

awaiting a heavenly fatherland with true faith, know that they are pilgrims even in their own habitations.⁵⁰

16 Whether the violation suffered in captivity by consecrated virgins could defile their virtue of soul even though their will did not consent

Again, our adversaries imagine themselves to be charging Christians with a great crime when, enlarging upon the theme of captivity, they add also the violations committed not only upon married women and maidens intending to marry, but also upon certain consecrated virgins. Here, however, although our discussion is forced into the narrow space between modesty and reason, we say that neither faith, nor godliness, nor that virtue which is called chastity, is really at stake.

But we are not here so much concerned to return an answer to outsiders as to bring comfort to our own people. In the first place, then, let this be stated and affirmed: that the virtue by which life is lived rightly has its seat in the soul; that it directs the members of the body from there; that the body is made holy by the exercise of a holy will; and that, while this will remains unshaken and steadfast, nothing that another does with the body, or in the body, that the sufferer has no power to avert without sinning in turn, is the fault of the sufferer. Not only the infliction of pain, but also the gratification of lust, is possible upon the body of another; but when anything of this kind is done, the chastity to which the most resolute soul holds fast is not struck down. It may be, however, that shame bursts in nonetheless, for fear that someone will think that an act which, perhaps, could not have been undergone without some bodily pleasure occurred with the consent of the mind also.

17 Of suicide committed through fear of punishment or dishonour

What person of human feeling, then, would refuse to forgive those women who for this reason slew themselves rather than suffer in

⁵⁰ Cf. Heb. 11, 13.

such a way? And as for those who refused to slay themselves, lest they avoid the crime of another only by a sin of their own: whoever makes that a matter of reproach to them will not himself escape the charge of foolishness. For if it is not lawful for a private person on his own authority to slay even a guilty man whose death has not been authorised by any law, certainly he who slays himself is also a murderer; and the more innocent he was of that for which he thought he ought to die, the more guilty is he when he kills himself. We rightly detest what Judas did; but the judgment of truth is that, when he hanged himself, he increased rather than expiated the guilt of that accursed betrayal. For though he was penitent at death, he left himself no room for wholesome repentance when he despaired of the mercy of God. If this is so, then, how much more should he who has no sin in him to be punished by such means refrain from killing himself! For Judas, when he slew himself, slew a wicked man; but he ended this life guilty not only of Christ's death, but of his own also. For though he killed himself for his own crime, killing himself was another crime. Why, then, should a man who has done no harm do harm to himself and, in slaying himself, slay an innocent man so as not to suffer the crime of another? Why should he perpetrate upon himself a sin of his own so that another's sin might not be perpetrated on him?

18 Of the violence and lust of others endured by a helpless body while the mind is unwilling

There is, however, the fear that lust will defile even when it is another's. It will not defile, if it is another's; and if it defiles, it is not another's. Modesty is a virtue of the soul, and has as its companion a fortitude which resolves to endure any evil whatsoever rather than consent to evil. But no one, no matter how high-minded and modest, has power to control what is done to the flesh, but only what the mind will consent to or refuse. Who of sane mind, therefore, will suppose that purity is lost if it so happens that the flesh is seized and overpowered, and another's lust exercised and satisfied on it? If purity can perish in this way, then purity certainly is not a virtue of the soul, nor does it belong among those good things whereby life is lived well. Rather, it will be numbered among the good things of the body, such as strength, beauty, health and so

forth. These are indeed good things; but, if they are diminished, this fact does not at all diminish a good and just life. If purity is something of this kind, then, why strive to avert its loss even when the body itself is thereby endangered? If, however, it is a good of the soul, then it is not lost when the body is conquered. On the contrary, when the good of holy continence does not yield to the impurity of fleshly lusts, it sanctifies the body itself. Therefore, when such continence remains unshaken in its intention not to yield, the holiness of the body is itself not destroyed, because the will to use the body in a holy fashion persists and, as far as in it lies, so also does the power.

Also, the holiness of the body does not lie in the integrity of its intimate parts, nor in the fact that they are not defiled by touch. For in various circumstances they sustain injuries, and sometimes physicians, in ministering to bodily health, perform operations on them which are dreadful to behold. If, for instance, a midwife, while examining with her hand the maidenhead of some young woman, has, through malice or clumsiness or accident, destroyed it while handling it, I do not suppose that anyone is so foolish as to deem that the young woman has lost any part of her body's holiness merely because the integrity of this part is now lost. For while the mind retains the firmness of purpose by virtue of which the body itself deserves to be called holy, the violence of another's lust does not take away the body's holiness, which is preserved by the perseverance of the mind.

Again, suppose that some female, already corrupted in mind, violating the pledge which she has vowed to God, is going to meet her seducer, to be debauched. Do we say that, while she is on her way there, she is still holy in body even though the sanctity of mind by which the body is made holy is already lost and destroyed? God forbid such error! Rather, let us learn from this instance that, on the one hand, sanctity of body is not lost while sanctity of mind remains, even if the body is overpowered; whereas, on the other, sanctity of body is indeed lost when the sanctity of the mind is violated, even if the body remains intact. A woman who has been overcome by violence and violated by the sin of another, therefore, has done nothing for which she ought to punish herself with voluntary death. Still less ought she to do so before the event; for let not

the certain guilt of murder be incurred while an outrage which is not even her own yet remains uncertain.

19 Of Lucretia, who slew herself because she was ravished

With clear reason, then, do we say that, when a woman's body is overpowered but the intention to remain chaste persists nonetheless, and is unaltered by any consent to evil, the crime belongs only to the man who violated her by force. It does not belong to the woman who, forced to submit to violation, did not consent to it by any act of will. Can it be that those against whom we are defending as holy not only the minds, but also the bodies, of the Christian women who were ravished while in captivity will dare to contradict this? Certainly, they extol with great praise the modesty of Lucretia, that noble woman of ancient Rome. When the son of Tarquin the king overcame her with violence and lustfully enjoyed her body, she made known the crime of that most deplorable young man to her husband Collatinus and her kinsman Brutus. These were men of the highest distinction and courage, whom she adjured to avenge her. Then, sick with the shame of what had been done to her, and unable to bear it, she slew herself. What shall we say? Should she be judged an adulteress or a chaste woman? Who can think it worthwhile to argue over such a question? A certain person, reciting this story with distinction and veracity, says: 'Marvellous to relate, there were two people, but only one of them committed adultery.'⁵¹ Splendidly and truly said! He, contemplating in this intermingling of bodies an entirely shameful lust on the one side, and an entirely chaste will on the other, and considering not the union of their members, but the separateness of their minds, says that 'there were two people, but only one of them committed adultery'.

How does it come about, then, that the one who did not commit adultery was the more severely punished? For Sextus was expelled from the fatherland with his father; Lucretia, however, was smitten with the supreme penalty. If it was not through any impurity on her part that she was taken against her will, then it was not justice

⁵¹ The source of this quotation is not known.

by which, being innocent, she was punished. I appeal to you, O laws and judges of Rome. Even after the commission of crimes you do not allow a wicked man to be executed uncondemned. If, therefore, anyone were to bring this case before your tribunal, and it were proved to you that a woman had been put to death not only uncondemned, but also chaste and innocent, would you not punish one who had done this with fitting severity? Lucretia, however – she who is so celebrated – did exactly this: she slew the innocent and chaste Lucretia, who had, moreover, suffered violence. Pronounce sentence, then; and if you cannot do so because she does not appear before you to be punished, why, at any rate, do you praise with such eloquence the murderess of an innocent and chaste woman? Certainly, you will have no arguments with which to defend her against those judges of the infernal regions of whom your poets sing in their verses. For she is plainly numbered among those who, 'though innocent, laid deadly hands upon themselves, hating the light, and threw away their souls'.⁵² And if they long to return to the underworld, 'Fate bars the way, and the dismal swamp's unlovely pools confine them'.⁵³

But is she, perhaps, not, after all, among the number of those who have slain themselves even though innocent? Did she, perhaps, slay herself because she was conscious not of innocence, but of guilt? What if – and only she could know this – even though the young man threw himself upon her with violence, she herself consented, seduced by her own lust? And what if she was then so stricken by remorse that, in seeking to punish herself, she thought that death was the only expiation? Even in this case, she should not have slain herself if it was possible to do penance which might bear fruit with her false gods.

If this was indeed the case, and it is false that 'there were two people and only one of them committed adultery'; if, rather, both committed adultery, the one by visible assault and the other by hidden assent: then she did not slay herself innocent. Her learned defenders can therefore say that she is not in the infernal regions among those who 'though innocent, laid deadly hands upon themselves'. But then the case is reduced to a dilemma. For if she is

acquitted of murder, she is convicted of adultery; and if she is acquitted of adultery, then she is convicted of murder. It is not possible to find a way out of this dilemma. One can only ask: If she was an adulteress, why is she praised? If she was pure, why was she slain?

Our purpose, however, is to refute those who, far removed from any understanding of holiness, reproach those Christian women who were outraged in captivity. For us, therefore, it is enough that, in the case of this noble lady, it is well said in her praise that 'there were two people, but only one of them committed adultery'. For the Romans prefer to believe that Lucretia was not one who could have soiled herself by consenting to adultery. In that case, therefore, when she slew herself because she had endured the act of an adulterer even though she was not an adulteress herself, she did this not from love of purity, but because of a weakness arising from shame. She was made ashamed by the infamy of another, even though committed against her without her consent. Being a Roman lady excessively eager for praise, she feared that, if she remained alive, she would be thought to have enjoyed suffering the violence that she had suffered when she lived. Hence, she judged that she must use self-punishment to exhibit the state of her mind to the eyes of men to whom she could not show her conscience. She blushed, indeed, to think that, if she were to bear patiently the infamy that another had inflicted upon her, she would be believed to have been an accomplice to it.

But this is not what those Christian women did who suffered in the same way yet are still alive. They did not avenge another's crime upon themselves; and it was because they feared adding to the crime of others a crime of their own that they did not do so. For this is what they would have done if, when their enemies committed rape on them out of lust, they had committed murder on themselves out of shame. Within themselves, indeed, by the testimony of their own conscience, they have the glory of chastity. Moreover, they have it in the sight of God, and they require nothing more. They intend no more than to do right, without straying from the authority of the divine law by doing wrong to avoid the scandal of human suspicion.

⁵² Virgil, *Aen.*, 6,434ff.

⁵³ *Aen.*, 6,438ff.

20 That there is no authority which extends to Christians the right to die of their own will in any circumstances whatsoever

It is not without significance that, in the holy canonical books, no divine precept or permission can be discovered which allows us to bring about our own death, either to obtain immortality or to avert or avoid some evil. On the contrary, we must understand the Law of God as forbidding us to do this, where it says, 'Thou shalt not kill.'⁵⁴ This is especially so given that it does not here add 'thy neighbour', as it does when it forbids false witness. It says, 'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.'⁵⁵ No one, however, should consider himself innocent of this crime if he has borne false witness only against himself; for he who loves his neighbour has received a rule under which he must love himself also. For it is indeed written: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.'⁵⁶ Thus, a man is no less guilty of false witness if he testifies falsely only against himself than if he does so against his neighbour; and this is so even though, in that commandment where false witness is prohibited, only false witness against a neighbour is forbidden. It might seem that it is not forbidden for someone to bear false witness against himself; but only to those who do not understand the matter rightly. Still more, then, must we understand that a man is not permitted to kill himself, since, when it is written, 'Thou shalt not kill', nothing is then added to this commandment, and no one – not even the person to whom the commandment is addressed – is seen to be excepted.

Hence, some persons endeavour to extend this commandment even to beasts and cattle, and maintain that it is not lawful to kill any of them either. Why, therefore, not also include plants and whatever else is rooted in the soil and fed by it? For things of this kind also are said to live, even though they have no sensation. By the same token, they can also die, and, consequently, when force is applied to them, be slain. The apostle himself, when he speaks of seeds of this kind, says: 'That which thou sowest is not quickened

⁵⁴ Exod. 20,13.

⁵⁵ Exod. 20,16.

⁵⁶ Matt. 22,39.

except it die.'⁵⁷ And in the psalm it is written: 'He killed their vines with hail.'⁵⁸ Do we, then, when we hear 'Thou shalt not kill', for this reason conclude that it is wicked to pull up a weed, and acquiesce in the most senseless error of the Manichaeans? Let us leave these maunderings aside, however. When we read 'Thou shalt not kill', we are not to take this commandment as applying to plants, for these have no sensation. Nor does it apply to the non-rational animals which fly, swim, walk or crawl, for these do not share the use of reason with us. It is not given to them to have it in common with us; and, for this reason, by the most just ordinance of their Creator, both their life and death are subject to our needs.⁵⁹ What remains, then, is this: that, when it is said, 'Thou shalt not kill', we must understand this as applying to man, and hence to mean 'neither another nor thyself'; for he who kills himself kills what is no other than a man.

21 Of those cases of homicide which do not incur the guilt of murder

But the divine authority itself has made certain exceptions to the rule that it is not lawful to kill men. These exceptions, however, include only those whom God commands to be slain, either by a general law, or by an express command applying to a particular person at a particular time. Moreover, he who is commanded to perform this ministry does not himself slay. Rather, he is like a sword which is the instrument of its user. And so those who, by God's authority, have waged wars, or who, bearing the public power in their own person, have punished the wicked with death according to His laws, that is, by His most just authority: these have in no way acted against that commandment which says, 'Thou shalt not kill.' Abraham, indeed, was not only exonerated from the guilt of cruelty, but was even praised in the name of piety; for, in resolving to slay his son, he acted not in the least wickedly, but in obedience to a command.⁶⁰ And it may rightly be asked whether it was also

⁵⁷ 1 Cor. 15,36.

⁵⁸ Psalm 78,47.

⁵⁹ Cf. Gen. 1,28ff.

⁶⁰ Gen. 22,2ff.

by God's command that Jephthah slew his daughter, who ran to meet her father when he had vowed that he would sacrifice to God whatever first met him as he returned victorious from battle.⁶¹ Nor is Samson, who crushed himself and his foes together when he brought about the collapse of the house, excused other than by the fact that the Spirit Who had been performing miracles through him secretly commanded him to do this.⁶² With the exception, however, of those who slay under a just general law or by the special command of God, Who is the fount of justice, he who kills a man – whether himself or anyone else – is implicated in the crime of murder.

22 Whether voluntary death can ever be a sign of greatness of soul

But perhaps those who have perpetrated this crime upon themselves, though not to be praised for the soundness of their wisdom, are nonetheless to be admired for their greatness of soul? If you consider the nature of the case more carefully, you will hardly call it greatness of soul which leads someone to do away with himself because he cannot manage to bear hardships of some kind, or the sins of others. On the contrary, the soul is seen to be weak if it cannot bear either the harsh servitude of its own body or the foolish opinion of the vulgar. We might more properly call a soul great if it can bear a life full of calamity and not flee from it, and if it can in the light of a pure conscience hold human judgment in contempt: especially the judgment of the vulgar, which is so commonly wrapped in the darkness of error.

If it is to be considered a great-souled act for a man to put himself to death, however, then such greatness certainly resided in the soul of that Cleombrotus who (the story goes), when he had read the book of Plato in which the immortality of the soul is discussed, cast himself headlong from a wall, and so departed this life for that which he believed to be a better. He was not prompted to do this by any calamity or crime, either real or imagined, which he could not manage to bear and so made away with himself. Rather, only

⁶¹ Judg. 11,29ff.

⁶² Judg. 16,28ff.

his 'greatness of soul' sustained him as he eagerly embraced death and burst the sweet bonds of this life. Yet Plato himself, whom he had read, could have told him that he acted greatly rather than well. For Plato, of all people, surely would have been the first to act in the same way had he not, with that mind with which he had seen the soul's immortality, also perceived that this should not be done: and should, indeed, be forbidden.

Again, many have killed themselves for fear of falling into the hands of an enemy: we are not here asking whether this has been done, but whether it should have been done. Sound reason is certainly to be preferred to examples; but, in this case, the examples are in harmony with reason, and the more excellent in godliness they are, the more worthy are they of emulation. The patriarchs did not do it; the prophets did not do it. Nor did the apostles; for, otherwise, the Lord Jesus Christ, instead of admonishing them that, if they suffered persecution, they should 'flee from city to city',⁶³ would have taught them to lay hands on themselves for fear of falling into the hands of persecutors. Given, then, that He did not command or admonish them to depart this life in such a fashion, even though He had promised that He would prepare eternal mansions for them against their departure,⁶⁴ it is obvious that, whatever examples are proposed by 'the nations that forget God',⁶⁵ this is not lawful for those who worship the one true God.

23 What of the example of Cato, who slew himself because he could not bear Caesar's victory?

Apart from Lucretia, however, of whom we seem already to have said enough, those who counsel suicide do not easily find an example to put forward as an authority, unless it be that Cato who slew himself at Utica. He was not, of course, the only one who did so. He was, however, a man of such learning and probity that anyone might fairly think that his act could have been, and can be, rightly done. What can I say of this act, then, other than that certain of his friends, also learned men, but more prudent ones, tried to

⁶³ Matt. 10,23.

⁶⁴ John 14,2.

⁶⁵ 1 Thess. 4,5.

dissuade him from it? For they deemed suicide more the deed of a foolish spirit than of a proud one: an act demonstrating not honour forestalling villainy, but weakness unable to sustain adversity. Cato himself thought so in the case of his dearly beloved son. For if it was a disgrace to live under the victorious Caesar, why was he the author of such a disgrace to his own son, when he admonished him to place all his hopes in Caesar's generosity?⁶⁶ Why, indeed, did he not compel his son to die with him? If Torquatus was worthy of praise when he slew his son who, even though he had won, had engaged the enemy contrary to what he was commanded to do, why did the vanquished Cato spare his vanquished son when he did not spare himself? Was it more disgraceful to be a victor against orders than to acknowledge a victor against honour? Cato, therefore, cannot, after all, have deemed it a disgrace to live under the victorious Caesar: otherwise, a father's sword would have redeemed his son from such disgrace. What can we say, therefore, other than what Caesar himself is reported to have said: that although Cato greatly loved his son, whom he hoped and wished would be spared by Caesar, still more greatly did he hate – or let us put it more kindly and say blush – to give Caesar the glory of pardoning himself?⁶⁷

24 That in that virtue in which Regulus excelled Cato the Christians are more eminent still

But our adversaries do not wish us to give preference over Cato to that holy man Job, who chose to endure terrible evils in his flesh rather than to be rid of all his sufferings by putting himself to death. Nor do they wish us to prefer those other saints of whom, on the highest authority, it is recorded in our most sublime and faithful books that they chose to bear captivity and enslavement by the enemy rather than to slay themselves. I shall, then, prefer to Marcus Cato that same Marcus Regulus who appears in their own books. For Cato never overcame Caesar, but, being overcome by him, and disdainful to be subject to him, chose to kill himself. Regulus, however, a Roman general with a Roman command, had already

⁶⁶ Dio Cassius, *Hist. Rom.*, 43,10.

⁶⁷ Plutarch, *Cato*, 72; *Caesar*, 54.

defeated the Carthaginians and brought back not a deplorable victory over his fellow countrymen, but a glorious victory over the enemy; yet afterwards, being defeated by them, he preferred rather to endure servitude under them than to escape it by dying. Accordingly, he remained both patient under the dominion of the Carthaginians and constant in his love of the Romans, neither stealing away his conquered body from his foes nor his unconquered spirit from his countrymen. Nor was it from love of this life that he refused to slay himself. This much he proved when, for the sake of his promise, and because of the oath he had sworn, he returned without hesitation to those same foes whom he had offended more gravely by his words in the Senate than by his feats of arms in battle. Beyond doubt, then, he who held life in such contempt, yet chose to end it in the midst of whatever tortures his enraged enemies might inflict rather than by doing away with himself, deemed it a great crime for a man to slay himself.

Among all their praiseworthy and illustrious men of outstanding virtue, the Romans offer no one better than this man. He was neither corrupted by good fortune, for he remained entirely poor even after his great victories, nor defeated by adversity, for he went back unmoved to so grim an end. But if the bravest and most distinguished men, defenders of an earthly fatherland and of their gods – false gods, certainly; but they were not false worshippers, for they indeed kept their oaths most faithfully: if these could, according to the custom and rule of war, smite their vanquished enemy, yet, when conquered by their enemies, refuse to smite themselves; if these, who did not in the least fear death, preferred to be enslaved by their conquerors rather than to inflict death upon themselves: then how much more will Christians, worshippers of the true God, who aspire to a supernal fatherland, abstain from this crime if by divine providence they are for a season subjugated by their enemies, either to prove or correct them! And they will not be forsaken in this humiliation by the Most High, Who for their sakes so humbled Himself. After all, they are bound by no military authority, nor by an oath of military service, to smite even a conquered enemy. Who is so grievously in error, then, as to suppose that a man may kill himself because a foe has sinned against him, or for fear that a foe may sin against him, yet may not kill the foe himself who has sinned, or will in the future sin, against him?

25 That sin may not be avoided by sin

But we must, they say, fear and beware lest the body, when overpowered by an enemy's lust, tempt the soul by a most enticing pleasure to consent to the sin. And it is for this reason, they say, that we ought to kill ourselves: not, now, because of the sin of another, but because of our own sin, even though no one has yet committed it. But the soul which is subject to God and His wisdom rather than to the body and its desire will by no means act so as to consent to the lust of the flesh because aroused by the lust of another. In any case, if it is also a detestable crime and a damnable wickedness for a man to slay himself, as the truth manifestly proclaims, who is so foolish as to say, 'Let us sin now, lest perhaps we sin later; let us now commit murder, for fear that we may later happen to commit adultery'? If we are so dominated by wickedness that we can choose only to commit sins rather than to perform innocent acts, is not a future and uncertain adultery at any rate better than a certain and present murder? Is it not better to commit an act of wickedness which penitence may heal than a crime such that no room is left for wholesome repentance? I say this for the sake of those men or women who consider that they should do themselves mortal violence in order to avoid not another's sin, but their own, for fear that they will otherwise consent because their own lust has been excited by that of another. Never let it be said that the Christian who trusts in God and, placing his hope in Him, leans upon His aid: never let it be said, I say, that such a mind will yield shameful consent to any pleasures of the flesh whatsoever. To be sure, that lustful disobedience which still dwells in our dying members sometimes moves itself as if by its own law, apart from the law of our will: when we are asleep, for instance. In this case also, however, there is still no guilt in the body of one who does not consent.

26 Of those things which ought not to be done which are nonetheless known to have been done by the saints; and what we are to believe as to their reasons for doing them

But, they say, in the time of persecution certain holy women, in order to escape those who might abuse their purity, hurled them-

selves into a river which bore them away and drowned them, and in that way died.⁶⁸ Moreover, their martyrdom is celebrated with veneration by great numbers in the Catholic Church. Of these women I do not venture any casual judgment. For I do not know if the Divine Authority has, by some trustworthy testimonies, persuaded the Church so to honour their memories; and it may be that this is so. For what if they did this thing not because they were deceived by human frailty, but by divine command, and so were not in error, but obedient? – as in the story of Samson, which it would be wickedness in us not to believe. For when God gives a command and shows without any ambiguity that it is His command, who will call obedience a crime? Who will reproach the submission of godliness? It is, of course, not done without wickedness if someone resolves to sacrifice his son to God merely because Abraham was praiseworthy in so doing. But when the soldier, obedient to the power under which he has been lawfully placed, slays a man, he is not guilty of murder according to any laws of his city. On the contrary, if he does not do so, he is guilty of desertion and contempt of authority. If he had done this of his own will and authority, however, he would have fallen into the crime of shedding human blood. Thus, the deed which is punished if he does it when not commanded is the same as that for which he will be punished if he does not do it when commanded. And if this is true when the command is given by a general, how much more true is it when the command is given by the Creator! He, therefore, who knows that it is not lawful to kill himself, may nonetheless do so if commanded by Him Whose commands it is not lawful to despise. Let him be sure, however, that the divine command is not made uncertain by any doubt.

It is through the ear, then, that we become aware of the conscience of others: we do not presume to judge those things which are hidden from us. No one 'knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him'.⁶⁹ But this we say; this we assert; this we in all ways approve: that no man ought voluntarily to inflict

⁶⁸ Augustine probably has in mind the story of the Christian lady of Antioch, Domnina, and her two daughters, who, captured during the persecution of Diocletian, drowned themselves to avoid compromising their chastity. The story is in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 8,12. He may also be thinking of the similar story of St Pelagia, who threw herself off the roof of her house to avoid rape, and whose heroism is praised by St Ambrose, *De virg.*, 3,7.

⁶⁹ 1 Cor. 2,11.

death upon himself, for this is to flee from temporal ills by falling into eternal ones. No one ought to do this because of the sins of another, lest, by doing so, he who would not have been defiled by another's sin incur the gravest guilt of his own. Again, no one ought to do so because of his own past sins, for he has all the more need of this life so that these sins may be healed by repentance. Finally, no one ought to do so out of desire for the better life which is hoped for after death, for that better life which comes after death does not receive those who are guilty of their own death.

27 Whether voluntary death is to be sought in order to avoid sin

There remains one reason, of which I had begun to speak, for supposing that it may be beneficial for someone to slay himself: namely, for fear of falling into sin either through the enticement of pleasure or the violence of pain. If we decide to admit this reason, however, it will carry us to the extent of thinking that men should be exhorted to kill themselves as soon as they have been washed in the font of holy regeneration and have received the forgiveness of all sins.⁷⁰ For the time to avoid all future sin, surely, is when all past sins have been blotted out; and if this can be rightly achieved by voluntary death, then why not by all means seek it?

On this view, then: why does anyone, once baptised, spare himself? Why, once set free, does he thrust his head back into the perils of this life, when he has the power to rid himself of them all so easily? For it is written: 'He who loveth danger shall fall into it.'⁷¹ Why, then, are so many and such grave dangers loved – or, if not loved, at least accepted – by those who remain in this life even though they might lawfully withdraw from it? Is there any heart so ruined by foolish perversity, and so turned aside from the contemplation of truth, as to think that, on the one hand, a man ought to do away with himself to avoid falling into sin if he is the prisoner of one oppressor, but that he ought in other circumstances to live, and so bear to the end the hourly temptations of this world: both those which threaten men who are under one oppressor and the

⁷⁰ Cf. Titus 3,5.

⁷¹ Ecclus. 3,26.

numberless others without which this life cannot be conducted? Why should we spend time on those exhortations by which we strive to persuade the baptised to embrace either virginal chastity, or the continence of widowhood, or the fidelity of the marriage bed, when we have a way which is so much better and more profitable of delivering ourselves from all sins? Let us, then, persuade whom-ever we can to lay hold of death as soon as possible after the remission of their sins, and inflict it upon themselves, and so send themselves to the Lord whole and pure.

Clearly, if anyone were really to suppose that we should undertake, or persuade others to undertake, such a thing, he would be not merely foolish, but mad. Is it, then, not impudent for someone say to a man, 'Living, as you do, under an oppressor with the shameless morals of a barbarian, you should kill yourself, for fear of adding to your little sins a more serious one'? How can anyone rightly say this if he cannot without the greatest wickedness say, 'Kill yourself, now that you are absolved of all your sins. Kill yourself, lest you commit the same or even worse sins while you live in the world: in a world with such a power to tempt by its impure pleasures, to enrage by its horrible cruelties, and to set at odds with its errors and terrors'? If it is wicked to say this, then surely it is also wicked to slay oneself. If there could be any just reason at all for doing so, surely there could be none more just than this. But since not even this reason is just, then none is.

28 By what judgment of God the enemy was permitted to sin against the bodies of the chaste

Let not your lives be a burden to you, then, O faithful ones of Christ, even if your chastity has been made sport of by your enemies. You have a great and true consolation if you retain an honest conscience because you did not consent to the sins of those who were permitted to sin against you. And if you should ask why they were permitted to do so: deep indeed is the providence of the Creator and Ruler of the world, and 'unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out'.⁷²

⁷² Rom. 11,33.