

The Mouth that Roared

By Jim Seghers

The Apostle James writes: "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an **unrighteous world** among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature and set on fire **by hell**. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, but no human being can tame the tongue—a **restless evil, full of deadly poison**. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so" (Jas 3:5-10).

In its instruction on the 8th Commandment the [Catechism of the Catholic Church \(#2477\)](#) affirms: "Respect for the reputation of persons forbids every attitude and word likely to cause them unjust injury. One becomes guilty:

- of rash judgment who, even tacitly, assumes as true, without sufficient foundation, the moral fault of a neighbor;
- of detraction who, without objectively valid reason, discloses another's faults and failings to persons who did not know them;
- of calumny who, by remarks contrary to the truth, harms the reputation of others and give occasion for false judgments concerning them."

It's a scandal that so many Christians accept gossip as a common form of recreation even though vile sins of rash judgments, detraction and calumny are frequently present.

Rash judgments are often triggered by emotions, which are given the weight of fact. The reality is that most of the behaviors that wound us stem from thoughtlessness not malice. Few people expend the time and energy plotting to "get" others. Rash judgments can be very harmful to relationships. When communicated to others they become detraction or calumny. Regarding judging others Jesus gave a stern warning: "Judge not, and you will not be judged. . . For the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Lk 6:37-38).

Detraction and Calumny sin against the virtues of **justice** and **charity** (CCC #2479). Both sins destroy another's reputation. "Every offense committed against justice and truth entails the duty of reparation, even if its author has been forgiven... This duty of reparation also concerns offenses against another's reputation. . . It **obliges in conscience**" (CCC #2487). Jesus gives a sobering admonition: "I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter" (Mt 12:36).

If one habitually fails in these areas the offense should be treated seriously. As in all areas of the spiritual life **grace is the essential remedy**. These sins should be the subject of confession. In examining ones conscience it would be helpful to seek the grace to understand the underlining motivation that provokes one to rash judge or slander. After the example of St. Ambrose it is a good practice to acknowledge ones sinfulness before Communion: "I am defiled by many sins in body and soul, and by my unguarded thoughts and words." Also consider the occasions of sin. Are there certain situations that make one vulnerable, or certain relationships that influence this evil gossip? If the slander can't be eliminated perhaps one should terminate the relationships

November 10, 1998