

V1_3rd_after_Pentecost= The Wickedness of Defaming the Character of our Neighbor

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U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love You, save souls

O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

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THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Wickedness of Defaming the Character of our Neighbor

*“And the Pharisees and Scribes murmured, saying: This man receiveth sinners.”—
St. Luke 15: 2.*

“Now the publicans and sinners drew near unto him to hear him.” Certainly their intention was a good one, and who could find fault with it? Christ receives sinners; he goes in search of them; he goes into their houses; he eats and drinks with them, so as to win their hearts and convert them to God. A most holy work, indeed, and who could have anything to say against it? And yet there were false and wicked tongues that spat out poison, murmured and complained, and cried down our Lord as a public sinner on account of that holy work. “The Pharisees and the Scribes murmured, saying: this man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.” But, if that was a good work, why did they complain of it? If it was wicked, why did they not represent that to Christ himself, in the spirit of fraternal correction? Why did they talk about it everywhere behind his back? I am not so much surprised to find the wicked Jews guilty of acting in that way, for they were filled with bitter hatred and envy against our Lord; but it is surprising that the same fault should exist amongst us Christians. What is more common among not only those who have a deadly hatred toward each other, but also among friends and relations, and Christians who otherwise are lovers of peace, and seem to lead holy lives, than for one to speak behind another’s back of what he has seen or heard of him, to make his faults and defects the subject of conversation, and to rob him of his good name, and lessen his reputation by murmuring against and finding fault with him? This vice of uncharitable tongues is as common as it is grievous and damnable, nor can one speak often enough

against it, because generally it becomes almost incurable on account of the habit of loquacity it fosters. Hence I say:

To defame the character of others is one of the most grievous of vices.

He who defames his neighbor severs the bond of charity, harmony, and union, which should exist among men, and by that fact alone is guilty of one of the most grievous of vices, since he acts against the fundamental law of charity. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart.” Still, great and important as is this command to love God, he places another command in the same rank with it: “And the second is like to this, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (St. Matthew 22: 39); that is, every one, great or small, rich or poor, friend or enemy, good or bad; and you must love them all as yourself. Nay, God frequently commands you, under pain of sin, to set aside the service you owe him when the love of your neighbor requires you to do so. For instance, there is a sick person whom you must attend to, and there is no one to take your place; what are you to do under those circumstances? It is true that you are bound to hear Mass every Sunday and holy-day under pain of mortal sin; but not in this case, for the love of your neighbor has a prior claim on you; you must remain with the sick man if he is really in need of you and would suffer great inconvenience if deprived of your services; so that you must omit hearing the Mass that you would otherwise be bound to offer to God. Jesus Christ our Saviour has given to his disciples, and in their persons to all of us, many beautiful instructions and exhortations; but there is nothing he impresses on us so forcibly as mutual charity. How often did he not repeat, both before and after his resurrection, the words: “These things I command you, that you love one another;” “A new commandment I give unto you: That you love one another” (St. John 15: 17). On this charity depends the observance of all the laws of God, as Christ tells us: “On these two commandments”—namely, that of the love of God, and that of the love of our neighbor— “dependeth the whole law and the prophets” (St. Matthew 22: 40). “My little children, love one another,” was the only sermon that St. John, the beloved disciple, preached to his disciples; for, said he, if you do that, it suffices.

Wicked, uncharitable tongues, what do you do when you talk about, criticise, ridicule, and find fault with the actions, the failings, and the defects of the absent? You violate the great fundamental law of charity; you break the bond of union that should exist amongst those for whom Christ died, that they might love one another; you cause those who listen to you to have a similar ill-will and aversion to the person you speak ill of, so that they lose the good opinion they formerly may have had of him. Nor will they, if they are as fond of talking as you are, keep to themselves what they have heard, but will make a point of spreading it about just as wickedly as you did, until everybody in the place knows all about it. Finally, what effect do you think your talk will have on the person of whom you speak, supposing it comes to his ears? What is more likely than that anger, ill-will, hatred, and desire of revenge will take the place of charity? You see now that with one breath, one uncharitable word, you have destroyed the peace, unity and charity that God has so emphatically recommended to us! This it is that makes the sin of injuring another’s character so odious to God and man.

There is nothing which proves more clearly the wickedness of uncharitable talk than the great value of the treasure it robs one of. The greater the value of the property that is

injured, the greater is the harm done. But of all the natural and temporal possessions that a man can have on this earth, is there any which is more esteemed, valued, and loved, than a good name or reputation? God, our religion, the world and its prudence, all unite in saying to and inculcating on every one that he must preserve his good name. God exhorts us: "Take care of a good name; for this shall continue with thee, more than a thousand treasures precious and great" (Ecclus. 41: 15). Our religion calls a good name the good odor of a Christian life, which encourages men to practice virtue, as much as the bad example and scandal-giving betray men to evil. The maxims and principles of the world forbid any one to suffer the least taint to rest on his honor. Ask any honorable man whether he would prefer to be looked upon as dishonorable, or to lose a hundred dollars. Away! he would say at once; away with all my money! My good name is far more to me! I would rather be poor and keep my good name, than rich and dishonorable. There is nothing more pleasant than good health, and there is nothing sweeter than life, to preserve which a man will readily sacrifice all his wealth. And yet honor and a good reputation are sweeter and more pleasant than life and health. How many there are who risk their lives for the sake of making a name for themselves! And why? The reason of that the Holy Ghost gives: "A good life hath its number of days; but a good name shall continue forever" (Ecclus. 41: 16); everything we can enjoy during life comes to an end in a short time, but a good name is not confined to this life, for it lasts after death, and is carried down to posterity. Hence, a good name is called the moral life of a man, and he who takes it away is called by the Apostle a murderer.

Murderers you are, then, you who defame your neighbor and take away his moral and most precious life. One can compare you to nothing better than to that stone that was cut from the mountain without hands, as we read in the Book of Daniel. King Nabuchodonosor once saw in a dream a great statue, the head of which was of gold, the breast and arms of silver, the belly and thighs of brass, the legs of iron, and the feet partly of iron and partly of clay. Suddenly the whole statue fell to pieces and crumbled into dust, which was blown away by the wind. What was the cause of this utter ruin? A single stone that fell from the mountain. "A stone was cut out of a mountain, without hands, and it struck the statue" (Dan. 2: 34). And on what part of the statue did the stone fall? On the golden head, the silver breast, the brazen body, or the iron legs? No; for it could not have broken those metals; but it fell on the feet, that were of clay. "It struck the statue upon the feet thereof, and broke them in pieces" (Dan. 34: 35). A picture of what is done every day in the world by uncharitable tongues. Many a one is as beautiful as gold in virtue and piety, as shining as silver in his purity, as strong as brass and iron in his constancy, while the good name he enjoys makes him like a beautiful statue in the eyes of men. And yet, how little is required to overthrow this statue and reduce it to dust! A single stone is enough; that is, a single word of calumny or detraction.

Man's good name is so precious in the sight of God that, generally speaking, whenever he mentions the wicked in Holy Scripture he conceals their names, that they may not be known. In the Book of Genesis we read of the presumption of those who attempted to build the tower of Babel. Who was the first to propose the building of it? Who made the plan? We know not; all we read is: "And each one said to his neighbor: come, let us make bricks, and bake them with fire" (Gen. 11: 3). In the same Book we read that the people of Sodom surrounded the house of Lot, in order to seize the strangers whom he had harbored; not one of those wicked people is mentioned by name. In the

Book of Exodus the king who persecuted the Israelites is called Pharaoh, a name that was common to all the Egyptian kings; which of the Pharaohs he was is not recorded. In the Book of Leviticus you will read of a blasphemer who was stoned, in the Book of Numbers of one who profaned the Sabbath by servile works, but you cannot find out the name of either of them, nor of the Levite, whom we read of in the Book of Judges, who adored an idol in the house of Michas. In the Gospels we seldom find the name of the guilty persons recorded; they are called by general appellations, such as Scribes and Pharisees, the buyers and sellers in the temple, the woman who was a public sinner, one of the servants buffeting Jesus, the soldiers mocking him. Whereby God gives us to understand how he hates and detests vice, but at the same time how careful he is of the sinner's reputation, since he does not mention his name.

For the same reason God has strictly forbidden any one to mention even in confession the sin of another, when the latter is known to the confessor, who is still ignorant of his sin. But here I must remind you that it is a different matter to mention the fault of another to a confessor, or to some other person, with the intention of being helped to amend one's own fault, or of helping one's neighbor to amend; for in that case the laws of fraternal correction oblige us to speak of the shortcomings of others, if we cannot induce them to correct those faults by privately admonishing them; otherwise it would be a great mistake to mention others by name in confession, and yet it is a common one. For instance, it often happens that the confessor is acquainted, or likely will be acquainted, with all the members of a family, husband, wife, brothers, sisters and servants. The wife comes to confession (I am not repeating anything heard in confession; I am merely saying what might happen), and, though she ought to mention nothing but her own sins, she begins something in the following style: Alas! I have cursed, and sworn, and given way to impatience very often; but I cannot help it; I am driven almost to desperation; my husband is enough to drive me mad; he gambles away all we earn; he is drunk nearly every day, and when he is in that state one is not safe with him; he goes to houses of ill-fame. But what has that to do with your confession? You do not come here to accuse your husband, but yourself. You have cursed, and been impatient, and have almost despaired; these are your sins, and you should have told them without saying anything of your husband, who was the occasion of these sins. The husband acts in the same way with regard to his wife, and neither of them has gained anything by confession, but each has taken away the other's good name. Mothers, too, often act in the same way: I have a disobedient, wayward son, who will not obey me; he curses and abuses me if I give him good advice, and I cannot help myself; I must give way to my anger, and curse him in turn. My sister, says another, is so snappish and unkind that I cannot bear her. But what has your son or your sister to do with your sins? What does the confessor want to know about their faults? Would you be satisfied if your children and relations were to mention your faults in confession? Hush! you must not mention any one's name; it is not only quite unnecessary to do so, but it is also injurious to the fair fame of your neighbor; you cannot mention the sins of another, even under the seal of confession and to your confessor, without committing another sin; for he either knows the person you mention, or will likely know him at some future time, and thus the latter's good name will suffer.

From all this you must draw the following conclusion: If it is forbidden, even with the protection of the seal of confession, which binds the confessor so strictly that he can no more speak of what he hears therein than if he had never heard it, and if theologians say

with good reason that one is bound rather to conceal the nature of his sin, which should otherwise be declared in confession, rather than run the risk of injuring the character of another; if it is forbidden under those circumstances to disclose another's sin, how grievous, how inexcusable must not be the malice of those evil-tongued persons who, in company, without any cause whatever, speak of the faults and defects that they have seen, heard of, or noticed in others, or even merely suspected them of, whether they do so out of hatred, envy and malice, or out of mere loquacity; for they rob their neighbor of his good name, that best of all natural possessions, which is so important in the eyes of God and man! With reason does St. Bernard cry out three times in succession: "Detraction is a great vice; detraction is a grievous sin; detraction is an enormous crime!" And yet, alas! what a common thing it is in the world nowadays, among people of all classes and conditions! I conclude with the advice of the Holy Ghost: "Keep yourselves, therefore, from murmuring, which profiteth nothing, and refrain your tongue from detraction" (Wisdom 1: 11). Let each one make the resolution with David: "that my mouth may not speak the works of men" (Ps. 16: 4). The works of men are sins, faults, defects; whatever is good and praiseworthy in them is the work of divine grace. If, then, you must speak of others, relate openly and fearlessly what they have received from God, but be careful not to allow the least word to escape that might injure them or lessen their reputation. Let each one remember the golden rule of charity: Do unto others as you wish them to do unto you. Never say in the absence of others what you would not say in their presence. Amen.

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