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SAINT JAMES IN HIS EPISTLE tells us that “we all make many mistakes, and if any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man” (Jas. 3:2). Our speech manifests what is in our hearts. If our hearts are in conformity with the heart of Christ, then our speech will also be perfect. But we often fall short of this ideal and sins of the tongue are some of the most common and widespread of sins. It may be that we are not even aware of some of these sins. Recently, in our little in-house theology classes, we were going through some questions of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* on these matters and I found this review helpful for myself and so would like to share some of this teaching with you.

Of the various sins of the tongue that Saint Thomas treats, I would like to consider four. Saint Thomas considers all these sins as sins against justice. In other words, in all these cases we are failing to give to our neighbor something that is due to him in justice. In considering these sins of the tongue, as we will see, it is important to keep in mind that what we are doing, morally speaking, depends very much on the intention with which

we are doing it.

The first kind of sin Saint Thomas treats is that of reviling or insulting. When we speak words directly to a person with the intention of dishonoring him, with the intention of showing him disrespect, then we are guilty of the sin of reviling. When we insult another person we want to inflict an injury, we want to cause pain by throwing their guilt in their faces as it were, or by showing them that they are inferior in some way. This sin is more serious when it is done in the presence of other people. Of course, this doesn’t mean that we can never confront others with their faults and failings, but when that is done out of charity for a person, there is no desire to dishonor them but rather to help them. To insult a person is to want to rob them of their honor and this can, in some cases, be a serious sin because a man loves his honor even more than his exterior possessions. Anger is the most common source of the sin of reviling.

Another common sin of speech against justice is that of detraction. In the sin of detraction, we speak about the faults of others behind their backs with the intention of injuring their good name. It

differs from reviling in two ways. First, detraction is done in secret rather than openly to someone's face and secondly, it is aimed at blackening their good name rather than dishonoring them. We can commit the sin of detraction in various ways: we can exaggerate a person's fault; we can reveal to others some fault that is unknown to the person we are speaking to; we can attribute bad intentions to a person's good works or we can try to diminish the good they have done in the eyes of others.

When considering this sin of detraction, it is important to see that the intention with which we speak about the faults of others determines what we are doing, morally speaking.

There are times and places where it is perfectly legitimate and even necessary to speak about the faults of others. Sometimes, for the sake of the common good we need to let a person in a position of authority know about the misbehavior of another.

Sometimes, when someone is suffering seriously because of the sins of another person, they need to seek counsel or they need the support of a trusted family member or friend. If we are speaking about the faults of others to the right persons, for the right reasons then this is not the sin of detraction. Detraction includes in its nature the desire to lessen or destroy the good name of another and that can be a serious injustice. Our good name is one of our most cherished possessions and when it is taken from us, we are often hindered from accomplishing much good. Saint Thomas makes the point that because our good name is a spiritual good, it follows that the sin of detraction is a graver sin than that of theft because we are robbing someone of a more precious good. Whereas reviling and insulting very often arise from anger, detraction most frequently has its source in the deadly sin of envy.

There is another sin of the tongue that goes by

the name of tale-bearing. A talebearer is someone who speaks about another person behind their backs with the intention of stirring up discord. A talebearer wants to destroy the friendship or harmony that exists between people. A talebearer may even say things which are good and true about a person, but they are aware that this information will be painful or unwelcome to the person they are speaking with and will likely result in putting a rift between them and their friend. This is an especially evil sin, as the good of friendship, which is a form of love, is one of our greatest goods in life. I

recently heard of a terrible case of tale-bearing which brought home to me how serious and evil this can be.

Someone who bore some ill will toward a certain very fine religious community found something in the more distant past on the Internet that could possibly put the community in a bad light. This person went around to many of the friends of the community showing this information in order

to stir up and sow discord. His work was so successful that the community, which had done a tremendous amount of good work for many decades within a certain community, had to leave the diocese and go elsewhere.

Finally, Saint Thomas speaks about the sin of derision. We commit the sin of derision when we speak directly to a person with the desire to shame them and to try to make them feel that they have little or no worth. We deride others when we mock them and make fun of them. We can also deride a person in their absence. It is not difficult to see that this is a common tool used by evil men to try to silence those who oppose their plans. Rather than addressing an issue or argument rationally, the person offering opposition is simply attacked and derided. This has, unfortunately, become a staple of much of our political discourse.



Our words have a tremendous power. They have the power to tear down and destroy, but they also have the power to build up. Rather than reviling and insulting others, we can speak a word of praise and encouragement. Rather than speaking about the faults of others, we can acknowledge the good they do. Rather than tale-bearing, we can try to sow peace and harmony between those who are growing apart or who are at odds with one another. Rather than deriding those who oppose our views, we can speak to the issue at hand in a rational way. Our

words come forth from our hearts and reveal what is in our hearts. From a good heart come forth words that have the power to build up and from an evil heart, words that can tear down.

May the Lord enlighten our minds that we may see more clearly what is in our hearts and give us the grace of a new heart so that our speech may be pleasing to him and so contribute to the building of the Kingdom of God.

