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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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SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Manifold Ways of Defaming Our Neighbor's Character, And The Excuses That Are Generally Made for This Sin

"*By their fruits you shall know them.*" St. Matthew 7:20.

Those false prophets, who are dressed in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves, are like those detractors and calumniators who, with smiling countenances and every outward show of friendship, outrage Christian charity in their conversation and take away from their neighbor the best and most valuable thing that he has that is, his good name. Beware of those false people, those ravening wolves, and pay no attention to what they say. "By their fruits you shall know them." You will find out what they are, by what they talk of; but you will be compelled almost to avoid society altogether, if you wish to keep away from those who malign their neighbor, so common is this vice, and so little do people generally make of it!

I. Injuring the good name of others is a very common sin, and it is committed generally in many different ways.

II. It is a sin that is thought little of, and that people try to excuse in different ways.

I. There are many forms of illness that the human body is subject to, which can cause it to die a natural death; but human ingenuity has also invented many ways of depriving people of life by violence, and it is still occupied in devising others. Into how many different forms are not steel and iron wrought for that purpose? Knives, stilettos, revolvers, pistols, swords, spears, axes, javelins, are all deadly weapons with which one can cut and pierce both near and at a distance, so as to destroy life at once. The art of gunnery can hardly be carried to greater perfection. What an enormous weight can be hurled to a distance by cannons and mortars! What fearful havoc is caused by mines, bombs, and hand-grenades and torpedoes!

Still, I know not but that slanderous tongues have nowadays still more numerous ways and instruments of depriving others of their moral life, that is, of their honor and good name. There are ten chief ways in which the fair fame of others may be attacked, and it is a rare thing to find one who does not sin in one or other of them.

1. The first is, when one falsely relates something bad and disgraceful of another. This is the worst form of defamation of another's character; because, besides the injury it inflicts on the fair fame of one's neighbor, it has also the malice of a grievous falsehood, which it is exceedingly difficult to make proper atonement for.

2. The second is, when one relates something bad of another that is true indeed, but is not yet publicly known; that is a sin that violates flagrantly the right that every one has to his good name, as long as his faults are secret.

3. The third is a common trick of slanderous tongues, and it consists in making a great crime out of a small fault, and in always causing it to appear far worse than it is in reality. For instance, a man happens to be guilty of some slight breach of trust, or to be caught in the act of committing a trifling theft; he is at once put down as a thief. He who has once been guilty of a sin of impurity is spoken of as being completely addicted to that vice. He who happens, unintentionally, to take a trifle too much drink is at once set down as a drunkard. In the same way, too, if a man lets fall a word inadvertently against his neighbor, he is considered a slanderer. All that is very wrong; there is a great difference between committing the sin once, and being in the habit of committing it. As the saying goes, one swallow does not make a summer. He who has told one lie does not deserve to be called a liar.

4. A fourth and still more wicked manner of injuring the character of others Consists in attributing wrong motives and intentions to them. These motives and intentions are supposed to be gathered with sufficient certainty from a person's least movement, from his words, his actions, his behavior, and even his dress, so that they can be made the subject of conversation. See, these evil-tongued people say, how often that young man, that young woman, that neighbor, that priest goes to that house; he or she cannot mean any good by it; we can easily imagine what goes on there. That person is very generous in giving alms to the poor; but we know why; he does not always do it for God and his soul's sake. That wife, that daughter, always appears at church in grand style; it is something else besides devotion that brings her there. I lately heard those two young people talking together, and I knew by their laughter what was going on. Did you not notice how so and so behaved when that person came into the room? I can easily guess what he was thinking of. One can know by merely looking at that man that he is not good.

5. The fifth manner of maligning one's neighbor is still more common, and it consists in not speaking directly from one's own experience against the character of others, but in relating what one has heard to their disadvantage. Thus people say: “I have heard so and so of that person on good authority; queer things are said of him; he is accused of having committed this or that crime.” This is one of the most venomous kinds of defamation, because they who hear it believe that it is publicly known, and they will therefore have no hesitation in spreading it farther, so that it is the same as if one were to make known his neighbor's disgrace in every country by sending the news of it in letters through the public mails.

6. Sixthly, I injure my neighbor's character by confirming a report that is prejudicial to him; thus, a person remarks to me that he has heard something bad about so and so, but that he does not know whether to believe it or not. Oh, yes! I answer, I, too, have frequently heard the same thing. In that way I confirm the report, and strengthen the bad opinion that he whom I am talking to has of my neighbor. Or, by contradicting and endeavoring to disparage what is said in praise of another, as people often do through hatred, envy, or pride; thus something praiseworthy is related of one who is, absent; oh, I say, with evident marks of displeasure, you do not know the man as well as I do; otherwise you would not talk in that way of him, and you would soon change your opinion.

7. Seventhly, I can injure my neighbor's honor, and that grievously, by keeping silence; thus, when he is praised, I say nothing, although, as all those who are present know, I am well acquainted with him; or else I assent to what is said in such a way as to show that I believe quite the contrary; or I answer somewhat in this style: “I dare not say all I know; I do not wish to speak ill of any one; I want to leave every man to himself; God forbid that I should malign my neighbor!” In this way a deeper wound is sometimes inflicted on another's good name than if the fault of which he is guilty were told out plainly, because those who are present imagine him to be guilty of some far more grievous offence, which I do not wish to speak of.

8. I can injure my neighbor's fair fame by outward signs; for instance, certain vices are spoken of without any one being directly accused of them; I press my neighbor's foot, or his arm, or make some other sign to show that I know him to be guilty. Even during a sermon, when a certain case is explained, if I look or smile at a certain person, with such an expression as to make it evident that I am referring to him what the preacher is saying, it is the same as if I said out openly: that suits you, there is something for you. I sin in the same way by remarking after the sermon that so and so got his share today; it is a pity that certain persons were not present, as they might have heard something that would do them good.

9. One can defame his neighbor even when giving good advice; thus parents sometimes say to their children: see, my son, you must not be like that other boy; people say so and so of him; nor like our neighbor, who has

spent all he has on drink; nor like that other person, who is suspected of theft and has lost all credit in consequence. Be careful, my daughter, to avoid the fate of that other girl, who allowed herself to be so shamefully betrayed; do not make yourself as common as that young woman, who talks to every one. In God's name! What have those examples to do with your warning? Can you not admonish your children to avoid vice and to practice virtue without at the same time revealing the faults of others and injuring their good name?

10. Finally, the character of another may be injured even by praising or pitying him. In order to give more force to the poison wherewith slanderous tongues intend destroying their neighbor's reputation, they first commence to praise him. Thus they say: such a one is a good, sensible, and honorable man, and he is esteemed by all who know him; I cannot understand how he could have committed himself so shamefully in that matter. What a pious, holy person that is! Who would think that he would have acted in that way! I am sorry for that man; if he had not that fault, he would be a splendid character. Is not that ruining a man's honor by dint of praising him? Nay, says St. Bernard, this vice is so subtle that even pious people often inflict grievous injury on their neighbor's fair fame, under the appearance of charity and a holy compassion. "You may see them," he says, "uttering slanderous words with troubled countenances." Alas! They sigh, I am sorry to hear such things of the poor man! He is one of my best friends. I wish he had not gone wrong. If he had only followed my advice! How often have I not warned him to be more careful! In that way things are often made public that no one was aware of before, by the person who thus gives expression to his or her pity.

How many ways have been invented of injuring the character of others! And that alone should convince you that there must be a great number of people in the world who are addicted to this vice; some through wickedness, others through hatred and spite, and others, again, through sheer love of talk. In fact, there are very few who are altogether free from the vice of speaking injuriously of their neighbor; for it is such a subtle and treacherous vice that even they who have been so fortunate as to have conquered all other vices are at length caught in this last snare of the devil, defaming their neighbor, and that, too, without fear or shame. Why is this? It is because people are accustomed to look on it as no great harm to speak ill of others, so that they try in every possible way to excuse it from sin; or, rather, they do all they can to prevent themselves from being considered slanderers. But their excuses are of no avail.

II. 1. God forbid that I should slander my neighbor, or bring disgrace on him! I have certainly told some things about him that are not to his credit; but I did not speak out of hatred, anger, or envy; I had not the least wish to injure his good name; what I said came in the ordinary course of conversation, and my only object was to pass away the time. This is a very lame excuse. People must have something to talk about, and they bring under discussion a person who is absent, and tear him to pieces, as if they could find no more interesting subject of conversation than that. If you cannot talk of anything else, you should hold your tongue, and hear what the others have to say. You maintain that you had no bad intention; but what has that to do with it? In any case, you have injured your neighbor's reputation by your wicked talk. If I spoke of your faults and failings to others, would you be satisfied, if I told you afterwards that I had no bad intention in doing so, and that I was only helping to keep up the conversation? If a thief steals your money in your absence, and then tries to excuse himself by saying that he had not a bad intention in what he did, that he was only trying to pass away the time, and that, as the opportunity offered, he availed himself of it, would you be satisfied with that? I do not and cannot believe it. In the same way, your intention does not excuse you when you have actually injured your neighbor's honor by your talk.

2. Others allege a still more frivolous excuse, that shows them to be very ignorant; others, they say, have spoken badly of me, and no one can blame me if I pay them back in their own coin. What nonsense! Did you ever hear or read that it is lawful? Is that the teaching of St. Peter, who says, "Do not render evil for evil, nor railing for railing"? (1 Peter 3:9.) That man, you say, has taken away your good name. But what then? Do you regain your good name by injuring his? By no means.

3. But I am certain of what I said; I saw it with my own eyes, or I heard it from one who would not tell a lie. They who allege such an excuse betray themselves by openly declaring that they are guilty of defaming their neighbor. You say you have seen it, or heard it from a trustworthy person, and therefore that you know it to be true. Does that give you a right to reveal your neighbor's dishonor to one who has not yet heard of it? Hear what St. Thomas says: "A detractor is one who speaks not against the truth, but against his neighbor's character." It is true that he who falsely attributes a crime to his neighbor is guilty of a greater sin, called

calumny; but he who makes known a private crime of his neighbor is guilty of the sin of detraction. Not only the Gospel law, but the light of reason alone, which teaches us not to do to others what we do not wish them to do to us, is sufficient to show how futile that excuse is.

4. I was not the first to speak of it; it had already been made known by others. And if you are not the first who has committed the sin of detraction, but the second, third, fourth, fifth, or sixth, then, although you are not the spring from which the stream of defamation flows, yet you are the channel by which it is spread about.

5. It was already known, and had become public talk. But very often people only imagine that; they hear a thing from two or three individuals, and at once jump to the conclusion that every one knows of it. In that way you can easily make a thing public which was before known only to a few. Even if it were public talk, you still act against Christian charity by reminding others of your neighbor's dishonor. It is the great God himself who is really offended by the sin that the latter has committed; perhaps he has forgiven that sin already, because your neighbor has repented of it; and if so he will never remember it for all eternity: "If the wicked do penance for all his sins which he hath, committed.... I will not remember all his iniquities that he hath done" (Ezech. 28:21, 22). Why should you, who have not been offended by your neighbor, try to keep alive the memory of his sins?

6. The sixth excuse consists in saying that they were only common, low people who were defamed. Common, low people! Their souls are just as precious; and perhaps more beautiful than yours, in the sight of God; and do you dare to take away their good name? People of lowly condition are often most sensitive in what concerns their honor; they are not blessed with riches and worldly wealth, but they do not on that account wish to part with their good name.

7. I told it to only one friend in strict confidence, and begged of him not to say a word to any one about it. Such is the excuse that many allege; but what a vain one it is! If what you did was lawful, your friend has the same liberty, and he can tell it in strict confidence to a third, the third can tell it to a fourth, and so it goes on; for why should they have less freedom than you? The raindrops fall first on the roofs of the houses, and then into the guttering, whence they are carried into the sewer; there they unite and flow in a stream. So it is with detraction; it is carried from one to another; each one relates it in confidence; listen, my friend, he says, and I will tell you something, but you must keep it to yourself. And before you have time to look around, the secret is made public. Let each one of us make a firm, unalterable resolution that nothing which is in the least prejudicial to our neighbor's character shall ever be mentioned by us, either in few words, or in many, or by signs or gestures; we must not inquire whether a certain thing is grievously or slightly injurious to another, nor whether a certain fault is private or public; it ought to suffice to know that to speak of such things is contrary to the charity we owe our neighbor, whom we are bound to love as ourselves. Amen.

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