

QUESTION 38

Contention

We next have to consider contention (*contentio*). And on this topic there are two questions: (1) Is contention a mortal sin? (2) Is contention a child of vainglory?

Article 1

Is contention a mortal sin?

It seems that contention is not a mortal sin:

Objection 1: Mortal sin is not found in spiritual men. Yet contention is found among spiritual men—this according to Luke 22:24 (“A dispute arose among the disciples of Jesus about which of them was the greatest”). Therefore, contention is not a mortal sin.

Objection 2: No well-disposed individual should be pleased by a mortal sin in his neighbor. But in Philippians 1:17 the Apostle says, “Some preach Christ out of contentiousness”—and afterwards he adds, “In this also I rejoice and will rejoice.” Therefore, contention is not a mortal sin.

Objection 3: It is possible for individuals to contend in a judicial proceeding or in a disputation without any malignant intentions but instead with good intentions, e.g., those who contend by disputing against heretics. Hence, a Gloss on 1 Kings 14:1 (“It came to pass one day that ...”) says, “Once they are challenged to a contest, Catholics set about contending with heretics.” Therefore, contention is not a mortal sin.

Objection 4: Job seems to have contended with God—this according to Job 39:32 (“Will he who contends with God be so easily silenced?”). And yet Job did not commit a mortal sin, since the Lord says of him, “You [Eliphaz] have not spoken uprightly before me, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7). Therefore, contention is not always a mortal sin.

But contrary to this: Contention is contrary to the Apostle’s command in 2 Timothy 2:14, “Do not contend with words.” And in Galatians 5:20 contention is numbered among the works of the flesh which are such that “those who do them do not possess the kingdom of God,” as it says in the same place. But everything that excludes one from the kingdom of God and that violates a precept is a mortal sin. Therefore, contention is a mortal sin.

I respond: To contend is to tend against someone (*contendere est contra aliquem tendere*). Hence, just as discord involves a kind of contrariety in the will, so contention involves a kind of contrariety in speech. Because of this, when someone’s speech makes ample use of contraries (*per contraria se diffundit*), it is called ‘contention’, which is posited as one of the ‘colors’ of rhetoric by Tully, who puts it this way: “Contention exists when one’s speech is put together out of contraries—as, for instance, if one says, ‘Flattering assent has pleasant beginnings and leads to very bitter outcomes.’”

Now there are two ways in which contrariety in speech can be thought of: (a) with respect to the *intention* of the one who contends, and (b) with respect to the *mode* or *manner* of contention.

As for the intention, one needs to consider whether the individual opposes the truth, which is blameworthy, or whether he instead opposes falsehood, which is praiseworthy.

As for the mode or manner, one needs to consider whether the manner of contending is fitting for both the persons involved and also the matter at hand, since this is praiseworthy—hence, in *Rhetorica* 3 Tully says, “Contention is sharply worded speech fit for confirming and confuting”—or whether instead the manner lies outside what is appropriate for the persons involved and the matter at hand, in which case the contentiousness is blameworthy.

Thus, if contention is understood to involve attacking the truth in a disordered manner, then it is a mortal sin. And it is in this way that Ambrose defines contention when he says, “Contention is attacking the truth with clamorous confidence.”

On the other hand, if contention is understood to involve attacking falsehood with an appropriate level of acrimony, then contention is praiseworthy.

Again, if contention is understood to involve attacking falsehood in a disordered way, then it can be a venial sin—unless perhaps the disorder in contending is so great that it generates scandal for others. Hence, in 2 Timothy 2:14, after the Apostle has said, “Do not contend with words,” he adds, “For it is good for nothing except subverting the listeners.”

Reply to objection 1: Among the disciples of Christ there was no contention with the intention of attacking the truth, since each one defended what seemed to him to be true. However, there was disorder in their contentions, since they contended about what should not have been contended about, viz., the primacy of honor. For as a Gloss on the same passage says, “They were not yet spiritual.” For this reason, our Lord held them in check after that.

Reply to objection 2: Those who were preaching Christ out of contentiousness were reprehensible, since even though they were not attacking the truth of the Faith but were instead preaching the Faith, they were nonetheless fighting against the truth in the sense that they intended to “raise affliction” for the Apostle, who was preaching the truth of the Faith. Hence, the Apostle was rejoicing not over their contentiousness, but over the fruit that was coming from it, viz., that Christ was being preached. For at times something good comes even from what is bad.

Reply to objection 3: According to the *complete concept* of contention insofar as it is a *mortal sin*, the one who ‘contends’ in a judicial proceeding is someone who is fighting against the truth of justice, and the one who ‘contends’ in a disputation is someone who intends to attack the truth of doctrine. And in this sense it is not the case Catholics contend against heretics—just the opposite.

However, if contention in a judicial proceeding or in a disputation is taken in an incomplete sense, viz., just insofar as it involves sharply worded speech, then it is not always a mortal sin.

Reply to objection 4: Contention is being taken in this objection generally for disputation. For Job had said, “I am speaking to the Almighty, and I wish to have a dispute with God” (Job 13:3). Nonetheless, he did not intend either (a) to fight against the truth, but instead wanted to make an inquiry, or (b) to make use of any disorder of intention or of speech in this inquiry.

Article 2

Is contention a child of vainglory?

It seems that contention is not a child of vainglory:

Objection 1: Contention has an affinity to jealousy or zeal; hence, 1 Corinthians 3:3 says, “Since there is jealousy and contention among you, are you not carnal, and walk in an ordinary human way?” But jealousy has to do with envy. Therefore, contention arises more from envy.

Objection 2: Contention is accompanied by a sort of clamor. But as is clear from Gregory in *Moralia* 31, clamor arises from anger. Therefore, contention likewise arises from anger.

Objection 3: Among other things, knowledge seems chiefly to be the matter of pride and vainglory—this according to 1 Corinthians 7:1 (“Knowledge inflates”). But contention very often arises from a lack of the knowledge through which the truth is known and is not attacked. Therefore, contention is not a child of vainglory.

But contrary to this is the authority of Gregory in *Moralia* 31.

I respond: As was explained above (q. 37, a. 2), discord is a child of vainglory because each of two discordant individuals insists on his own position, and the one does not acquiesce to the other; but it is proper to pride and vainglory to seek one’s own excellence.

Now just as individuals are discordant because they insist *with their heart* on their own position, so

individuals are said to contend because each of them defends *with his words* what seems to him to be correct. And so contention is posited as a child of vainglory for the very same reason that discord is.

Reply to objection 1: Contention, like discord, has an affinity to envy as regards the withdrawal of the individual from the one whom he is discordant with and contends with. However, as regards what the one who contends insists on, contention agrees with pride and vainglory—viz., as has been explained, insofar as he stands firm on his own position.

Reply to objection 2: Clamor is presupposed by the sort of contention we are talking about, which has the purpose of attacking the truth. Hence, clamor is not the main element in contention. And so it is not necessary that the contention should be derived from the same source that the clamor is derived from.

Reply to objection 3: Pride and vainglory are occasioned mainly by goods—even by the goods that are opposed to them, as when someone takes pride in his own humility. For derivations of this sort are *per accidens* and not *per se*, and in this mode of derivation nothing prevents one contrary from having its source in the other contrary.

And so nothing prevents things that have their source *per se* in pride and vainglory from being caused by contraries of those things from which pride sometimes arises.