

## St. Thomas Aquinas

# The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

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### OF VIRGINITY (FIVE ARTICLES)

We must now consider virginity: and under this head there are five points of inquiry:

- [\(1\)](#) In what does virginity consist?
  - [\(2\)](#) Whether it is lawful?
  - [\(3\)](#) Whether it is a virtue?
  - [\(4\)](#) Of its excellence in comparison with marriage;
  - [\(5\)](#) Of its excellence in comparison with the other virtues.
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### Whether virginity consists in integrity of the flesh?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that virginity does not consist in integrity of the flesh. For Augustine says (De Nup. et Concup.) [\*The quotation is from De Sancta Virgin. xiii] that "virginity is the continual meditation on incorruption in a corruptible flesh." But meditation does not concern the flesh. Therefore virginity is not situated in the flesh.

**Objection 2:** Further, virginity denotes a kind of purity. Now Augustine says (De Civ. Dei i, 18) that "purity dwells in the soul." Therefore virginity is not incorruption of the flesh.

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purity. Yet sometimes the seal is broken without loss of virginity. For Augustine says (De Civ. Dei i, 18) that "those organs may be injured through being wounded by mischance. Physicians, too, sometimes do for the sake of health that which makes one shudder to see: and a midwife has been known to destroy by touch the proof of virginity that she sought." And he adds: "Nobody, I think, would be so foolish as to deem this maiden to have forfeited even bodily sanctity, though she lost the integrity of that organ." Therefore virginity does not consist in incorruption of the flesh.

**Objection 4:** Further, corruption of the flesh consists chiefly in resolution of the semen: and this may take place without copulation, whether one be asleep or awake. Yet seemingly virginity is not lost without copulation: for Augustine says (De Virgin. xiii) that "virginal integrity and holy continency that refrains from all sexual intercourse is the portion of angels." Therefore virginity does not consist in incorruption of the flesh.

**On the contrary,** Augustine says (De Virgin. viii) that "virginity is continence whereby integrity of the flesh is vowed, consecrated and observed in honor of the Creator of both soul and flesh."

**I answer that,** Virginity takes its name apparently from "viror" [freshness], and just as a thing is described as fresh and retaining its freshness, so long as it is not parched by excessive heat, so too, virginity denotes that the person possessed thereof is unseared by the heat of concupiscence which is experienced in achieving the greatest bodily pleasure which is that of sexual intercourse. Hence, Ambrose says (De Virgin. i, 5) that "virginal chastity is integrity free of pollution."

Now venereal pleasures offer three points for consideration. The first is on the part of the body, viz. the violation of the seal of virginity. The second is the link between that which concerns the soul and that which concerns the body, and this is the resolution of the semen, causing sensible pleasure. The third is entirely on the part of the soul, namely the purpose of attaining this pleasure. Of these three the first is accidental to the moral act, which as such must be considered in reference to the soul. The second stands in the relation of matter to the moral act, since the sensible passions are the matters of moral acts. But the third stands in the position of form and complement, because the essence of morality is perfected in that which concerns the reason. Since then virginity consists in freedom from the aforesaid corruption, it follows that the integrity of the bodily organ is accidental to virginity; while freedom from pleasure in resolution of the semen is related thereto materially; and the purpose of perpetually abstaining from this pleasure is the formal and complete element in virginity.

**Reply to Objection 1:** This definition of Augustine's expresses directly that which is formal in virginity. For "meditation" denotes reason's purpose; and the addition "perpetual" does not imply that a virgin must always retain this meditation actually, but that she should bear in mind the purpose of always persevering therein. The material element is expressed indirectly by the words "on incorruption in a corruptible body." This is added to show the difficulty of virginity: for if the flesh were incorruptible, it would not be difficult to maintain a perpetual meditation on incorruption.

**Reply to Objection 2:** It is true that purity, as to its essence, is in the soul; but as to its matter, it is in the body: and it is the same with virginity. Wherefore Augustine says (De Virgin. viii) that "although virginity resides in the flesh," and for this reason is a bodily quality, "yet it is a spiritual thing, which a holy continency fosters and preserves."

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[Donate bitcoin.](#) St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS152.html](#)ity, in so far as a person, through purposely abstaining from venereal pleasure, retains the integrity of a bodily organ. Hence if the organ lose its integrity by chance in some other way, this is no more prejudicial to virginity than being deprived of a hand or foot.

**Reply to Objection 4:** Pleasure resulting from resolution of semen may arise in two ways. If this be the result of the mind's purpose, it destroys virginity, whether copulation takes place or not. Augustine, however, mentions copulation, because such like resolution is the ordinary and natural result thereof. In another way this may happen beside the purpose of the mind, either during sleep, or through violence and without the mind's consent, although the flesh derives pleasure from it, or again through weakness of nature, as in the case of those who are subject to a flow of semen. In such cases virginity is not forfeit, because such like pollution is not the result of impurity which excludes virginity.

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## Whether virginity is unlawful?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that virginity is unlawful. For whatever is contrary to a precept of the natural law is unlawful. Now just as the words of Gn. 2:16, "Of every tree" that is in "paradise, thou shalt eat," indicate a precept of the natural law, in reference to the preservation of the individual, so also the words of Gn. 1:28, "Increase and multiply, and fill the earth," express a precept of the natural law, in reference to the preservation of the species. Therefore just as it would be a sin to abstain from all food, as this would be to act counter to the good of the individual, so too it is a sin to abstain altogether from the act of procreation, for this is to act against the good of the species.

**Objection 2:** Further, whatever declines from the mean of virtue is apparently sinful. Now virginity declines from the mean of virtue, since it abstains from all venereal pleasures: for the Philosopher says (Ethic. ii, 2), that "he who revels in every pleasure, and abstains from not even one, is intemperate: but he who refrains from all is loutish and insensible." Therefore virginity is something sinful.

**Objection 3:** Further, punishment is not due save for a vice. Now in olden times those were punished who led a celibate life, as Valerius Maximus asserts [\*Dict. Fact. Mem. ii, 9]. Hence according to Augustine (De Vera Relig. iii) Plato "is said to have sacrificed to nature, in order that he might atone for his perpetual continency as though it were a sin." Therefore virginity is a sin.

**On the contrary,** No sin is a matter of direct counsel. But virginity is a matter of direct counsel: for it is written ([1 Cor. 7:25](#)): "Concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord: but I give counsel." Therefore virginity is not an unlawful thing.

**I answer that,** In human acts, those are sinful which are against right reason. Now right reason requires that things directed to an end should be used in a measure proportionate to

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for instance riches; another, consisting in bodily goods; the third, consisting in the goods of the soul among which the goods of the contemplative life take precedence of the goods of the active life, as the Philosopher shows (Ethic. x, 7), and as our Lord declared ([Lk. 10:42](#)), "Mary hath chosen the better part." Of these goods those that are external are directed to those which belong to the body, and those which belong to the body are directed to those which belong to the soul; and furthermore those which belong to the active life are directed to those which belong to the life of contemplation. Accordingly, right reason dictates that one use external goods in a measure proportionate to the body, and in like manner as regards the rest.

Wherefore if a man refrain from possessing certain things (which otherwise it were good for him to possess), for the sake of his body's good, or of the contemplation of truth, this is not sinful, but in accord /with right reason. In like manner if a man abstain from bodily pleasures, in order more freely to give himself to the contemplation of truth, this is in accordance with the rectitude of reason. Now holy virginity refrains from all venereal pleasure in order more freely to have leisure for Divine contemplation: for the Apostle says ([1 Cor. 7:34](#)): "The unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord: that she may be holy in both body and in spirit. But she that is married thinketh on the things of the world, how she may please her husband." Therefore it follows that virginity instead of being sinful is worthy of praise.

**Reply to Objection 1:** A precept implies a duty, as stated above ([Question \[122\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#)). Now there are two kinds of duty. There is the duty that has to be fulfilled by one person; and a duty of this kind cannot be set aside without sin. The other duty has to be fulfilled by the multitude, and the fulfilment of this kind of duty is not binding on each one of the multitude. For the multitude has many obligations which cannot be discharged by the individual; but are fulfilled by one person doing this, and another doing that. Accordingly the precept of natural law which binds man to eat must needs be fulfilled by each individual, otherwise the individual cannot be sustained. On the other hand, the precept of procreation regards the whole multitude of men, which needs not only to multiply in body, but also to advance spiritually. Wherefore sufficient provision is made for the human multitude, if some betake themselves to carnal procreation, while others abstaining from this betake themselves to the contemplation of Divine things, for the beauty and welfare of the whole human race. Thus too in an army, some take sentry duty, others are standard-bearers, and others fight with the sword: yet all these things are necessary for the multitude, although they cannot be done by one person.

**Reply to Objection 2:** The person who, beside the dictate of right reason, abstains from all pleasures through aversion, as it were, for pleasure as such, is insensible as a country lout. But a virgin does not refrain from every pleasure, but only from that which is venereal: and abstains therefrom according to right reason, as stated above. Now the mean of virtue is fixed with reference, not to quantity but to right reason, as stated in Ethic. ii, 6: wherefore it is said of the magnanimous (Ethic. iv, 3) that "in point of quantity he goes to the extreme, but in point of becomingness he follows the mean."

**Reply to Objection 3:** Laws are framed according to what occurs more frequently. Now it seldom happened in olden times that anyone refrained from all venereal pleasure through love of the contemplation of truth: as Plato alone is related to have done. Hence it was not through thinking this a sin, that he offered sacrifice, but "because he yielded to the false opinion of his fellow countrymen," as Augustine remarks (De Vera Relig. iii).

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## Whether virginity is a virtue?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that virginity is not a virtue. For "no virtue is in us by nature," as the Philosopher says (Ethic. ii, 1). Now virginity is in us by nature, since all are virgins when born. Therefore virginity is not a virtue.

**Objection 2:** Further, whoever has one virtue has all virtues, as stated above ([FS, Question \[65\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#)). Yet some have other virtues without having virginity: else, since none can go to the heavenly kingdom without virtue, no one could go there without virginity, which would involve the condemnation of marriage. Therefore virginity is not a virtue.

**Objection 3:** Further, every virtue is recovered by penance. But virginity is not recovered by penance: wherefore Jerome says [\*Ep. xxii ad Eustoch.]: "Other things God can do, but He cannot restore the virgin after her downfall." Therefore seemingly virginity is not a virtue.

**Objection 4:** Further, no virtue is lost without sin. Yet virginity is lost without sin, namely by marriage. Therefore virginity is not a virtue.

**Objection 5:** Further, virginity is condivided with widowhood and conjugal purity. But neither of these is a virtue. Therefore virginity is not a virtue.

**On the contrary,** Ambrose says (De Virgin. i, 3): "Love of virginity moves us to say something about virginity, lest by passing it over we should seem to cast a slight on what is a virtue of high degree."

**I answer that,** As stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)), the formal and completive element in virginity is the purpose of abstaining from venereal pleasure, which purpose is rendered praiseworthy by its end, in so far, to wit, as this is done in order to have leisure for Divine things: while the material element in virginity is integrity of the flesh free of all experience of venereal pleasure. Now it is manifest that where a good action has a special matter through having a special excellence, there is a special kind of virtue: for example, magnificence which is about great expenditure is for this reason a special virtue distinct from liberality, which is about all uses of money in general. Now to keep oneself free from the experience of venereal pleasure has an excellence of its own deserving of greater praise than keeping oneself free from inordinate venereal pleasure. Wherefore virginity is a special virtue being related to chastity as magnificence to liberality.

**Reply to Objection 1:** Men have from their birth that which is material in virginity, namely integrity of the flesh and freedom from venereal experience. But they have not that which is formal in virginity, namely the purpose of safeguarding this integrity for God's sake, which purpose gives virginity its character of virtue. Hence Augustine says (De Virgin. xi): "Nor do we praise virgins for being virgins, but, because their virginity is consecrated to God by holy continency."

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them, namely charity, or by reason of prudence, as stated above ([Question \[129\]](#), [Article \[3\]](#), ad 2), but not by reason of that which is material in them. For nothing hinders a virtuous man from providing the matter of one virtue, and not the matter of another virtue: thus a poor man has the matter of temperance, but not that of magnificence. It is in this way that one who has the other virtues lacks the matter of virginity, namely the aforesaid integrity of the flesh: nevertheless he can have that which is formal in virginity, his mind being so prepared that he has the purpose of safeguarding this same integrity of the flesh, should it be fitting for him to do so: even as a poor man may be so prepared in mind as to have the purpose of being magnificent in his expenditure, were he in a position to do so: or again as a prosperous man is so prepared in mind as to purpose bearing misfortune with equanimity: without which preparedness of the mind no man can be virtuous.

**Reply to Objection 3:** Virtue can be recovered by penance as regards that which is formal in virtue, but not as to that which is material therein. For if a magnificent man has squandered all his wealth he does not recover his riches by repenting of his sin. In like manner a person who has lost virginity by sin, recovers by repenting, not the matter of virginity but the purpose of virginity.

As regards the matter of virginity there is that which can be miraculously restored by God, namely the integrity of the organ, which we hold to be accidental to virginity: while there is something else which cannot be restored even by miracle, to wit, that one who has experienced venereal lust should cease to have had that experience. For God cannot make that which is done not to have been done, as stated in the FP, [Question \[25\]](#), [Article \[4\]](#).

**Reply to Objection 4:** Virginity as a virtue denotes the purpose, confirmed by vow, of observing perpetual integrity. For Augustine says (*De Virgin.* viii) that "by virginity, integrity of the flesh is vowed, consecrated and observed in honor of the Creator of both soul and flesh." Hence virginity, as a virtue, is never lost without sin.

**Reply to Objection 5:** Conjugal chastity is deserving of praise merely because it abstains from unlawful pleasures: hence no excellence attaches to it above that of chastity in general. Widowhood, however, adds something to chastity in general; but it does not attain to that which is perfect in this matter, namely to entire freedom from venereal pleasure; virginity alone achieves this. Wherefore virginity alone is accounted a virtue above chastity, even as magnificence is reckoned above liberality.

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## Whether virginity is more excellent than marriage?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that virginity is not more excellent than marriage. For Augustine says (*De Bono Conjug.* xxi): "Continence was equally meritorious in John who remained unmarried and Abraham who begot children." Now a greater virtue has greater merit. Therefore virginity is not a greater virtue than conjugal chastity.

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virginity were preferable to conjugal continence, it would seem to follow that every virgin is to be praised more than any married woman. But this is untrue. Therefore virginity is not preferable to marriage.

**Objection 3:** Further, the common good takes precedence of the private good, according to the Philosopher (Ethic. i, 2). Now marriage is directed to the common good: for Augustine says (De Bono Conjug. xvi): "What food is to a man's wellbeing, such is sexual intercourse to the welfare of the human race." On the other hand, virginity is ordered to the individual good, namely in order to avoid what the Apostle calls the "tribulation of the flesh," to which married people are subject ([1 Cor. 7:28](#)). Therefore virginity is not greater than conjugal continence.

**On the contrary,** Augustine says (De Virgin. xix): "Both solid reason and the authority of Holy Writ show that neither is marriage sinful, nor is it to be equaled to the good of virginal continence or even to that of widowhood."

**I answer that,** According to Jerome (Contra Jovin. i) the error of Jovinian consisted in holding virginity not to be preferable to marriage. This error is refuted above all by the example of Christ Who both chose a virgin for His mother, and remained Himself a virgin, and by the teaching of the Apostle who ([1 Cor. 7](#)) counsels virginity as the greater good. It is also refuted by reason, both because a Divine good takes precedence of a human good, and because the good of the soul is preferable to the good of the body, and again because the good of the contemplative life is better than that of the active life. Now virginity is directed to the good of the soul in respect of the contemplative life, which consists in thinking "on the things of God" [Vulg.: 'the Lord'], whereas marriage is directed to the good of the body, namely the bodily increase of the human race, and belongs to the active life, since the man and woman who embrace the married life have to think "on the things of the world," as the Apostle says ([1 Cor. 7:34](#)). Without doubt therefore virginity is preferable to conjugal continence.

**Reply to Objection 1:** Merit is measured not only by the kind of action, but still more by the mind of the agent. Now Abraham had a mind so disposed, that he was prepared to observe virginity, if it were in keeping with the times for him to do so. Wherefore in him conjugal continence was equally meritorious with the virginal continence of John, as regards the essential reward, but not as regards the accidental reward. Hence Augustine says (De Bono Conjug. xxi) that both "the celibacy of John and the marriage of Abraham fought Christ's battle in keeping with the difference of the times: but John was continent even in deed, whereas Abraham was continent only in habit."

**Reply to Objection 2:** Though virginity is better than conjugal continence, a married person may be better than a virgin for two reasons. First, on the part of chastity itself; if to wit, the married person is more prepared in mind to observe virginity, if it should be expedient, than the one who is actually a virgin. Hence Augustine (De Bono Conjug. xxii) charges the virgin to say: "I am no better than Abraham, although the chastity of celibacy is better than the chastity of marriage." Further on he gives the reason for this: "For what I do now, he would have done better, if it were fitting for him to do it then; and what they did I would even do now if it behooved me now to do it." Secondly, because perhaps the person who is not a virgin has some more excellent virtue. Wherefore Augustine says (De Virgin. xlv): "Whence does a virgin know the things that belong to the Lord, however solicitous she be about them, if perchance on account of some mental fault she be not yet ripe for martyrdom, whereas this woman to whom she delighted in preferring herself is already able to drink the chalice of the Lord?"

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same genus: but it may be that the private good is better generically. It is thus that the virginity that is consecrated to God is preferable to carnal fruitfulness. Hence Augustine says (De Virgin. ix): "It must be confessed that the fruitfulness of the flesh, even of those women who in these times seek naught else from marriage but children in order to make them servants of Christ, cannot compensate for lost virginity."

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## Whether virginity is the greatest of virtues?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that virginity is the greatest of virtues. For Cyprian says (De Virgin. [\*De Habitu Virg.]): "We address ourselves now to the virgins. Sublime is their glory, but no less exalted is their vocation. They are a flower of the Church's sowing, the pride and ornament of spiritual grace, the most honored portion of Christ's flock."

**Objection 2:** Further, a greater reward is due to the greater virtue. Now the greatest reward is due to virginity, namely the hundredfold fruit, according to a gloss on Mt. 13:23. Therefore virginity is the greatest of the virtues.

**Objection 3:** Further, the more a virtue conforms us to Christ, the greater it is. Now virginity above all conforms us to Christ; for it is declared in the Apocalypse 14:4 that virgins "follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth," and ([Apoc. 14:3](#)) that they sing "a new canticle," which "no" other "man" could say. Therefore virginity is the greatest of the virtues.

**On the contrary,** Augustine says (De Virgin. xlv): "No one, methinks, would dare prefer virginity to martyrdom," and (De Virgin. xlv): "The authority of the Church informs the faithful in no uncertain manner, so that they know in what place the martyrs and the holy virgins who have departed this life are commemorated in the Sacrament of the Altar." By this we are given to understand that martyrdom, and also the monastic state, are preferable to virginity.

**I answer that,** A thing may excel all others in two ways. First, in some particular genus: and thus virginity is most excellent, namely in the genus of chastity, since it surpasses the chastity both of widowhood and of marriage. And because comeliness is ascribed to chastity antonomastically, it follows that surpassing beauty is ascribed to chastity. Wherefore Ambrose says (De Virgin. i, 7): "Can anyone esteem any beauty greater than a virgin's, since she is beloved of her King, approved by her Judge, dedicated to her Lord, consecrated to her God?" Secondly, a thing may be most excellent simply, and in this way virginity is not the most excellent of the virtues. Because the end always excels that which is directed to the end; and the more effectively a thing is directed to the end, the better it is. Now the end which renders virginity praiseworthy is that one may have leisure for Divine things, as stated above ([Article 4](#)). Wherefore the theological virtues as well as the virtue of religion, the acts of which consist in being occupied about Divine things, are preferable to virginity. Moreover, martyrs work more mightily in order to cleave to God---since for this end they hold their own life in contempt; and those who dwell in monasteries---since for this end they give up their own will

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purpose. Therefore virginity is not simply the greatest of virtues.

**Reply to Objection 1:** Virgins are "the more honored portion of Christ's flock," and "their glory more sublime" in comparison with widows and married women.

**Reply to Objection 2:** The hundredfold fruit is ascribed to virginity, according to Jerome [\*Ep. cxxiii ad Ageruch.], on account of its superiority to widowhood, to which the sixtyfold fruit is ascribed, and to marriage, to which is ascribed the thirtyfold fruit. But according to Augustine (De Questions. Evang. i, 9), "the hundredfold fruit is given to martyrs, the sixtyfold to virgins, and the thirtyfold to married persons." Wherefore it does not follow that virginity is simply the greatest of virtues, but only in comparison with other degrees of chastity.

**Reply to Objection 3:** Virgins "follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth," because they imitate Christ, by integrity not only of the mind but also of the flesh, as Augustine says (De Virgin. xxvii). Wherefore they follow the Lamb in more ways, but this does not imply that they follow more closely, because other virtues make us cleave to God more closely by imitation of the mind. The "new hymn" which virgins alone sing, is their joy at having preserved integrity of the flesh.