

SUPPLEMENT TO THE THIRD PART, QUESTION 19

Of the Ministers of the Keys (In Six Articles)

We must now consider the ministers and the use of the keys: under which head there are six points of inquiry:

- (1) Whether the priest of the Law had the keys?
- (2) Whether Christ had the keys?
- (3) Whether priests alone have the keys?
- (4) Whether holy men who are not priests have the keys or their use?
- (5) Whether wicked priests have the effective use of the keys?
- (6) Whether those who are schismatics, heretics, excommunicate, suspended or degraded, have the use of the keys?

Whether the priest of the Law had the keys?

Suppl. q. 19 a. 1

Objection 1. It would seem that the priests of the Law had the keys. For the possession of the keys results from having orders. But they had orders since they were called priests. Therefore the priests of the Law had the keys.

Objection 2. Further, as the Master states (Sent. iv, D, 18), there are two keys, knowledge of discretion, and power of judgment. But the priests of the Law had authority for both of these: therefore they had the keys.

Objection 3. Further, the priests of the Law had some power over the rest of the people, which power was not temporal, else the kingly power would not have differed from the priestly power. Therefore it was a spiritual power; and this is the key. Therefore they had the key.

On the contrary, The keys are ordained to the opening of the heavenly kingdom, which could not be opened before Christ's Passion. Therefore the priest of the Law had not the keys. Further, the sacraments of the old Law did not confer grace. Now the gate of the heavenly kingdom could not be opened except by means of grace. Therefore it could not be opened by means of those sacraments, so that the priests who administered them, had not the keys of the heavenly kingdom.

I answer that, Some have held that, under the Old Law, the keys of the kingdom were in the hands of the priests, because the right of imposing punishment for sin was conferred on them, as related in Lev. 5, which right seems to belong to the keys; but that these keys were incomplete then, whereas

now they are complete as bestowed by Christ on the priests of the New Law.

But this seems to be contrary to the intent of the Apostle in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb. 9:11-12). For there the priesthood of Christ is given the preference over the priesthood of the Law, inasmuch as Christ came, "a high priest of the good things to come," and brought us "by His own blood" into a tabernacle not made with hand, whither the priesthood of the Old Law brought men "by the blood of goats and of oxen." Hence it is clear that the power of that priesthood did not reach to heavenly things but to the shadow of heavenly things: and so, we must say with others that they had not the keys, but that the keys were foreshadowed in them.

Reply to Objection 1. The keys of the kingdom go with the priesthood whereby man is brought into the heavenly kingdom, but such was not the priesthood of Levi; hence it had the keys, not of heaven, but of an earthly tabernacle.

Reply to Objection 2. The priests of the Old Law had authority to discern and judge, but not to admit those they judged into heaven, but only into the shadow of heavenly things.

Reply to Objection 3. They had no spiritual power, since, by the sacraments of the Law, they cleansed men not from their sins but from irregularities, so that those who were cleansed by them could enter into a tabernacle which was "made with hand."

Whether Christ had the key?

Suppl. q. 19 a. 2

Objection 1. It would seem that Christ did not have the key. For the key goes with the character of order. But Christ did not have a character. Therefore He had not the key.

Objection 2. Further, Christ had power of "excellence" in the sacraments, so that He could produce the sacramental effect without the sacramental rite. Now the key is something sacramental. Therefore He needed no key, and it would have been useless to Him to have it.

On the contrary, It is written (Apoc. 3:7): "These things saith...He that hath the key of David," etc.

I answer that, The power to do a thing is both in the instrument and in the principal agent, but not in the same way since it is more perfectly in the latter. Now the power of the keys which we have, like other sacramental powers, is instrumental: whereas it is in Christ as principal agent in the matter of our salvation, by authority, if we consider Him as God, by

merit, if we consider Him as man^{*}. But the very notion of a key expresses a power to open and shut, whether this be done by the principal agent or by an instrument. Consequently we must admit that Christ had the key, but in a higher way than His ministers, wherefore He is said to have the key of “excellence.”

Reply to Objection 1. A character implies the notion

of something derived from another, hence the power of the keys which we receive from Christ results from the character whereby we are conformed to Christ, whereas in Christ it results not from a character, but from the principal form.

Reply to Objection 2. The key, which Christ had was not sacramental, but the origin of the sacramental key.

Whether priests alone have the keys?

Suppl. q. 19 a. 3

Objection 1. It would seem that not only priests have the keys. For Isidore says (Ety. vii, 12) that the “doorkeepers have to tell the good from the bad, so as to admit the good and keep out the bad.” Now this is the definition of the keys, as appears from what has been said (q. 17, a. 2). Therefore not only priests but even doorkeepers have the keys.

Objection 2. Further, the keys are conferred on priests when by being anointed they receive power from God. But kings of Christian peoples also receive power from God and are consecrated by being anointed. Therefore not only priests have the keys.

Objection 3. Further, the priesthood is an order belonging to an individual person. But sometimes a number of people together seem to have the key, because certain Chapters can pass a sentence of excommunication, which pertains to the power of the keys. Therefore not only priests have the key.

Objection 4. Further, a woman is not capable of receiving the priesthood, since she is not competent to teach, according to the Apostle (1 Cor. 14:34). But some women (abbesses, for instance, who exercise a spiritual power over their subjects), seem to have the keys. Therefore not only priests have the keys.

On the contrary, Ambrose says (De Poenit. i): “This right,” viz. of binding and loosing, “is granted to priests alone.”

Further, by receiving the power of the keys, a man is set up between the people and God. But this belongs to the priest alone, who is “ordained...in the things that appertain to God, that he may offer up gifts and sacrifices for sins” (Heb. 5:1). Therefore only priests have the keys.

I answer that, There are two kinds of key. one reaches to heaven itself directly, by remitting sin and thus removing the obstacles to the entrance into heaven; and this is called the key of “order.” Priests alone have this key, because they alone are ordained for the people in the things which appertain to God directly. The other key reaches to heaven, not directly but through the medium of the Church Militant. By this key a man goes to heaven, since, by its means, a man is shut out from or admitted to the fellowship of the Church Militant, by excommunication or absolution. This is called the key of “jurisdic-

tion” in the external court, wherefore even those who are not priests can have this key, e.g. archdeacons, bishops elect, and others who can excommunicate. But it is not properly called a key of heaven, but a disposition thereto.

Reply to Objection 1. The doorkeepers have the key for taking care of those things which are contained in a material temple, and they have to judge whether a person should be excluded from or admitted to that temple; which judgment they pronounce, not by their own authority, but in pursuance to the priest’s judgment, so that they appear to be the administrators of the priestly power.

Reply to Objection 2. Kings have no power in spiritual matters, so that they do not receive the key of the heavenly kingdom. Their power is confined to temporal matters, and this too can only come to them from God, as appears from Rom. 13:1. Nor are they consecrated by the unction of a sacred order: their anointing is merely a sign that the excellence of their power comes down to them from Christ, and that, under Christ, they reign over the Christian people.

Reply to Objection 3. Just as in civil matters the whole power is sometimes vested in a judge, as in a kingdom, whereas sometimes it is vested in many exercising various offices but acting together with equal rights (Ethic. viii, 10,11), so too, spiritual jurisdiction may be exercised both by one alone, e.g. a bishop, and by many together, e.g. by a Chapter, and thus they have the key of jurisdiction, but they have not all together the key of order.

Reply to Objection 4. According to the Apostle (1 Tim. 2:11; Titus 2:5), woman is in a state of subjection: wherefore she can have no spiritual jurisdiction, since the Philosopher also says (Ethic. viii) that it is a corruption of public life when the government comes into the hands of a woman. Consequently a woman has neither the key of order nor the key of jurisdiction. Nevertheless a certain use of the keys is allowed to women, such as the right to correct other women who are under them, on account of the danger that might threaten if men were to dwell under the same roof.

^{*} For St. Thomas’ later teaching on this point, Cf. IIIa, q. 48, a. 6; Ia IIae, q. 112, a. 1, AD 1.

Objection 1. It would seem that holy men, even those who are not priests, have the use of the keys. For loosing and binding, which are the effects of the keys, derive their efficacy from the merit of Christ's Passion. Now those are most conformed to Christ's Passion, who follow Christ, suffering by patience and other virtues. Therefore it seems that even if they have not the priestly order, they can bind and loose.

Objection 2. Further, it is written (Heb. 7:7): "Without all contradiction, that which is less is blessed by the greater [Vulg.: 'better']." Now "in spiritual matters," according to Augustine (De Trin. vi, 8), "to be better is to be greater." Therefore those who are better, i.e. who have more charity, can bless others by absolving them. Hence the same conclusion follows.

On the contrary, "Action belongs to that which has the power," as the Philosopher says (De Somno et Vigil. i). But the key which is a spiritual power belongs to priests alone. Therefore priests alone are competent to have the use of the keys.

I answer that, There is this difference between a principal and an instrumental agent, that the latter does not produce, in the effect, its own likeness, but the likeness of the principal agent, whereas the principal agent produces its own likeness. Consequently a thing becomes a principal agent through having a form, which it can reproduce in another, whereas an instrumental agent is not constituted thus, but through being applied by the principal agent in order to produce a certain effect. Since therefore in the act of the keys the principal agent by authority is Christ as God, and by merit is Christ as man,* it

follows that on account of the very fulness of Divine goodness in Him, and of the perfection of His grace, He is competent to exercise the act of the keys. But another man is not competent to exercise this act as principal agent, since neither can he give another man grace whereby sins are remitted, nor can he merit sufficiently, so that he is nothing more than an instrumental agent. Consequently the recipient of the effect of the keys, is likened, not to the one who uses the keys, but to Christ. Therefore, no matter how much grace a man may have, he cannot produce the effect of the keys, unless he be appointed to that purpose by receiving orders.

Reply to Objection 1. Just as between instrument and effect there is need or likeness, not of a similar form, but of aptitude in the instrument for the effect, so is it as regards the instrument and the principal agent. The former is the likeness between holy men and the suffering Christ, nor does it bestow on them the use of the keys.

Reply to Objection 2. Although a mere man cannot merit grace for another man condignly, yet the merit of one man can co-operate in the salvation of another. Hence there is a twofold blessing. One proceeds from a mere man, as meriting by his own act: this blessing can be conferred by any holy person in whom Christ dwells by His grace, in so far as he excels in goodness the person whom he blesses. The other blessing is when a man blesses, as applying a blessing instrumentally through the merit of Christ, and this requires excellence of order and not of virtue.

Objection 1. It would seem that wicked priests have not the use of the keys. For in the passage where the use of the keys is bestowed on the apostles (Jn. 20:22,23), the gift of the Holy Ghost is promised. But wicked men have not the Holy Ghost. Therefore they have not the use of the keys.

Objection 2. Further, no wise king entrusts his enemy with the dispensation of his treasure. Now the use of the keys consists in dispensing the treasure of the King of heaven, Who is Wisdom itself. Therefore the wicked, who are His enemies on account of sin, have not the use of the keys.

Objection 3. Further, Augustine says (De Bapt. v, 21) that God "gives the sacrament of grace even through wicked men, but grace itself only by Himself or through His saints." Hence He forgives sin by Himself, or by those who are members of the Dove. But the remission of sins is the use of the keys. Therefore sinners, who are not "members of the Dove," have not the use of the keys.

Objection 4. Further, the prayer of a wicked priest cannot effect reconciliation, for, as Gregory says (Pastor. i, 11), "if an unacceptable person is sent to intercede, anger is provoked to

yet greater severity." But the use of the keys implies a kind of intercession, as appears in the form of absolution. Therefore wicked priests cannot use the keys effectively.

On the contrary, No man can know whether another man is in the state of grace. If, therefore, no one could use the keys in giving absolution unless he were in a state of grace, no one would know that he had been absolved, which would be very unfitting.

Further, the wickedness of the minister cannot void the liberality of his lord. But the priest is no more than a minister. Therefore he cannot by his wickedness take away from us the gift which God has given through him.

I answer that, Just as participation of a form to be induced into an effect does not make a thing to be an instrument, so neither does the loss of that form prevent that thing being used as an instrument. Consequently, since man is merely an instrument in the use of the keys, however much he may through sin be deprived of grace, whereby sins are forgiven, yet he is by no means deprived of the use of the keys.

Reply to Objection 1. The gift of the Holy Ghost is req-

* For St. Thomas' later teaching on this point, cf. IIIa, q. 48, a. 6; Ia IIae, q. 112, a. 1, ad 1.

uisite for the use of the keys, not as being indispensable for the purpose, but because it is unbecoming for the user to use them without it, though he that submits to them receives their effect.

Reply to Objection 2. An earthly king can be cheated and deceived in the matter of his treasure, and so he does not entrust his enemy with the dispensation thereof. But the King of heaven cannot be cheated, because all tends to His own glory, even the abuse of the keys by some, for He can make good come out of evil, and produce many good effects through evil men. Hence the comparison fails.

Reply to Objection 3. Augustine speaks of the remission of sins in so far as holy men co-operate therein, not by virtue of the keys, but by merit of congruity. Hence He says that God confers the sacraments even through evil men, and among the other sacraments, absolution which is the use of the keys

should be reckoned: but that through “members of the Dove,” i.e. holy men, He grants forgiveness of sins, in so far as He remits sins on account of their intercession.

We might also reply that by “members of the Dove” he means all who are not cut off from the Church, for those who receive the sacraments from them, receive grace, whereas those who receive the sacraments from those who are cut off from the Church, do not receive grace, because they sin in so doing, except in the case of Baptism, which, in cases of necessity, may be received even from one who is excommunicate.

Reply to Objection 4. The prayer which the wicked priest proffers on his own account, is not efficacious: but that which he makes as a minister of the Church, is efficacious through the merit of Christ. Yet in both ways the priest’s prayer should profit those who are subject to him.

Whether those who are schismatics, heretics, excommunicate, suspended or degraded have the use of the keys?

Suppl. q. 19 a. 6

Objection 1. It would seem that those who are schismatics, heretics, excommunicate, suspended or degraded have the use of the keys. For just as the power of the keys results from orders, so does the power of consecration. But the above cannot lose the use of the power of consecration, since if they do consecrate it is valid, though they sin in doing so. Therefore neither can they lose the use of the keys.

Objection 2. Further, any active spiritual power in one who has the use of his free-will can be exercised by him when he wills. Now the power of the keys remains in the aforesaid, for, since it is only conferred with orders, they would have to be reordained when they return to the Church. Therefore, since it is an active power, they can exercise it when they will.

Objection 3. Further, spiritual grace is hindered by guilt more than by punishment. Now excommunication, suspension and degradation are punishments. Therefore, since a man does not lose the use of the keys on account of guilt, it seems that he does not lose it on account of the aforesaid.

On the contrary, Augustine says (Tract. cxxi in Joan.) that the “charity of the Church forgives sins.” Now it is the charity of the Church which unites its members. Since therefore the above are disunited from the Church, it seems that they have not the use of the keys in remitting sins.

Further, no man is absolved from sin by sinning. Now it is a sin for anyone to seek absolution of his sins from the above, for he disobeys the Church in so doing. Therefore he cannot be absolved by them: and so the same conclusion follows.

I answer that, In all the above the power of the keys remains as to its essence, but its use is hindered on account of the lack of matter. For since the use of the keys requires in the user authority over the person on whom they are used, as stated above (q. 17, a. 2, ad 2), the proper matter on whom one can exercise the use of the keys is a man under one’s authority. And since it is by appointment of the Church that one man has authority over another, so a man may be deprived of his authority over another by his ecclesiastical superiors. Consequently, since the Church deprives heretics, schismatics and the like, by withdrawing their subjects from them either altogether or in some respect, in so far as they are thus deprived, they cannot have the use of the keys.

Reply to Objection 1. The matter of the sacrament of the Eucharist, on which the priest exercises his power, is not a man but wheaten bread, and in Baptism, the matter is simply a man. Wherefore, just as, were a heretic to be without wheaten bread, he could not consecrate, so neither can a prelate absolve if he be deprived of his authority, yet he can baptize and consecrate, albeit to his own damnation.

Reply to Objection 2. The assertion is true, provided matter be not lacking as it is in the case in point.

Reply to Objection 3. Sin, of itself, does not remove matter, as certain punishments do: so that punishment is a hindrance not because it is contrary to the effect, but for the reason stated.