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Out of the Heart's Abundance: Truth and Charity in Judging Others

The vice of gossip is a recurring theme in Pope Francis's preaching. This article contains some considerations on gossip and judging others, from both a spiritual and human perspective.

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On walks in the countryside, one frequently catches a glimpse of

bright berries among the green bushes. If it is a young child who does so, the end result is often tears caused by cuts from a bramble bush, full of sharp hidden thorns. The bramble is a type of plant found all over the world which grows rapidly until it becomes an invasive weed. Jesus uses it to speak of the relationship between our heart and our words: *Every tree is known by its own fruit. For people do not pick figs from thorn bushes, nor do they gather grapes from brambles. A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, but an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil; for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks (Lk 6:44-45).*

The external sound of internal music

The things we think and feel — and then say — belong to such a deep sphere of our intimacy that they may

seem like territories over which we have little control. A misunderstanding of spontaneity, or simply a lack of self-awareness, can fuel this impression. However, not only can we in fact cultivate this inner garden, but we are not alone in doing so. Jesus wants to enter this space to sanctify it, to unite it with his heart; he wants our hearts, our thoughts, words and deeds, to express themselves harmoniously.

Christ reminds us, for example, that we cannot love others truly and, at the same time, speak ill of them; or that we cannot want to improve the world and, at the same time, damage those processes of growth with words of division. Our Lord goes even further. He tells us clearly that we cannot love God with all our heart or pray authentically if we persist in holding grudges against the people around us: *If in bringing your gift to the altar you remember that*

your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, go and be reconciled to your brother first, and then come back (Mt 5:23-24). Jesus wants to put us on our guard against any possible interior fracture; he wants to close any crack through which the coldness of a false charity could creep in. He knows that we ourselves are the first to be affected and he desires nothing more than to heal us with his peace.

The writings of the early Christians echo these teachings very clearly: *Out of the same mouth come blessing and cursing. This, my brethren, must not be so: does sweet and bitter water flow from one fountain through the same pipe, or, my brethren, can the fig tree yield olives or the vine figs? Neither can a salt spring yield fresh water* (James 3:10-12). James reminds us, again and again, that faith in Jesus transforms us, that it is necessarily manifested in our works;

in this case, in our words. And he uses simple examples to help us understand his message. Just as we can steer the whole body of a horse by putting a bridle in its mouth, or we can guide a whole ship with a small rudder, so it is important to pay attention to the content of our conversations (cf. *James* 3:3-4). Our tongue, James insists with his examples, can be like a small fire that ends up setting the forest on fire or like a deadly poison that kills (cf. *James* 3:5, 8). This is why it is important to examine ourselves frequently about the way we speak about the people and events around us, and the motives that lead us to do so. In this way we can follow the clues that lead us to what is truly in our hearts.

During a homily in a parish on the outskirts of Rome, Pope Francis encouraged the faithful to follow the path that leads from our words to

our hearts. In this way, we can honestly discover whether we are filled with love or, on the contrary, with indifference or hatred. The Holy Father encouraged all of us "to be honest with yourself. It's not easy! Because, when we see something wrong inside of us, don't we always try to cover it up? So that it doesn't come out, right? We must ask the Lord for two graces. The first: to know what is in our own heart, not to deceive ourselves, not to live in deceit. The second grace: to do what is good in our hearts and not to do the evil that is in our hearts.

Remember that words spoken against another person and even ill-will kills. Often, it seems like the sin of slander and of defamation has been erased from the Ten Commandments and yet to speak evil of a person is still a sin."^[1] We cannot, therefore, trivialize backbiting; we cannot simply assume that everything that comes from our

mouths is good: "The tongue must also be transformed, purified. The tongue gives voice to the music that sounds in the heart."^[2] —

"When I cannot praise, I will keep quiet"

Saint Josemaría was 29 years old when he definitively left his duties as chaplain of the Foundation for the Sick in Madrid, in order to have more time available for the development of Opus Dei. Among his personal notes in those months are several related to an aspect of interior maturity which he was trying to strengthen in his dealings with others in this decisive time: "I will be very careful in everything that involves forming judgments about people, not allowing a bad thought of anyone, even if their words or works give reasonable grounds for making such a judgment."^[3] — "Practical resolutions: (1) Before beginning a

conversation or paying a visit to anyone, I will raise my heart to God. (2) I will not be obstinate, even if I have many reasons to be. I will only say my opinion if it is for the glory of God, but without insisting. (3) I will not make negative criticisms: when I cannot praise, I will keep quiet."^[4] —

These two notes are the origin, respectively, of points 442 and 443 in his book *The Way*. They are followed there by another fifteen considerations on different forms of criticism towards others. These texts reveal the conviction that the key to bearing good fruit lies in purifying in our heart the source of our actions — raising our heart and truly seeking God's glory by being careful about our thoughts, and making a practical resolution to never speak badly of anyone.

The Eighth Commandment is not only about avoiding great deceptions;

it also aims to form in us an interior world that seeks only what is true, a personal desire that our judgments never be contaminated with a shadow of falsehood or duplicity. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that "respect for the reputation of persons forbids every attitude and word likely to cause them unjust injury."^[5] — And it goes on to define rash judgment (assuming as true, without sufficient foundation, the moral fault of a neighbor), slander (disclosing, without a valid reason, another's faults and failings to persons who did not know them), and calumny (giving occasion for false judgments about others). The Church, with a mother's heart, puts us on our guard against these stumbling blocks that can only harm us and others.

There is also another way of harming the truth with our words: through a lack of the discretion required by our

work or our responsibilities. The *Catechism* once again is clear in pointing out that "the right to the communication of the truth is not unconditional."^[6] In each instance, we need to consider "whether or not to reveal the truth to those who ask for it" and realize that there are reasons for "being silent about what ought not be known," especially when in fact "no one is bound to reveal the truth to someone who does not have the right to know it."^[7] It may happen that, because of our position in a social or professional group, we have information that other people do not have. These are situations in which refinement is required to determine what can and should be communicated. Information confers a certain power, and the temptation to use it irresponsibly, to transform it into rumors, slander or vainglory, is always lurking nearby. It is, sadly, a

lethal poison for one's own rectitude of intention.

Indiscretion in the handling of information often harms those who receive it, because they often do not have the elements needed to digest or understand it. It is not fair to impose burdens on those who are not called to carry them. Thus when Saint Josemaría spoke about the "silence of office" that Don Alvaro kept with regard to his work at the Holy See, he always praised the supernatural spirit that moved Don Alvaro to guard information with great refinement.^[8] Discretion in Church affairs and in matters of other people's lives is a requirement for fruitfulness: *Death and life are in the power of the tongue; those who guard it will eat its fruit (Prov 18:21).*

How to interpret what happens

To avoid getting entangled in the brambles of falsehood, the *Catechism*

recommends a sure way: "Interpret, insofar as possible, our neighbor's thoughts, words, and deeds in a favorable way."^[9] When we interpret events around us, that is, when we join each isolated fact into a story that connects them, we never do so in a neutral way. We always choose a point of view, a place from where to look at them and evaluate them, even if unconsciously, because we have an inner world that tilts our judgments to one side or the other. This is what happens, for example, when we say that we are "positively predisposed" or "negatively predisposed" towards something or someone.

Saint Josemaría always tried to look at people as their own mother would look at them. This can remove the temptation to do harm with our words and judgments, since it provides a positive point of view from which to interpret the actions of others. Thus, even if the apparent

facts are the same, the interpretation changes; and it tends to be in tune with the way God looks at events and people. It can be helpful to remember that God and the devil are always looking at the same facts, but have very different interpretations of them. "Paradoxically, the Evil One can also speak the truth to us, yet he does so only to condemn us. We know that God's truth does not condemn, but instead welcomes, embraces, sustains and forgives us."^[10] Uniting ourselves, through prayer, to this divine way of looking, helps us to be more welcoming and patient with those around us.

But if we fail to constantly purify our hearts, if we do not detect the thorns that try to find their way onto our tongues, the events around us will lead us to make rash judgments, to fall into slander and calumny. And it will be hard for us to discover God, who is always working in a

mysterious way. Faced with what is happening around us, we can always choose between a judgmental way of looking and a contemplative one.

Fray Luis de Granada, in explaining the Eighth Commandment, said that a judgmental look tends to wound the truth in our neighbor: "God is the One who knows all truth, and he knows who possesses it and who does not. He is the One we have to go to to tell us the truth, for he is the true judge of it."^[11] Only God knows what is to be found in the depths of people's hearts.

God is the only judge

The Gospels show us how, seeking to put Jesus to the test, some authorities complain that his disciples eat on the Sabbath, or that the Master heals a man's hand on that holy day. Then, out of envy, they attribute to Beelzebul the fact that Christ heals a demoniac. But our Lord *knew their*

thoughts (Lk 11:17), and sought to awaken their hearts, to reach the depths of their souls: How can you say good things when you are evil? For from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks. A good person brings forth good out of a store of goodness, but an evil person brings forth evil out of a store of evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will render an account for every careless word they speak (Mt 12:34-36). By focusing on the importance of the heart, Jesus reminds us that, for those of us who want to join in his mission, and who want to bring about a positive transformation in the world, the most fruitful approach will always be to constantly changing ourselves from within; to decide to be people who, with their words, move the hearts of others towards the good, instead of wanting to intervene in everything, and end up hurting their neighbor in their conversations.

One of the causes of gossip (which, as we have seen, initially arises in the person's inner world) is the temptation to seek to be judges of everything that happens arounds us.

^[12] This attitude is often linked to the tendency to try to play too big a role in God's plans, almost as if God's freedom or that of others could not act without our approval. In this type of disordered critical judgment, which easily degenerates into backbiting and slander, Pope Francis has detected "a dark joy,"^[13] something that at first "can even seem pleasurable,"^[14] perhaps because it leads us to take the position of judging everything, which in reality belongs only to God. To counteract this false outlook, we need to foster the simple conviction that Providence has entrusted us with a small plot of his vineyard where, if we put our talents to work, we will be fruitful and happy. Not all of the vineyard is in our jurisdiction;

nor do we have sufficient information to call all the vinedressers to judgment. Aspiring to do so may be a sign that we are not sanctifying the present moment or making our own abilities bear fruit. By investing time in criticizing others, we take time away from those who really need us; in the end, this is energy that the devil robs from us. It is simply a trap to prevent us from doing the good that God expects of us.

The saints, in spite of having often found themselves confronting events with which they didn't agree, also within the Church, have known how to detect God's times and way of acting, without violating them with their tongues. Saint Josemaría, in notes written in 1933 while considering the formation of the first people who would come to Opus Dei, wrote: "Do you speak badly of others? Then you are losing the spirit

of the Work and, if you do not learn to check your tongue, each word will take you one step closer to the exit."^[15] This doesn't mean always agreeing with everyone, but being ready to enter into God's way of acting, channeling these disagreements for the right time and place, where they can truly bear fruit.

Rejoicing in the good of others

Another big generator of the brambles of slander is often envy. In fact, Saint Thomas Aquinas considers murmuring (grumbling and complaining about others) to be "the first daughter" of this "sorrow about another's good."^[16] The first temptation that the book of Genesis reveals is precisely that of the serpent who, out of envy for men and hatred for God, wants to drive them apart. The devil deceived our first parents by murmuring to them

about the Creator: *You will by no means die; for God knows...* (Gen 3:4-5). Once again we see the temptation to want to know more than God, to invade his time and space. The book of Wisdom also tells us that *God created man for incorruptibility and made him in the image of his own eternity. But through the devil's envy death entered the world* (Wis 2:23-24). And the gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus was betrayed because of envy (cf. *Mk* 15:10). Sadness and jealousy of others' goods can lead to undermining and even crushing the honor of those around us.

One door through which envy can creep in is that of continually comparing ourselves with others. This attitude ignores the fact that we are all different and that it is difficult for us to be treated equally in life. God himself has not given his gifts equally to everyone; he knows us

better than anyone else and distributes his gifts in different ways. A mother treats her children according to their needs and does not distribute everything with the same measure.

A good way to prevent the stirrings of envy is to learn to rejoice in the good of others. This may come easily to us, and even instinctively with the people we love the most, with our intimate circle of friends; but it is not so easy when that circle begins to expand. Small personal renunciations so that others may prosper is a good school for overcoming the temptations of envy, especially in areas where prestige and fame are at stake. *Rejoice with those who rejoice (Rom 12:15)* Saint Paul advises us in his Letter to the Romans.

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The Eighth Commandment protects our inner garden from the wild growth of brambles and thorns, so that our heart may bear the fruit that God expects of us. "God wants us to be temperate in our judgments, to not pass judgment hastily, to not assume the worst of others. He wants us to empathize with the efforts of our fellow men, to look with favor on them, to always speak well of them and excuse their faults whenever possible ... Let all your words be virtuous and upright, and do not let anyone think that someone is evil because of what you have said."^[17]

Wanting to live in the truth leads us to watch over the source of our judgments, so that we may always utter Christian words that support others, and not crush them; words that do not darken the world, but illuminate it.

^[1] Pope Francis, Homily, 16 February 2014.

^[2] — Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, *In the Light of the Gospel*, "Murmuring trivialized."

^[3] *Intimate Notes*, no. 389, 14 November 1931. Quoted in *The Way, critical-historical edition*, Pedro Rodríguez, Rialp, Madrid, 2004, p. 607.

^[4] *Intimate Notes*, no. 399, November 18, 1931. Quoted in *ibid.*

^[5] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2477.

^[6] *Ibid.*, no. 2488.

^[7] *Ibid.*, no. 2489.

^[8] Cf. Saint Josemaría, Notes taken during a family gathering, 19 February 1975.

^[9] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2478.

^[10] Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, no. 2.

^[11] Fray Luis de Granada, *Compendium of Christian Doctrine*, part II, c. IX.

^[12] Saint Thomas Aquinas says that to presume possession of what one does not possess is part of pride. Cf. *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 162, a. 4, resp.

^[13] Pope Francis, Homily, 27 March 2013.

^[14] Pope Francis, Homily, 16 February 2014.

^[15] *Intimate Notes*, no. 953, 19 March 1933. Quoted in *The Way, Critical-historical Edition*, ed. by Pedro Rodríguez, Scepter, p. 623. This note is at the origin of point 453 in *The Way*.

^[16] Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 36, a. 1, resp. and a. 4, obj. 3.

^[17] Fray Luis de Granada, *Compendium of Christian Doctrine*, part II, c. IX.

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