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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 +++

*VOL. I = THE BAD CHRISTIAN*

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

### On Uncharitable Listeners

*“He, hath made both the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak.”* St. Mark 7:37.

There are not a few Christians whose souls would profit much if their bodily tongues were dumb and their bodily ears deaf, so many sins do they commit by their senses of speech and hearing. Would it not be better for certain talkative people to be altogether dumb than to injure or destroy their neighbor's honor and good name by their wicked tongues? Would it not be better for those curious ears to be completely deaf than to listen with pleasure to backbiting, detraction and scandal? Certainly it would be much better, if it were God's holy will, for some men to lose both tongue and ears than to lose their souls. I have already said enough of those who sin in this exceedingly dangerous matter by talking against their neighbors (God grant that what I have said may help them to amendment in this respect!) They who listen to such uncharitable talk must now have their instruction, for they must know

- I. Whether, and how they commit sin, and*
- II. How they ought to behave under such circumstances.*

I. According to the old saying, the receiver makes the thief. If there were none willing to buy stolen goods no one would steal or offer ill-gotten goods for sale. In like manner, if no one were willing to listen to uncharitable talk, slanderous tongues would soon be reduced to silence, and in a short time an end would be put to this widely-prevalent and detestable vice. But why is this vice so universal among men? Mainly because the majority of people are willing to encourage it by listening to the detractor or backbiter.

Few have the courage, the zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls which would prompt them to put a stop to an uncharitable discourse, if commenced in their presence. Few are brave enough to withdraw from, or at least to testify their displeasure at, uncharitable conversation, much less to say out boldly: “If you have anything praiseworthy to tell me of this absent person, I will listen to you with pleasure; but I do not want to hear anything prejudicial to my neighbor's honor and good name.” Or else: “What is it to me that So and So has acted in that way, that that man is a usurer, that servant stupid, that merchant unjust, that that woman is given to idleness, that young girl to vanity, that young man to drunkenness? We have not to look after the shortcomings of others, but our own, for which alone we shall be held responsible at the judgment-seat of God.”

The malice of the sin committed by those who listen deliberately to uncharitable talk consists in this, that they give the slanderer the occasion of committing sin, instead of preventing him from offending God. Two devils are present in every company where a conversation is carried on about the faults and failings of others. The detractor (who speaks) has a devil in his mouth; the listener has a devil in his ears. Both parties commit sin, but which of them commits the greater sin? The first sins by injuring his neighbor's honor and good name in the estimation of the listener; the latter sins because he gives the former occasion to continue the uncharitable conversation. Such, in effect, was the answer once given by a sensible man to a certain tale-bearer, who came and told him that his enemy had said something against him. "If my enemy," said he, "had not found in you a ready listener, he would not have ventured to make so free with my good name; therefore, if either of you has committed sin by that conversation, it is you, certainly, who are most to blame for it!"

Now, if this is true of all those who listen to such conversation with pleasure, how grievously do they not sin who, by asking questions, directly furnish others with the occasion of speaking against their neighbor! How grievous the sin must be that is committed by those inquisitive people who are always meddling with the affairs of others, and who never rest until they find out everything that is going on. There are certain hunting dogs whose only business is to unearth the game; this done, they bark as a signal to the huntsman, who immediately comes and shoots the animal or bird, as it may chance to be. They who are so fond of prying into their neighbor's faults and defects are like these dogs. They ask all kinds of questions and fish for information in every possible way, until they find out what goes on in that house, that family, that street, or between those friends and relatives; then they go howling around, exposing their "find" to all who will listen to them. If they hear anything good and praiseworthy of another, they pay no attention to it. It is not what they are looking for. There are certain plants, such as broom corn, that are good for nothing but to make brooms of. The same may be said of these prying, gossiping people. They are good for nothing but to sweep up filth amid impurities; they are brooms to gather scandal from their neighbor's failings and faults. Thus, for instance, they say in the course of conversation:

"There is a queer report about So and So; have you heard anything about it? I wonder what it can be?" Or, if any one inadvertently lets fall a hint against his neighbor's character, they are not satisfied until they have found out the whole affair. "Go on," they say; "tell me all about it; you need not be afraid that I will speak of it: I will tell you afterwards why I am so anxious to hear it."

The worst of this class are those meddlesome persons who, under guise of apparent friendship, ask servants and little children all kinds of questions about what goes on at home. "How are you getting on?" they say; "are you satisfied with your situation? Have you not a very good master or mistress? Who was at your house yesterday? What was he doing there?" and so on, until the unsuspecting child or the discontented servant tells them everything they wish to know. What do I gain by knowing that my neighbor is a bad man? Is it not, on the contrary, a great evil and loss to me to have found that out? If I have gained my knowledge by prying inquiries, I have caused those whom I have questioned to commit sin, and I have committed sin myself by my curiosity, because, as it is unlawful to make known the private faults of another, so also it is sinful to try to find out what those faults are. The servant or the child commits a mortal sin against charity and justice by relating anything that is apt to bring grievous dishonor on the family, and of course I commit a much more grievous sin by being the occasion of their offending God.

Therefore, hedge in your ears with thorns, and hear not a wicked tongue. You should not listen to it, much less should you give it occasion to speak. But, you will ask, who can avoid hearing uncharitable talk? He who wishes to do that would have to shut himself up in his room and never go out. In spite of ourselves we are often obliged to listen to things that are injurious to our neighbor's character, and there is not a chance of making uncharitable people hold their tongues. What, then, is to be done under such circumstances, so as not to sin against God or my neighbor?

II. I acknowledge that, since it is a common thing in the world to talk about the faults and failings of others, no matter how careful we are we can hardly avoid hearing some talk of that kind. That is why I said in the first place that I could wish that we were often deprived of hearing for a time. But my wish is in vain; as long as we

have ears, and they are in a healthy state, so long must we hear whatever sound is made, whatever words are pronounced aloud near us.

What, then, are we to do when an uncharitable conversation is commenced in our presence against our will? The Holy Ghost tells us: "Hedge in thy ears with thorns." By thorns, which pierce and wound, are here meant those fraternal admonitions, those reproofs, which we should administer to detractors or backbiters, in order that they may cease talking uncharitably, and that we may have no part in their sin.

If he who speaks against his neighbor's character is subject to you, then there is no doubt that you are bound to use the authority that God has given you and to command the detractor to hold his tongue. This obligation especially concerns fathers and mothers who hear their children or servants speaking ill of others, because they are bound in conscience to look after the spiritual welfare of the members of their household.

But if the detractor is not subject to you, although he is of lower condition than you, the law of fraternal correction binds you; but you must administer the reproof in a friendly and courteous manner. For instance, you might say: "Let us talk of something else. I know you have no bad intention, still there is always danger in speaking of such things, as one is apt to say what he will be sorry for afterwards."

If the detractor is equal to you in condition, you are not always bound to correct him in that manner; but you must try to put a stop to the conversation in such a manner as not to offend him. Excuse the person spoken of, and say: "At all events, he is an honorable man," or: "she is a respectable lady; we must not believe everything that people say. There is so much of that kind of talk going about that one hardly knows whether it be true or not. If everything that people say were true, we should be all thieves and rogues." Or say: "We have all our faults; what is the use of talking of those of others?"

Finally, if the detractor is of a higher position than your own, what are you to do? It would hardly do for you to admonish or correct him, and if you try to interrupt the conversation, you must do it very cautiously and delicately, otherwise that plan will not be successful. Naturalists tell us that the dolphin hears, although he seems to have no means of hearing, as he has no ears. That is just what one must do when his superior commences to talk uncharitably of others. He must not show by his outward behavior or by the least sign or word, or by laughing or smiling, that he takes pleasure in such conversation. He must keep still and silent and serious, so as to let every one see that it is very displeasing to him. "The north wind driveth away rain, so doth a sad countenance a backbiting tongue." If you listen to a detractor with a serious, sad countenance, he will learn not to be too ready to say what is not heard with pleasure; for, as no one goes willingly into a house in which he knows he is not welcome, so no one will care about protracting a conversation that he knows is displeasing to those who listen. St. Augustine was such an enemy to all uncharitable discourses that he caused a tablet, with the following inscription, to be inserted in the wall over his table, so that all might be able to see it: "He that takes pleasure in speaking ill of the absent, must know that he dare not present himself at this table." It happened once that several bishops were at table with St. Augustine, when some of them forgot the inscription on the tablet and began to speak rather freely of the absent. St. Augustine at once reproved them: "My brethren," said he, "either the tablet must be taken away, or you must change the conversation; or else I will go to my room."

Finally, if we, against our will, hear something bad, that we did not know before of our neighbor, how are we to act? "Charity covereth all sins," is the warning given us by the Holy Ghost. If any one speaks ill to me of a dear friend of mine, I at once think to myself that what he says is not true. And this should be the first effect of Christian charity—namely, not to be too ready to believe the uncharitable things that are said of others, according to the wise admonition: "Believe not every word." There is no doubt that plenty of talk of the kind is carried on almost everywhere, and therefore do not let anything you hear interfere with the good opinion you have of your neighbor. Besides, it is a gross injustice to condemn one who is absent and who cannot defend himself. "We must hear the other side," is a well-known axiom of jurists whenever an accusation is brought forward against a third party. But if the authority of the detractor, or the proofs he brings forward, force me to believe that my neighbor has done wrong, then, according to the laws of charity, I must put the best interpretation I can on everything, and excuse my neighbor, in thought at least, since I cannot be sure that his intention was bad.

Another thing required by the law of Christian charity of all who hear uncharitable conversations is to keep it to themselves, and not to speak of it afterwards. “Hast thou heard a word against thy neighbor? Let it die within thee, trusting that it will not burst thee.” Be not like those talkative people who imagine that they must explode if they do not at once tell to others everything they hear. “At the hearing of a word the fool is in travail, as a woman groaning in the bringing forth of a child. As an arrow that striketh in a man’s side, so is a word in the heart of a fool.” No, you must not be fools, that is, sinners. “Hast thou heard a word against thy neighbor, let it die within thee.” You will notice that it does not read: You must keep the word you have heard against your neighbor locked up in your breast like a malefactor in prison, but you must “let it die”; you must let it be like a dead man in the grave. And why? Because the prisoner, no matter how carefully he is guarded, may find an opportunity to escape, but a dead man, even if his grave were opened, could not come forth; his body must remain where it was placed. A prisoner may show himself to others by looking out at the window, or at least he can make his voice heard; but a dead body is unable to do either; it has neither life nor speech. Therefore, the detraction we have heard must remain buried within, not like a prisoner in his dungeon, but like a dead body in the grave. Let it die within you. Reveal it not by the least sign, nor complain about it to your friends, as so many do. “Oh,” they say; “how disgusted I was to-day! I was in company with So and So, and they commenced to talk about such and such a one, and to tear him to pieces unmercifully. I wish I had remained at home!” No, I say again: “Hast thou heard a word against thy neighbor, let it die within thee.”

I conclude this subject by again reminding you of the warning of the Holy Ghost, and begging of you for Christ’s sake and for the sake of your eternal salvation, “keep yourselves, therefore, from murmuring, which profiteth nothing,” and refrain your tongue from detraction. Guard against that vice of speaking ill of others, which it is so easy to fall into and so difficult to cure, and let us agree unanimously, for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, to do our best to put a stop to that sin, which is the cause of such universal ruin. Amen.

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