

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEACONS

SINS AGAINST THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

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Lent is always a good time to brush up on sin. Not that you want to sin more but that you want to ponder what sin may be and where it may manifest itself in your life. It is important to understand what sin is so that you can work on removing it from your life as you progress through Lent and through life. One of the ways to get to know sin is to become familiar with the helps God gives us for recognising sin and its consequences. The ten commandments are just one such help.

The eighth commandment, “you shall not give false testimony against your neighbour,” (Exodus 20:16) is one that is particularly relevant in the age of the internet. One only need look at the comment box following a thoughtful article or a YouTube clip that someone has shared or begin to think about internet trolls for evidence of how we are harnessing the internet for new ways of sinning against the eighth commandment. Some of the ways the internet has been used to spread hateful messages, especially in the light of the tragic events in Christchurch in March 2019, and some thoughtless comments by Senator Fraser Anning prompted me to ponder this commandment again.

Offences against the eighth commandment do not require the internet and have existed long before it. I am not, in this article, going to comment on the internet and whether there is support that the supposed anonymity of the communication makes it easy to sin in this way. People can find plenty of ways to offend against this commandment and their neighbour through gossip, spreading rumours, ruining reputations, handing on a lie or even sharing with others a fault another person may truly have but which the hearer has no right or need to know. Ordinary conversations at home, in the work place, in a committee meeting, on your way travelling to and from work, or on public transport can all present occasions of sin against this commandment and our neighbour. The internet is incidental to the sin.

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The essence of sins against the eighth commandment is that they are an offence against truth and also charity (love). Each person has a right to his or her good name. The commandment concerns the public estimation of a person's intellectual and moral excellence. When we cause other to question a person's intellectual and moral excellence, we have created a public and personal harm. In a very real sense, a person's good name is his or her property — it belongs to the person concerned as a strict right. Hence the violation of a person's good name is a sin against the virtue of justice. Those who harm reputations steal the good name to which each is due.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church there are at least three ways in which the good name of another person can be harmed by our bearing false witness against them; rash judgement, detraction and calumny. The catechism teaches us that (2477); “*Respect for the reputation of persons forbids every attitude and word likely to cause them unjust injury. He becomes guilty:*

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- of *rash judgment* who, even tacitly, assumes as true, without sufficient foundation, the moral fault of a neighbour;

- 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 gives occasion for false judgments concerning them.”

The catechism goes on to say, “to avoid rash judgment, everyone should be careful to interpret insofar as possible his neighbour’s thoughts, words, and deeds in a favourable way” (2478). That is, we should always assume they speak the truth and that they intend good in their actions. We cannot know another’s thoughts so we must assume them to be good. We cannot determine an unfavourable judgement until we have honestly enquired about them and after prayerful discernment, we come to a determination. That determination is always provisional because only God has perfect knowledge required to make firm judgements.

Offences against our neighbours’ good name and reputation can do real social harm to that person. As the catechism explains, ‘detraction and calumny destroy the *reputation and honour of one’s neighbour*. Honour is the social witness given to human dignity, and everyone enjoys a natural right to the honour of his name and reputation and to respect. Thus, detraction and calumny offend against the virtues of justice and charity.” (2479)

When a reputation has been harmed, even if the person who is harmed is not aware of the offence, the offender is obliged to make the situation right and restore the reputation. “Every offense committed against justice and truth entails the *duty of reparation*, even if its author has been forgiven. When it is impossible publicly to make reparation for a wrong, it must be made secretly. If someone who has suffered harm cannot be directly compensated, he must be given moral satisfaction in the name of charity. This duty of reparation also concerns offenses against another's reputation. This reparation, moral and sometimes material, must be evaluated in terms of the extent of the damage inflicted. It obliges in conscience.” (2487)

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Harms to reputation can do other harms. A person who is the victim of a calumny, harm to reputation, may miss out on a job she is applying for because someone on the panel heard something about her that seemed unfavourable to employing her. Or she might be overlooked for invitations for a speaking engagement at an event because people attribute to her views, she does not in fact hold. She might work in an organisation where she is marginalised in the workplace because people have heard of the calumny and now believe certain things about her that are not true but, on this basis, avoid her. People on a committee may block her progress, overlook her, ban her from speaking, not publish her writings or prevent her from some other good to which she may be due because those on the committee are party to the calumny or through ignorance listen to the voices of those who spread the lies. All of this can happen without her ever knowing that a calumny has spread about her. Yet it does real harm to her. There are lots of ordinary ways, ordinary people with recourse to ordinary means can harm and even kill the reputation of a person.

I have come across some very real examples of offences against this commandment involving Catholic intuitions and people who work in them. One is an example a woman who was bullied in her Catholic workplace by her manager who was a Religious sister. Eventually the bullying became too much for her and she used the workplace bullying policy to address the situation. Things improved after the intervention of legal mediation. When the woman moved from that place of employment and attended interviews for positions, she was always very highly rated and was told so by the prospective employer. But then the job would not be offered. This happened several times over the course of a year and it was very distressing emotionally and

financially. The cycle was only broken when one prospective employer was puzzled by the disparity in references. Two offered high praise and the other painted a very different picture. The negative one came from a Sister in that former organisation who had been told by the former manager that the woman was the bully and not the other way around. It was a lie, a calumny, that prevented her being successful in three interviews. It was broken by someone who wanted the truth.

The second example concerns a Catholic deacon. He was informed by two of the senior presbyters in the diocese that he would 'never go anywhere in this diocese', by which they meant he would be overlooked for appointments and roles. They said that a presbyter close to the bishop had taken a dislike to him. What both of the presbyters and the deacon thought was strange is that the other presbyter barely knew the deacon. Those two presbyters did know him well and regarding him as outstanding in many ways and championed his cause. But they were blocked at every turn by the presbyter who had the ear of the bishop. None of them knew what offence the deacon may have caused but the presbyter continued to portray him in a bad light much to the dismay of the two senior presbyters. The two senior presbyters and the deacon at least knew one thing about the other presbyter, he had offended against the eighth commandment.

Calumny can be committed by one who knowingly harms the reputation of another and also by those who are eager to hear the lie or who hand on that lie. The offence is somewhat mitigated if a third party is convinced it is true and hands it on, but this only mitigates subjective guilt. It is still objectively wrong. Real harm is done to the right to a good name of our neighbour.

Thomas Aquinas judged calumny, harming another's good name and reputation, to be a mortal sin. The sinner needs to confess this grave fault and must, even after receiving absolution, do all that she or he can to restore the good name of the other. In a homily he remarked that in some ways harming a reputation was worse than murder. This was because a murder only offends the neighbour once but the harm resulting from calumny and reputation damage can spread out in space and time. Calumny can be like a small spark which can start a mighty blazing bushfire. The letter of James describes the power of the tongue to cause great harm in just this way (James 3:6).

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Reputational harm can go on for years. The offence can lead to accumulating more harm for the whole life of the person, killing their good name over and over again. (Aquinas as not advising liars to go into murder, he was just comparing the nature of the harm caused by the two offences. Murder is absolutely prohibited.)

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Once harmed, a reputation is very hard to repair. A calumny, an offence against the good name of a person, is like a bag full of feathers dropped from a tall building onto the street below. The offender is hardly capable of going back down to street level and regathering every feather. Can the offender go to every person who has heard this reputation harming information and tell them the truth about the person or confess that he had no right to talk about that person in that way. The offender must seek out the one against whom he offered and ask forgiveness and do all that he can to restore his good name but the restoration is almost impossible. The feathers cannot be regathered. It is best if the occasion for sin were avoided in the first place.

Chapter three of the Letter of James is worth reading in the context of offences against this commandment. How easy it is for us, with an undisciplined tongue or a desire to harm another's reputation, to achieve that offence. How hard it is to repair the harm. Lent is a good time to reflect on our speech with regard to the good name of our neighbour. Very few of us will ever commit murder but how many of us have killed the reputation and good name of another?

In Dante's *Inferno*, as we descend further into hell, we find that unrepentant sinners are assigned a type of punishment that 'fit's the crime'. I cannot recall the punishment given to those who harm reputations. I think a fitting one would be to have to carry a bag of feathers up the top of a tall building on a windy day and release them and then have to gather them all. The process would begin again every day. We could avoid this punishment if we develop the virtue of controlled and measured speech.