in the same place the Philosopher says that those who have an abusive disposition do not have pity. Therefore, a defect on the part of the one who has pity is not a reason for having pity.

But contrary to this: Mercy is a certain sort of sadness. But a defect is a reason for sadness; this is why, as was explained above (*ST* 1-2, q. 47, a. 3), the sick are easily saddened. Therefore, a reason for having mercy is a defect on the part of the one who has mercy.

I respond: Since, as was explained above (a. 1), mercy or pity is compassion over another's unhappiness, it follows that someone has mercy or pity because it happens that he is sorry about another's unhappiness. Now since sadness or sorrow is directed toward something bad that belongs to oneself, it follows that someone is sorry about, or is saddened by, another's unhappiness to the extent that he perceives the other's unhappiness as his own. Now there are two ways in which this can happen.

In one way, because of a *union of affection*, which is effected by love (*amor*). For since the lover thinks of his friend as himself, he thinks of the evil that belongs to his friend as his own evil, and so he is sorry about his friend's evil as about his own. This is why, in *Ethics* 9, the Philosopher posits among the signs of friendship that one suffers along with one's friend. And in Romans 12:15 the Apostle says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."

In the second way, it happens because of a *real union*, as when something bad that belongs to certain individuals is close enough that it passes from them to us. And so the Philosopher says in *Rhetoric* 2 that men have pity on those who are connected with them and are similar to them, since they are thereby made to think that they themselves are likewise able to undergo similar bad things. And this is why the old and the wise, who realize that they are able to come unexpectedly upon evils, along with the weak and the fearful, are more merciful. By contrast, others, who think themselves happy and powerful enough that they think that they are unable to be afflicted by anything bad, are not so merciful.

So, then, defects are always the reason for having pity or mercy, either insofar as one thinks of another's defect as his own because of a union of love, or because of the possibility of undergoing similar evils.

Reply to objection 1: God is merciful only because of love, insofar as He loves us as something of His own.

Reply to objection 2: Those who are already immersed in the worst evils do not fear that they will suffer anything worse, and so they do not have pity or mercy. Similarly, neither do those who are extremely fearful, since they are so intent on their own suffering that they do not pay attention to the unhappiness of others.

Reply to objection 3: Those who have an abusive disposition—whether because they have suffered abuse or because they want to afflict abuse on others—are moved to anger and audacity, which are passions of virility that lift a man's mind to deal with what is difficult. Hence, these passions draw a man's mind away from the thought that something will be suffered in the future. Hence, as long as such individuals are in this disposition, they have no mercy—this according to Proverbs 27:4 ("Anger has no mercy, nor fury when it erupts").

For a similar reason, the proud, who look down upon others and think them bad, do not show mercy. This is why Gregory says that false justice, i.e., the false justice of the proud, harbors disdain and not compassion.

Article 3

Is mercy a virtue?

It seems that mercy is not a virtue:

Objection 1: As is clear from the Philosopher in the *Ethics*, the main thing in a virtue is choice. But as is explained in the same book, an act of choosing is an inclination toward what has already been deliberated about (*appetitus praeconsiliati*). Therefore, what impedes deliberation cannot be called a virtue. But mercy or pity impedes deliberation—this according to Sallust ("All men who take counsel need to be free from anger and pity, since the mind does not easily see the truth when these things stand in the way"). Therefore, mercy is not a virtue.

Objection 2: Nothing contrary to a virtue is praiseworthy. But as the Philosopher says in *Rhetoric* 2, *nemesis* is contrary to mercy. But as *Ethics* 2 says, *nemesis* is a praiseworthy virtue. Therefore, mercy is not a virtue.

Objection 3: As was explained above (q. 28, a. 4 and q. 29, a. 4), since joy and peace follow upon charity, they are not special virtues,. But mercy likewise follows upon charity, since it is out of charity

that we "weep with those who weep," in the same way that we "rejoice with those who rejoice." Therefore, mercy is not a special virtue.

Objection 4: Since mercy belongs to the appetitive power, it is not an intellectual virtue. Neither is it a theological virtue, since it does not have God as its object. Similarly, it is not a moral virtue, either. For it does not have to do with operations, since this pertains to justice; nor does it have to do with the passions, since it is not traced back to any of the twelve 'means' that the Philosopher posits in *Ethics* 2. Therefore, mercy is not a virtue.

But contrary to this: In *De Civitate Dei* 9 Augustine says, "In praising Caesar, Cicero spoke much better and more humanely and more in keeping with pious sensibilities when he said, 'None of your virtues is more admirable or gracious than your mercy'." Therefore, mercy is a virtue.

I respond: Mercy implies sorrow over the unhappiness of another.

Now this sorrow can, in one sense, denominate a movement of the sentient appetite. And on this score mercy or pity is a passion and not a virtue.

However, in a second sense it can denominate a movement of the intellective appetite, insofar as an individual is displeased by what is bad for someone else. Now this movement can be regulated by reason and, in accord with this movement regulated by reason, the movement of the lower appetite can be regulated. Hence, in *De Civitate Dei* 9 Augustine says, "This movement of the soul"—viz., mercy—"serves reason when mercy is offered in such a way that justice is preserved, whether one is giving to the needy or forgiving the penitent." And because, as was shown above (*ST* 1-2, q. 56, a. 4 and q. 59, a. 4 and q. 60, a. 5 and q. 66, a. 4), the nature of a human virtue consists in the mind's movements being regulated by reason, it follows that mercy is a virtue.

Reply to objection 1: This passage from Sallust is taken to be about mercy insofar as it is a passion unregulated by reason. For as an unregulated passion it impedes reason's deliberation when it makes for a departure from justice.

Reply to objection 2: Here the Philosopher is speaking of mercy and *nemesis* insofar as both of them are passions. And, to be sure, they have a contrariety as to the estimation they have of the bad things that happen to others. The one who experiences mercy is sorry about those bad things to the extent that he thinks that an individual is suffering them undeservedly, whereas the one who experiences *nemesis* (a) rejoices over them to the extent that he thinks that the individuals are suffering them deservedly and (b) is saddened if things go well for the undeserving. And as is said in the same place, "Both of the passions are praiseworthy and derive from the same moral disposition."

However, as will be explained below (q. 36, a. 3), it is envy that is properly opposed to mercy.

Reply to objection 3: Joy and peace add nothing to the character of the good which is the object of charity, and so they do not require virtues other than charity. By contrast, mercy has to do with a special reason, viz., the unhappiness of the individual to whom mercy is shown.

Reply to objection 4: Insofar as it is a virtue, mercy is a moral virtue that has to do with the passions, and it is traced back to the mean that is called *nemesis*, since it proceeds from the same moral disposition, as *Rhetoric* 2 explains. To be sure, the Philosopher does posit these means as passions and not as virtues, since they are praiseworthy even insofar as they are passions. However, nothing prevents them from arising from an elective habit. And in this respect they assume the character of a virtue.

Article 4

Is mercy the greatest of the virtues?

It seems that mercy is the greatest of the virtues:

Objection 1: Divine worship seems especially relevant to virtue. But mercy is placed higher than

divine worship—this according to Hosea 6:6 and Matthew 12:7 ("I desire mercy, and not sacrifice"). Therefore, mercy is the greatest of the virtues.

Objection 2: In his Gloss on 1 Timothy 4:8 ("Godliness (*pietas*) is profitable to all things"), Ambrose says, "The whole summit of the Christian way of life lies in mercy and piety." But the Christian way of life includes every virtue. Therefore, the summit of the whole of virtue consists in mercy.

Objection 3: A virtue is something that makes the one having it good. Therefore, a virtue is better to the extent that it makes a man more similar to God, since a man is better by being more similar to God. But it is mercy that especially does this, since in Psalm 144:9 it is said of God that "His tender mercies are over all His works." Hence, in Luke 6:36 our Lord says, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." Therefore, mercy is the greatest of the virtues.

But contrary to this: In Colossians 3:12, after the Apostle had said, "Put on, as the beloved of God, the bowels of mercy ...," he later added, "... above all, have charity." Therefore, mercy is not the greatest of the virtues.

I respond: There are two ways in which a virtue can be the greatest virtue: (a) in its own right (*secundum se*) and (b) in relation to the one who has it.

In its own right mercy is the greatest. For it belongs to mercy to be bountiful to others and, what's more, to alleviate the needs of others—and this belongs especially to someone who is higher (*est superioris*). That is why being merciful is posited as proper to God, and it is in this that His omnipotence is especially manifested.

However, as regards the one who has the virtue, mercy is not the greatest unless the one who has it is the greatest and has no one above him, but instead has everyone below him. For one who has someone above him is such that it is greater and better for him to be connected to someone above him than to supply what is needed to someone below him. And so, as regards a man, who has God above him, charity, through which he is united to God, is better than mercy, through which he supplies what is needed by his neighbors (*per quam defectus proximorum supplet*).

Still, among all the virtues that pertain to one's neighbor, mercy is the best, just as its act likewise belongs to one who is better. For to supply what is needed by another belongs, as such, to someone who is higher and better.

Reply to objection 1: It is not because of God that we worship Him with exterior sacrifices and gifts; it is because of ourselves and because of our neighbors. For He does not need our sacrifices, but instead He wants them to be offered for the sake of our devotion and for the sake of the advantage of our neighbors. And so mercy, by which the needs of others are supplied, is a sacrifice more acceptable to Him, because it works more closely to the advantage of our neighbors—this according to Hebrews 13:16 ("Do not forget to do good and to share; for by such sacrifices God's favor is obtained").

Reply to objection 2: The summit of the Christian religion consists in mercy as regards its exterior works. However, the interior affection of charity, by which we are joined to God, is greater than both love and mercy with respect to our neighbors.

Reply to objection 3: It is through charity that we are assimilated to God as united to Him through affection. And so charity is greater than mercy, through which we are assimilated to God as regards a similarity in operation.