
MAN AND HIS SINS (2)



In a recent reflection I asked what were the more serious sins. I talked about those sins which broke the covenant of love between God and His people. Tradition established that murder, adultery and apostasy were directly opposed to this covenant. In a recent past we still spoke of “sins of the flesh”, oftentimes to the exclusion of all others, eventually forgetting those caused by the tongue: gossip, lies, slander, defamation, perjury and the like.

RESTRAINING THE TONGUE

The New American Bible heading for an important section of the Letter of James, “Restraining the Tongue.” My interest being aroused by all those “rumours” circulating among us regarding different subjects, these words of wisdom challenged me: “If a person is without fault in speech he is a man in the fullest sense, because he can control his entire body. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide the rest of their bodies. It is the same with ships: however large they are, and despite the fact that they are driven by fierce winds, they are directed by very small rudders on whatever course the steersman’s impulse may select. The tongue is something like that. It is a small member, yet it makes great pretensions” (3:2a-5a).

CAPABLE OF GREAT EVIL

Following his equestrian and nautical examples, Saint James sets out on a fierce diatribe: “See how tiny the spark is that sets a huge forest ablaze! The tongue is such a flame. It exists among our members as a whole universe of malice. The tongue defiles the entire body. Its flames encircle our course from birth, and its fire is kindled by hell. Every form of life, four-footed or winged, crawling or swimming, can be tamed, and has been tamed, by mankind; the tongue no man can tame. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (5b-8).

SWEET AND BITTER

Like Saint Paul who deplores the fact that he does not always do what he would like to do, Saint James evokes the contrast that are in all of us: “We use [the tongue] to say, ‘Praised be the Lord and Father;’ then we use it to curse men, though they are made in the likeness of God. Blessing and curse come out of the same mouth. This ought not to be, my brothers! Does a spring gush forth fresh water and foul from the same outlet? A fig tree, brothers, cannot produce olives, or a grapevine figs; no more can a brackish source yield fresh water” (9-12).

THE WHIPLASH

The Book of Sirach is even more blistering: “A blow from a whip raises a welt, but a blow from the tongue smashes bones; many have fallen by the edge of the sword, but not as many as by the tongue. Happy is he who is sheltered from it, and has not endured its wrath; who has not borne its yoke nor has been fettered with its chains” (28:17-19).

TIMELY WORDS

When we consider the disasters caused by rumour, gossip, sarcasm, slander and defamation, we cannot help thinking that the words of James and Sirach are very timely. Opportunities for meeting others and for conversation abound, today, and we can well be pleased with this but then, they should always be opportunities for real fellowship and communion with one another. We cannot grow by belittling another. If we only were better aware of what a word can do, or a simple rumour, we would exercise greater wisdom and prudence. Marriages have been torn apart by insinuating rumours to the other spouse, political careers have come crashing down because of the repeated phrase "It seems that..." There are some pastoral projects that are doomed to never see the light of day because uncontrolled and uncontrollable rumours have undermined them in advance.

TRUTH AND LOVE

It seems to me that making a diet of rumours contributes to destroying the bond of communion that others painfully work at developing. Spreading rumours breaks reputations, lessens credibility and trust, and altogether destroys basic charity. And encouraging rumour is letting falsehood gain ground and establish an unhealthy atmosphere of untruth. Happy the person who can please in both silence and speech!

THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

Pope John Paul II asserts that the thirst for truth is so deeply ingrained in humankind that dispensing with it would bring about a crisis to existence itself. Humans could never establish their lives on doubts, uncertainty and falsehood: such an existence would be continuously threatened by fear and anxiety. Humans can be defined as searchers after truth. Have a good week!

+ François Thibodeau

+ François Thibodeau, C.J.M.
Bishop of Edmundston

« From A Bishop's Journal » (477) (26 February 2003)