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THOU SHALT LOVE THY NEIGHBOR AS THYSELF

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JMJ

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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FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

### The Irreparable Injury Caused by Defaming Another's Character

*"First go to be reconciled to thy brother." St. Matthew 5:24.*

What a difficult thing it is for people, when they are once embittered against each other, to be thoroughly reconciled; and yet it is an absolutely necessary thing to salvation; for without it all one's confessions and Communion are sacrilegious and cannot merit the grace of forgiveness. I have lately spoken of the vice of defaming our neighbor, and have shown how grievous it is, because it violates Christian charity, and injures our neighbor's fair fame. There is still another point to be explained in order to deter you all the more from this fearful vice, and to show those who are guilty in this respect what they have to do. And what is that? "First go to be reconciled to thy brother." Have you said anything to injure his fair fame? "Go to be reconciled to him," and to all those whose honor you have attacked; make good the harm you have done. How easy it is to offend in this matter of defaming our neighbor, but how hard and difficult to atone for the injury done! This I shall now proceed to show.

I. *Amongst all sins there is none so difficult to atone for or to make reparation for, as the sin of injuring our neighbor's character.*

II. *What must we do to avoid it?*

I. If he who has defamed another wishes to be reconciled to God and to his neighbor, and to atone for his sin, besides a true repentance, a firm purpose of amendment, and a candid declaration of his sin in confession, he must make complete reparation for the injury he has inflicted on his neighbor's character, whether he has simply lessened that character or taken it away altogether, provided such reparation be possible. This truth needs no proof. "The sin will not be forgiven, unless that which is unjustly taken away be restored to its lawful owner."

But how difficult it is to make this reparation as it ought to be made! So difficult, that it is generally the next thing to an impossibility! Why so? For the following reasons:

I. In the first place, the reparation must be in proportion to the amount stolen, or to the injury committed; that is, I must give back as much as I have stolen, and make good all the harm I have done. But who can find out that proportion in the matter of injury inflicted on another's character, so as to be able to say: so much and no more have I taken away from that person's good name? You have, for instance, said of that neighbor, or man of business, that he cannot be trusted, and that he cheats people, as you know by experience; of that doctor, that he knows nothing, that he is always drunk when visiting a patient; of that young lady, that she makes herself too common, that you saw her one evening acting improperly; of that servant, that he or she is unfaithful, and takes things secretly out of the house, that you would not have such people in your employment.

Now, what you say in that way to another, or to two or three people, they tell afterwards to others, and these latter spread it still further, so that the evil report against your neighbor soon becomes known to a great number.

Sometimes a dog goes quietly along the street, doing no harm to any one, when suddenly some mischievous boys begin to shout and to throw stones at him; at once the whole neighborhood is in an uproar, and every one runs after the poor animal; the other dogs run out of the houses, and, though they are afraid to join in the pursuit, they add to the confusion by barking with the others. Thus a whole crowd of people rush after the poor dog; some beat him with sticks, others throw stones at him; one says he must be mad, another that he has severely bitten a child, a third that he has stolen some meat in the neighborhood. Meanwhile the poor dog's only fault is his misfortune in meeting the mischievous boys who occasioned the whole uproar. So it is also with the unfortunate and sometimes completely innocent man, who comes across some ill-tongued person. That businessman, that doctor, that young girl, that servant, wherever they go, have a bad name, and everybody speaks against them. And how did that come to pass? They came across some one who, either through malice or loquacity, related something bad about them, which he either heard or saw, or merely suspected them to be guilty of; the report was spread from one person to another, from one street to another, until it became the talk of the town. See, oh, ill-tongued man, what mischief you have done by your imprudence! You are to blame for it all; you were the first to cause your neighbor's reputation to suffer, and no matter how many have helped to spread the report, the origin of it is to be traced to you. Now, if you wish to atone for your fault, you are bound in conscience to restore your neighbor's good name with all those people to whom you have defamed it, and in proportion as you have defamed it to each one, so that he will enjoy just the same good reputation as before. But who does not see that it is almost an impossibility to do this? Nevertheless you are bound absolutely to do it, if you wish to make reparation for the harm you have done by your slanderous tongue. And this, I say, is the obligation which is so hard of fulfillment that it is never properly fulfilled.

2. But there is still another difficulty, another obligation, you have to attend to. And what is that? Besides the loss of character you may have occasioned, you may also have been the cause of a loss in business or other material concerns to those you have maligned. That man of business has lost credit, his customers abandon him; that doctor is no longer employed, as people are afraid to trust him; that young girl might have married well, but now no one will have anything to say to her; that servant cannot find a place any more. Count up, now, if you can, the amount of injury you have done in each case. All this you are bound to make reparation for, if you wish to make full atonement before God and man for what you have done. But how difficult that is! It is almost an impossibility!

3. Suppose, now, that you have calculated exactly all the injury you have done your neighbor's character, and the amount of loss you have caused him in his business; are you still really determined to make full reparation? Then, if what you have said of your neighbor is false, you are bound to contradict it before every one to whom you said it, and in whose estimation your neighbor's character has suffered in consequence; and you must say to each one of them: What I told you of so and so is not true; it is a lie. If what you said is true, but not yet publicly known, you are bound to do all you can to restore your neighbor's character before all those in whose presence you have injured it. But what an iron resolution it must require to disgrace one's self, to swallow one's own words, and to acknowledge one's own guilt, besides making reparation for the material losses caused!

Many and many a slanderer there is in the world; but you will hardly find one in a hundred who makes reparation for the injury done his neighbor's good name. How many have you not heard during your lives speaking ill of others, and injuring their reputation more or less seriously? But can you remember even one who came back to restore his neighbor's character? In spite of the numbers of confessions in which people accuse themselves of slander, there is hardly a case in which due reparation is made.

See, now, how difficult, nay, almost impossible, it is to make due reparation for the injury inflicted on your neighbor's honor, and to make that atonement for your sin which is, absolutely speaking, required. Oh, in what a labyrinth those talkative and scandalous tongues of ours involve us! How easy it is to get into it; how difficult to get out of it! The word falls from the lips without any trouble; but what great art is required to retract it? With reason the slanderous tongue is compared to a venomous serpent: "If a serpent bite in silence, he is nothing better than backbiteth secretly" (Eccles. 10:1). Some serpents bite so quickly that one hardly feels the fatal wound at first; in the same way a slanderous tongue inflicts a fatal wound on a man's good name, without the sufferer being able to tell how or by whom he is injured. There are serpents so venomous that, once their

poison is infused into the blood, nothing but amputation of the injured limb will save the person whom they have bitten. The same may safely be said of slanderous tongues. Once they have poured out their venom, it is almost impossible to heal the wound they have inflicted, that is, to restore the reputation they have ruined. Moses, in order to convince King Pharaoh that he was sent by the true God, threw his rod on the ground, and it was instantly changed into a serpent; but when he took the serpent into his hand, it became a rod again. Pharaoh's magicians tried their skill in the same way, but not with the same success; they changed their rods into serpents, but, with all their art, they could not change the serpents back into rods. There you have a specimen of your art, oh, slanderous and evil-tongued people! By your uncharitable talk you cause your neighbor to lose his good reputation, and to appear in the eyes of others like a loathsome serpent; but you are utterly unable to restore the good name you have taken away, and to make full reparation for the injury you have done his honor. Therefore the Holy Ghost warns us to be careful to avoid the voice of slander: "Take heed lest thou slip with thy tongue, and thy fall be incurable unto death" (Ecclus. 28:30).

II. What is he, then, to do, who knows that he is guilty of having inflicted a serious injury on his neighbor's character? On the one hand the sin will not be forgiven him unless he is firmly resolved to make full reparation for the wrong he has done, as soon as possible; on the other hand, the difficulty of making this reparation verges almost on the impossible, when the evil report has once been spread abroad. What hope of salvation, then, can there be for such a man? Must he despair? Must I say, to him what Father Alexander de Castro once said to a nobleman, who accused himself of having said publicly in company that he had sinned with a certain noble lady, whose name he mentioned, although what he said was quite false? "Away with you! You are lost!" he said to him, knowing well that the nobleman could never bring himself to retract his own words in the same company, and to confess, even on oath, that he had told a lie; and the event proved that the confessor's fears were justified. Must I, too, launch forth the same thunderbolt against all slanderers, and say to each one of them: away with you! You are lost! Your confession will not avail you! There is no help for you? No; things have not gone as far as that yet. If you are quite certain that you have injured your neighbor's honor, and injured it seriously, and that you knew that you were doing wrong when you were speaking against him, then you must relate the whole matter, with all its circumstances, to an experienced confessor, who is able to advise you, and he will tell you what to do and will help you out of the difficulty.

Meanwhile, as far as the injury done to your neighbor's honor is concerned, I must tell you, in order to relieve your mind somewhat and to give you a little consolation, that there are many circumstances in which we are not obliged to make reparation for the injury which we think we have done our neighbor's honor (mind, however, that I am speaking of the injury done to his honor alone); for it is a different thing altogether, with regard to the material loss we may have caused him.

I. In the first place, I am not bound to make reparation if I have just reasons for thinking that they who heard me speaking ill of my neighbor did not believe me, or did not look on what I said as dishonorable to him. Sometimes, too, there are people to be found who are publicly known as being apt to say anything that comes into their minds, without any regard for the truth; no sensible man would believe what such people say. Again, when they who are under the influence of violent anger utter all sorts of calumnies against their opponents, in such a way that it is evident they are speaking out of the bitterness of their hearts, out of hatred and vindictiveness, it is clear that no sensible man will believe what they say. And why? Because he has not really injured his neighbor's honor in the estimation of those who were listening to him. A thief wishes to steal; to that end he places the ladder against the window of a house, climbs in during the night, and breaks open the chest, but finds nothing, so that he has to go back empty-handed. He has committed a theft in desire and intention, and has therefore sinned grievously against God and his neighbor; but he is not bound to restitution, because he has not actually stolen anything, or injured any one's property. And so it is, too, with those who, through wantonness, wickedness, hatred, or talkativeness, try to injure their neighbor's character; they commit a grievous sin; but, since no one believes what they say, they have not really injured their neighbor, and are therefore not bound to make reparation.

2. I am not bound to make good my neighbor's injured character if he of whom I have spoken uncharitably has publicly justified himself and proved his innocence, or has otherwise regained his good name in that particular matter in which I have spoken ill of him. Thus, it often happens that a servant, a man of business, is accused of some grievous violation of duty, although afterwards his innocence is clearly proven; in a case of

that kind I am not bound to make further reparation; just as a thief is not bound to make restitution if the lawful owner has succeeded in getting possession of his property again.

3. If I have revealed a secret and disgraceful crime of my neighbor, and the same vice afterwards comes to be publicly known, not through me, nor through those to whom I revealed it, but in some other way, I am freed from the obligation of making reparation; because he is publicly dishonored, and has thus lost his right to his good name. Much less am I bound to make reparation if his crime was already known to only a small number of people; because he had already lost his good name before I spoke of him.

4. Suppose that two women or two sworn enemies are quarrelling; they growl and snarl at each other like dogs; they hurl at each other all the abusive epithets they can think of, without caring whether they are true or false, and thus they publicly disgrace themselves before a crowd of people. The question now is, what are they to do to restore each other's good name? They sin grievously by using contumelious expressions toward each other; but, since they both suffer the same amount of injury, neither is bound to make reparation to the other.

5. If a long time has elapsed since the slander was uttered, so that there is a moral certainty that it has fallen into oblivion, and that no one thinks of it any longer, I am freed from the obligation of making reparation; for when people forget the slander they are as if they never heard it, and time itself has restored my neighbor's injured character. Nay, in a case of that kind, I am bound to keep silent, so as not to remind people of what they have forgotten, and to avoid doing my neighbor further harm by my efforts to make reparation to him.

6. I am freed from this obligation if I foresee certainly that all my retractions, excuses, praises, and other means that I am ready to make use of, will have no effect, and that people will put no faith in them. Again, I am excused if I cannot make reparation without endangering my life. The same is to be said if they to whom I have spoken ill of my neighbor are dead, or have gone away to such a distance that I cannot retract my words in their presence.

7. If I have not committed a sin before God by my uncharitable talk, as is generally the case with pious people who inadvertently let fall a word now and then that is injurious to their neighbor, I am not bound in that case to make reparation, if I cannot do so without grave inconvenience, unless I have publicly told a lie against my neighbor, in which case I am bound to retract it. Meanwhile, every one who is in the habit of speaking thoughtlessly of the faults of others, is bound under pain of sin to correct that bad habit, and to restrain his tongue.

8. I am freed from the obligation of making reparation if he whom I have slandered renounces his right and does not exact any retraction from me.

From all this it is evident that we must carefully avoid speaking ill of our neighbor, and that, if we wish to save our souls, we must restrain our tongues whenever his faults and failings are made the subject of conversation in our presence. "Take heed," is my final warning, in the words of the Holy Ghost, both to you and to myself, "take heed lest thou slip with thy tongue, and thy fall be incurable unto death." Ah, keep a guard on your tongue, that it may not lead you to a mortal fall, from which you can never properly rise again! Once more, observe the golden rule of charity, to do unto others as you wish others to do unto you, and never say in the absence of others what you would not say in their presence. Amen.

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