

WILLIAM OF SAINT-AMOUR

On the Quantity of Alms

Translated from the critical edition edited in:
A. G. Traver, 'William of Saint-Amour's Two Disputed Questions *De quantitate eleemosynae* and *De valido mendicante*', *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et litteraire du moyen age* 62 (1995): 295–342

It is asked concerning the quantity of alms, whether it is permissible for a man to give whatever he has to such an extent that he retain nothing for himself.

[Arguments for the Proposition]

Proof that it is:

1. Matthew 19:21: *If you wish to be perfect, go, and sell all that you have, and give to the poor;*¹ the Gloss: 'All, not part.'
2. Item. Mark 10:21: *Whatever you have, sell and give to the poor;* the Gloss: 'Altogether all not part, as Ananias.'
3. Item. Psalms 39:18: *I am a beggar and poor; the Lord is watchful of me.* Therefore it is licit to give to the point of begging.'
4. Item. Matthew 5:3: *Blessed are the poor in spirit;* the Gloss: 'voluntary.' Therefore, etc.
5. Item. Luke 2:7: *She wrapped him with cloths and placed him in a manger.* Therefore the highest poverty is chosen according to the image of Christ.
6. Item. Luke 12:33: *Sell what you possess and give alms.* Therefore, etc.
7. Item. Luke 14:33: *He who does not renounce everything that he possesses cannot be my disciple.*
8. Item. Luke 16:22: *The beggar, Lazarus, was brought down by an angel into the breast of Abraham.* Therefore it is licit to beg.

1. Biblical citations have been silently expanded, and are italicized, but note that I have translated what William wrote, and that there may be minor differences between his text and that of the Vulgate. Andrew Traver's edition of this text includes full citations to the various works William cites; those interested in such matters are encouraged to consult his text.

9. Item. Acts 4 [3:6]: *Silver and gold is not mine*, says Peter. Therefore it is licit to give away everything.
10. Item. James 2:5: *Does not the Lord choose the poor in this world, rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom?* Therefore, etc.
11. Item. Luke 5:11: *With everything having been left behind, they followed him.* Therefore, etc.
12. Item. Matthew 19:27; Mark 10:28; Luke 18:28: *Behold we have left everything.* Therefore etc.
13. Item. Philippians 3:8: *On account of Christ I have suffered the loss of all things, and I judge all things as dung.* Therefore, etc.
14. Item. Matthew 6:25–26: *Do not be concerned about what you eat*, etc. *Look at the flying things of the sky*, etc. Therefore, all things ought to be given away and the Lord will feed and clothe us.

[Arguments Against the Proposition]

On the contrary:

1. Giving away everything and retaining nothing for the sustenance of life is prodigality. Therefore it is not licit.
2. Item. Romans 12:1: *Your service is reasonable.* the Gloss: ‘lest anything be too much.’ But not retaining food is excessive because this is bringing death upon oneself. Therefore it is not licit everything away under the hope of begging.
3. Item. Exodus 20:13: *You shall not kill*; the Gloss: ‘by hand, or by mind: by taking away the counsel of life (*consilium vitae*) from him to whom you ought to give’. But you owe more to none but yourself.’ Therefore it is not licit for you to withdraw your victual. Therefore, etc.
4. Item. Ambrose, *De officiis* (D. 86 c. *Pasce*).² ‘Those whom you are able to serve by feeding, if you did not fear [for them], you have killed.’ But one owes this more to none than oneself. Therefore, one ought not withdraw sustenance from oneself. Therefore, etc.
5. Item. Augustine, *De verbis Domini* (14 q. 5 c. 2, *Immolans*).³ The bread of the needy is life for the poor. The man who defrauds him [the poor

2. D. 86 c. 21 (1.302). References are to Gratian’s *Decretum*, as found in Friedberg 1879–1881; volume and page numbers are follow in parentheses.

3. C. 14 q. 5 c. 2 (1.738).

- man] is a murderer. Therefore, much more strongly, it is not licit that he defraud himself of food. Therefore, etc.
6. Item. D. 50 c. *Sepe contigit*:⁴ If it happens that a tree, by the intention or negligence of the cutter, falls so that a man is crushed under it, he ought altogether be punished as a murderer. Therefore, by a similar argument, since through his wish or negligence he retains nothing, it can happen that he die. Therefore, etc.
 7. Item. Augustine in 16 q. 1 c. *Decime*:⁵ ‘How many paupers in [these] places in which he (who does not give the tenth part) lives, die from hunger? He, defendant of so many homicides, will appear before the tribune of eternal judges.’ Therefore, since each one owes himself to think of future nourishment, if he withdraws knowingly, he sins.⁶ Therefore it is not licit to give everything away and retain nothing for himself.
 8. Item. 1 Timothy 6:8: *Having food and we are content with these things by which we are protected*; the Gloss: ‘even if we had brought nothing into this world, or carried it away, nevertheless these temporal things ought not be altogether thrown away’, but having food and clothing, we are contented with these. Therefore, the necessities of life ought to be retained. Therefore, etc.
 9. Item. Thren. 4:9:⁷ *It was better for those killed by the sword than those who died from hunger*. Therefore, it is worse that one expose himself to death of hunger than to death by the sword. But this is not licit while a man holds what he made without sin, as Augustine says, ‘Let man make what he can’. Therefore, he ought not expose himself to death of hunger while he can do something else without sin. Therefore, it is not licit to withdraw *victual*. Therefore, etc.
 10. Item. Luke 3:11: *He who has two tunics, let him give [one] to one who does not have any*; the Gloss: ‘This precept is given concerning the dividing up of the two tunics, since if one is divided, neither [part] can be worn. Let a measure of pity itself be preserved for the possibility of the human condition, so that everyone does not seize the whole for himself, but that what he has is shared with the poor’. If this ought

4. D. 50 c. 50 (1.197).

5. C. 16 q. 1 c. 66 (1.784).

6. The word *peccat* seems to be missing; it is found in the *Opera omnia* edition (1632, 75).

7. That is, the Lamentations of Jeremias.

to be observed in matters of clothing, therefore by that much more it ought to be observed in foodstuffs.

If you object about the blessed Martin who divides the mantle, the Gloss solves it so: namely since ‘a tunic is more necessary than a mantle; for if the tunic be divided, he would remain naked, both he who received and he who gave’.⁸

11. Item. Luke 12:29: *Do not seek with longing what you will eat*; the Gloss: ‘It is not commanded so that no money is reserved for necessary uses by the holy (since the Lord is read to have had a purse), but so that he not serve God on account of those things and that justice not be deserted from fear of want.’ Therefore it is good and expedient to reserve *victual*.
12. Item. 2 Corinthians 8:12: *For if the will is prepared, it is received according to what it has, not according to what it does not have*; the Gloss: ‘that is, beyond [your] power’. But giving away the whole, with the victual subtracted, under pretext of begging is giving beyond one’s power. Therefore, such a wish is not received by God. Therefore, etc.
13. Item. 2 Corinthians 8:13: *For I do not wish that there be a remission for others, or a tribulation for you*; the Gloss: ‘That is poverty, but from equality’; the Gloss: ‘It is not demanded that one give more than what ought to be retained for oneself—just as Zacheus gave half of his goods to the poor’: Luke 19:8. This is equality, that he who receives spiritual things assigns carnal things. Therefore one ought not give away the whole under the pretence of begging.
14. Item. 1 Thess. 5:12: *We ask you, o brothers, that you come to know those who labour in the word*. Gloss: ‘Just as riches produce a negligence of health [*salutis*], so need, while it seeks to be satisfied, declines from justice. But no one should put himself in such a state so that he easily declines from justice.’ Therefore, one [should not be] in such a state of need that he seeks to be satisfied [by others].
15. Item. 2 Thessalonians 3:9: *That we ourselves give a model for you*; the Gloss: ‘[When] he who is given to leisure comes to another’s table, it is necessary that he flatter the host [*pascenti*]’. But no one ought to put themselves in such a state. Therefore, etc.

8. Traver’s edition of the text splits the objections into two sets of ten. While he has assured me that there is some MSS. authority for this decision, I have opted for simplicity and to follow the *Opera omnia* here and leave them all as a single set.

16. Item. He who imposes the necessity of begging upon himself, does so against the Apostle. 1 Thessalonians 4:11: *Work with your hands so that you desire nothing of anyone*; the Gloss: ‘Much less may you ask, or may you steal [*tollatis*] something’. Therefore, etc.
17. Item. 2 Thessalonians 3:14: *If anyone will not obey my word—namely that one abstain from begging while he is able to seek victuals with bodily labour—do not eat with that one so that he feel upset*; the Gloss: ‘That is, so that, ejected from everyone, he grow ashamed, until he subjects himself to the precepts of the Apostle’. Therefore, since no one ought to be ejected from the communion of men, except on account of mortal sin 11 q. 3 c. *Nemo episcoporum* it remains that such a person sinned mortally.⁹ Therefore, etc.
18. Item. Proverbs 30:8: *Do not give me lies and riches; distribute only the necessities of life, lest by chance I, sated, am enticed into denying God and say: Who is the Lord? And, compelled by need, I rave and slander the name of my God.*’ The Gloss: ‘lest from abundance or poverty of transient things one sink into the oblivion of eternity’. Therefore, poverty makes [one] forget eternal things. Therefore it is an evil. Therefore, etc.
19. Item. Ambrose, in D. 86 c. *Singulis*:¹⁰ ‘Let a measure of pity itself be preserved for the possibility of the human condition, so that one not seize the whole for himself, but that he share what he has with the poor’.
20. Item. Augustine, *On the Work of Monks* 41.5.3: ‘If through infirmity or occupation we are not able to work, so God will feed and clothe us, after the fashion of birds and lilies which do no work. When we can work, however, we ought not try our God’—namely, that we expose ourselves to mendicancy. Therefore, it is not licit for those able to work to beg.

[Response]

I respond according to Master William of Auxerre: ‘If one thus gives everything away, so that he does not otherwise have hope of having necessary things without sin, he sins mortally’, because he places himself in danger of many sins, namely [the sins of] adultery, slander, theft,

9. C. 11 q. 3 c. 41 (1.655).

10. D. 86 c. 19 (1.302).

deviating from justice—as is clear above. Or he is in danger of mortal sin, which one is able to avoid without sin, if he retains the necessities of life. ‘If, however, he gives away everything with the intent of entering a monastery where he sufficiently have all the necessities of life, then he does well and this is the work of perfection, nor does he give away things superfluously. Rather, he retains all necessities for himself, since there ought to be no needy person among people leading a common life.’¹¹ Acts 4:32: ‘Everything was common for them, nor was anyone in need amongst them’. And on this verse is written an ecclesiastical regulation: 12 q. 1 c. *Videntes*,¹² which if anyone strives to remove, let him be smitten with excommunication.

Also: If he gives everything away with the intent of living thenceforth from the work of his own hands, he does well and this is the work of perfection. Luke 12:33: *Sell your possessions and give alms*; the Gloss: ‘so that, having first rejected all your things for God, afterwards you work with your hands, you may live and give alms’. If, however, one gives away everything in the hope of begging, I do not think that this is licit, because the Apostle prohibits this, saying, 1 Thessalonians 4:11: *work with your hands so that you desire nothing of anyone*’.

Also: 2 Thessalonians 3:8: *Nor did we eat bread for free from anyone, but in labour and fatigue, labouring day and night so that we not burden anyone of you*. And he admonished that he ought to be imitated in this, saying at 2 Thessalonians 3:9: *that we our very selves give this model for you for the sake of imitating us*. If the Apostle, therefore, restrained himself from taking up what was given to him and physically worked so that he not burden men, and advised that he be imitated in this, it is clear that it is [also] not licit for those who are not apostles to seek food or victual [by begging], if they are otherwise able have [food or victual] without sin. Nor is it licit for them, under the hope of begging, to give away everything against the Apostle, but only under the hope of living from the goods of the church or under the hope of living from bodily labour. And 2 Thessalonians 3:10: *He who does not wish to work*—the Gloss: ‘physically, whence he may live’—*nor let him eat*.

For if he chooses poverty so that he may beg, he wishes his poverty to be temporally profitable and displays his pretended, venal, sanctity (cf.

11. William of Auxerre, *Summa aurea*, 3.24.4 (pp. 447–48).

12. C. 12 q. 1 c. 16 (1.682–83).

2 Timothy 3:5)—in opposition to the Augustine saying in his book, *On the Work of Monks* (41.5.3) concerning certain regulars, who, wishing to live off of spiritual works, went about the provinces: ‘O servants of God, soldiers of Christ, why do you conceal the traps of the ancient enemy, who, desiring to stain your reputation with their stink to such a degree [that] he scatters many hypocrites—endlessly travelling around the provinces, nowhere sent, nowhere fixed—under the guise of monks? . . . And they ask of all, and demand of all, either the cost of profitable need or the price of simulated sanctity.’

Also: It is difficult for those who wander thus through the world that they not have something of their own since they proceed without witnesses. And therefore, it were better that they be seculars than regulars; because, just as Augustine says in the sermon *De communi vita clericorum*:¹³ ‘I preferred to have bars than to mourn for the dead. For whoever is a hypocrite, namely someone holding something of his own, is dead.’

But anyone who will say: It is better to beg than to be in a monastery having possessions because it is better to have nothing, neither of one’s own, nor in common, than to have anything in common, because the latter is of lesser perfection.

I respond: Prosper says the opposite in 12 q. 1 c. *Expedit*:¹⁴ ‘Finally, St Paul sold and bequeathed his huge estates to the poor; but when he became bishop, he did not condemn the resources of the church, but most faithfully dispensed them. This action shows sufficiently that one’s own things ought to be despised for the sake of perfection, and that the resources of the church that are completely held in common can be possessed without any impediment to perfection.’

[Response to the Objections]

To those authorities [1] which say, ‘everything ought to be sold and given to the poor’ and the Gloss [2] which says ‘altogether everything, not part; likewise to those [11, 12] which say ‘everything ought to be left behind and God ought to be followed’, we say that they hold truth and speak of the state of perfection. But it should not be understood that they should live by begging, but rather by leading a common life from the goods of

13. C. 12 q. 1 c. 10, *Nolo* (1.679–80).

14. C. 12 q. 1 c. 13 (1.681).

the church (Acts 4:32; 12 q. 1 c. 16, *Videntes*¹⁵); or they ought to live from the labour of their own hands, according to the above Gloss [6] on Luke 12:33: *Sell possessions*; the Gloss: ‘so that, having once spurned all things for the Lord, you may work with your hands whence you may live’.

To that [3] which Psalms 39:18 says, *I am a beggar and poor*, in the person of Christ, the Gloss says: ‘in so much as [he was a] man seeking from another’, i.e., from God. Whence it follows, ‘The Lord is anxious for me’; the Gloss: ‘that is, he cares after me’. But I do not read that he begged bread; but that he had a purse, John 12:6 concerning Judas: ‘he was a thief and holding a purse’; the Gloss: Guardian of the purse of the Lord—which purse the Lord had to give the model of the church holding temporal goods in common, even for the perfect. Whence Augustine, in 12 q. 1 c. 12, *Exemplum*: ‘Receive the example of the Lord’s conduct (*conversantis*) on the earth. Why did He whom the angels ministered have a purse unless [it was] because the church will hold his purse’.¹⁶ And Prosper in 12 q. 1 c. *Expedit*:¹⁷ ‘It is useful that the resources of the church be possessed, and one’s own things be despised from love of perfection. For they [the resources] are not one’s own, but common resources of the church. And therefore whoever, having sent away or sold everything he had, becomes a despiser of his things, since he should become head of the church, he is made the dispenser of everything which the church has.’

To that [7] Luke 14:33: *He who does not renounce everything he possesses cannot be my disciple*, the Gloss responds: ‘this separates between renouncing everything and relinquishing everything, because it is fitting to renounce everything [for those] who licitly use mundane things in such a way that they strive toward higher things with the mind; but relinquishing [everything] is only for the perfect ones who care less for temporal things and only long for eternal things’.

To that [8] Luke 16:22, concerning Lazarus begging, we respond that he was *full of ulcers* whence he begged licitly, just as if [he were] unable to work physically, as Ambrose says in the book, *De officiis* (D. 86 c. 14, *Non satis*).¹⁸

To that [9] Acts 4 [3:6]: *the silver and gold is not mine* (says Peter), we respond that he did not have it as his own, but in common, which

15. C. q. 1 c. 16 (1.682–83): .

16. C. 12 q. 1 c. 12 (1.681): .

17. C. 12 q. 1 c. 13 (1.681).

18. D. 86 c. 14 (1.300–01).

nevertheless he was not carrying with him. And although Peter was able to seek expenses, since he was an apostle and they were owed to him. 1 Corinthians 9:14: ‘God ordained for the ones who announce the gospel to live from the gospel’; the Gloss: ‘so that they be freer to preach’ yet for those who do not have apostolic authority [*potestatem*], they are not able to ask [for ‘wages’ (*sumptus*)], and if they ask, it is beggary, not authority. In the apostles, on the contrary, there is authority to receive expenses; [it is] not beggary.

To that [14] Matthew 6:25: *Do not be anxious*, etc., we respond that he prohibits suffocating anxiousness, but not forethought; the Gloss: ‘Anxiousness suffocates the word of God, so that someone does not bear away the reward’. Likewise, the Gloss: ‘bread is prepared by the sweat of the face, but labour must be employed, anxiety, which disturbs the mind, ought to be removed’.

Likewise to that [14] Matthew 6:26: *Behold the flying things of the sky*, we respond through the Gloss: ‘these examples do not prohibit foresight and labour but anxiety, namely the suffocating [variety], which turns [us] away from God.

And on this Augustine says in his book *On the Work of Monks* (41.5.3) ‘On their account, they say that they ought not work because the birds do not sow, nor reap. Why do they not therefore attend to what follows? Nor do they congregate in store-rooms, which can be called repositories. Why therefore do these ones wish to have idle hands and full repositories? Why, finally, do they grind meal and cook? For birds do not do these things. They show us that men thus wish to serve the birds, just as they wish for men to serve themselves, unless, captured and confined (by which means faith may not be held), so that, flying away, they return. How good was it, if the Lord even deigned to provide them with wings, not so that the servants of God are found in foreign fields as thieves are captured, but as starlings are driven away. But in order to comprehend briefly, those ones—who try to pervert the most obvious apostolic precepts with a perverse understanding from the gospel, either they don’t take thought of the morrow, just as the birds of the sky, or they [don’t?] obey the apostle commanding [us] to work with our hands; rather they do both because both are concordant. Why are the birds of the sky not an example for you to retain nothing, and [yet] you wish that they be an example for doing no work?’

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