

from SUMMA THEOLOGIAE, 2A 2AE, Q. 64, A. 5

WHETHER ONE IS ALLOWED TO KILL HIMSELF

We proceed to the fifth article.

1. It appears that one is permitted to kill himself. Homicide is a crime in that it is contrary to justice, but, as proven [by Aristotle] in *Ethics*, Book V, no one can do an injustice to himself; therefore, no one sins by killing himself.

2. Moreover, those with public authority are allowed to kill criminals; but sometimes one with public authority is himself a criminal, and so he is allowed to kill himself.

3. Moreover, it is permissible to submit oneself voluntarily to a smaller danger in order to avoid a greater, as one may amputate an infected member in order to save the whole body. Sometimes one may, by killing himself, avoid a greater evil, such as a wretched life or corruption through some sin; therefore, it is permissible for one to kill himself.

4. Moreover, Samson killed himself (Judges xvi), yet he is numbered among the saints, as is evident from Hebrews xi. Therefore, it is permissible for one to kill himself.

5. Moreover, it is said in II Maccabees xiv that a certain Razis killed himself, “choosing to die nobly rather than be subject to sinners and to injuries unworthy of his birth.” Therefore, it is not unlawful to kill oneself.

On the contrary is what Augustine says in Book I of *The City of God*: “We understand the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ to pertain to man. Kill no other man, nor yourself; for he who kills himself kills another man.”

I respond by saying that to kill oneself is altogether unlawful for three reasons. First, because every thing loves itself, it is thus proper for every thing to keep itself in being and resist decay as far as it can. Therefore, to kill oneself is contrary to natural inclination, and contrary to the charity according to which everyone ought to love himself. Hence self-killing is always a mortal sin, inasmuch as it stands against natural law and charity.

Second, because every thing that is a part belongs to a whole, every man is part of a community, and as such is of the community. Therefore, he who kills himself injures the community, as is proven by the Philosopher in his *Ethics*, Book V.

Third, because life is a gift divinely given to man, and subject to the power of Him “who kills and makes to live.” Therefore, he who deprives himself of life sins against God, just as he who kills another’s slave sins against the slave’s master, and just as he sins who arrogates to himself power over something not committed to him. To God alone belongs the power over death and life, according to Deuteronomy xxxii: “I kill and I make to live.”

To the first [argument that suicide is permissible], it may be objected that homicide is not only a sin against justice, but is also a sin against the charity that everyone ought to have for himself; on that ground, self-killing is a sin with respect to oneself. And with respect to the community and to God, it is a sin through its opposition to justice.

To the second, it may be objected that one with public authority may kill a criminal because he is empowered to judge him. But no one is allowed to be the judge of himself, and so one with public authority is not allowed to kill himself because of some sin, although he is allowed to commit himself to the judgment of some other.

To the third, it may be objected that man is indeed lord of himself through his free will, and so may lawfully dispose of himself as far as what pertains to this life is concerned; that much is governed by man's free will. But the passage from this life to the other, happier one is not subject to man's free will, but to divine power. Therefore, it is not permissible for a man to kill himself in order to pass over into the happier life. Neither, likewise, to avoid the present life's miseries; the "ultimate" evil of this life, and the "most frightful," is death, as the Philosopher shows in *Ethics*, Book III, and so to kill oneself to evade the other miseries of life is to assume a greater evil to avoid a less. Neither, likewise, may one kill oneself on account of some sin committed; in that case one harms oneself as much as may be, by preventing the necessary time for penitence. Besides, killing a criminal is not permitted except through the judgment of public authority. Neither, likewise, is a woman permitted to kill herself to prevent another's violating her; she ought not commit the maximal sin on herself, which is to kill herself, to avoid another, smaller sin (for it is no crime for a woman to be violated through force, without her consent, because "the body is not corrupted without the mind's consent," as Lucia said [*Golden Legend*, IV]). And it is certain that fornication and adultery are less sins than homicide, especially self-homicide, which is the gravest of all because it injures the self to which is owed the greatest love. And it is also the most dangerous, because there remains no time to expiate the sin through penance. Neither, likewise, is one allowed to kill himself in fear of consenting to sin, for "we must not do evil in order that good come from it" [Romans iii 8], or to avoid evils, especially smaller and less certain ones, for it is not inevitable that one will in the future consent to sin; God is capable, whenever temptation arises, to free man from sin.

To the fourth, it may be objected that, as Augustine says in *The City of God*, Book I, "Neither may Samson be otherwise excused for crushing himself along with his enemies in the fall of the house, except that the Holy Spirit inwardly commanded this in order to perform a miracle through him"; and he gives the same reason for certain holy women who killed themselves in time of persecution, whose memory the church celebrates.

To the fifth, it may be objected that it is fortitude when one does not shrink from suffering death inflicted by another person, in the interest of virtue and the avoidance of sin; but when one kills oneself to avoid bad punishments, it has some appearance of fortitude, on account of which certain suicides are accounted to have acted bravely, Razis among them. But this is not real fortitude, it is instead some weakness in a soul not strong enough to bear hardship, as is shown by the Philosopher in *Ethics*, Book III, and Augustine in *The City of God*, Book I.