



I'D LIKED TO SAY...

# CUT OUT GOSSIP

– it's far from harmless

Most of us enjoy a bit of gossip. But gossip is like the ocean - sometimes it's a bit of fun and sometimes it can kill

*By Fr George Wadding, C.Ss.R.*

The setting is a ladies' hairdressing salon.

"Have you seen the drunk priest?"

"I saw him yesterday at 11 o'clock in the morning. He was staggering all over the place."

"And I saw him last week saying Mass."

"Never!"

"I swear I did."

Just then, a No.15 bus pulled up outside and a cleric got off.

"Look, there he is - and he's drunk again."

Staff and customers craned to see the unfortunate man as he lurched on his way. By the time he reached the gate of the monastery, the monastery phone was hopping. A concerned and irate man from across the road spoke to the Brother on reception. Without giving his name, he launched straight into his tirade:

"If you look out the window, you will see that drunk young priest, hardly able to walk at this early hour of the day. What are you doing to end this scandal which has all the neighbourhood talking?"

Br John looked out and saw the alleged miscreant struggling down the driveway carrying his briefcase and umbrella. He recognised Fr Matthew (not his real name).

"Sir," he said to the caller, "that's Fr Matthew. He is a saint. From the year of his ordination he has suffered from Multiple Sclerosis and very severe diabetes. But he won't let it get the better of him. Just now he's coming back from the library with more books to read for his B.A. Because of his diabetes, he cannot and does not drink alcohol."

The caller had become completely silent and Br John heard a click as he replaced his receiver without another word. But the damage was done and only God knows where it ended - not that it bothered Fr Matthew who struggled on until his illness brought him back to God some years later.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF GOSSIP

The word "gossip" has a long history. It started in Old English as *Godsibb* (God's sibling or relative). Its earliest meaning was innocent enough: one who has contracted a spiritual relationship with another by acting as sponsor at baptism. In other words, a Godfather or Godmother. Later on, it came to mean simply a friend or chum, applied originally to both sexes and later only to a woman friend. Then it was reserved for a person (mostly a woman) of trifling character, who delighted in idle talk; a newsmonger or tattler. And today it refers both to the idle talk itself and to the person who indulges in it, male or female.

Most people enjoy a bit of gossip unless it is about themselves. And often the gossip is innocent enough - just idle talk, catching up on the news, sharing what is already in the public forum. But gossip is like the ocean. Sometimes it's a bit of fun and sometimes it can kill.

The gossip about Fr Matthew was deadly gossip. Granted, if you did not know his circumstances, it would have been easy to come to the wrong conclusion. And if drink had indeed been Fr Matthew's problem, then the local indignation would have been justified. In fact, the gossip in Fr Matthew's case was completely wrong. It's true what they say: "Never tell evil of a person if you do not know it for certainty, and if you know it for certainty then

ask yourself, 'why tell it?'" (Johann K. Lavater) And, remember, the person who gossips to you will surely gossip about you.

#### WHAT THE CHURCH SAYS

So, then, when is gossip just idle tittle-tattle and when is it the breaker that drowns? The Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

"Respect for reputation of persons forbids every attitude and word likely to cause them unjust injury. He becomes guilty:

- of rash judgement who, even tacitly, assumes as true, without sufficient foundation, the moral fault of a neighbour;
- of detraction who, without objectively valid reasons, discloses another's faults and failings to persons who did not know them;
- of calumny (or slander) who, by remarks contrary to the truth, harms the reputation of others and gives occasion for false judgements concerning them. (No. 2477)

If such statements are given under oath, they become perjury and contribute to condemnation of the innocent, exoneration of the guilty, or the increased punishment of the accused. (No. 2476)

#### KINDS OF GOSSIP

Remember, gossip is more like a caged animal than a homing pigeon. Once released it does not come back. Let's take some examples...

The case of Fr Matthew is a very good example of rash judgement. I might have assumed that he was an alcoholic and kept that judgement to myself. It would still be rash and wrong but probably would not do Fr Matthew any harm. But once I share my false judgement with someone else my action enters the more serious realm of harmful gossip. In either case, I would feel I had sinned in thought or deed against my neighbour, and my confessor would be hearing about it from me.

Next, we move up the ladder of seriousness to detraction. Some friends meet after Mass in the parish hall for a cup of coffee. In the course of conversation one of them says, "I hear Peter and Caroline McGrath have separated." Another says, "Oh, that's a shame! They seemed so happy! I wonder what's behind that!"

So far we're just paddling in the shallow waters of tittle-tattle. Then another says (in confidence, like), "Peter was having an affair." "Never!" the others chorus. "I saw him kissing his secretary in a parked car along the quays." That does it. A freak wave has just washed over Peter and his secretary. One conscientious member of the group says, "You shouldn't have told us that!" "But it's true," protests the other. "I'm only telling you what's true."

But that's detraction - disclosing another's faults and failings to persons who did not know them. Everyone has a natural right to their good name and reputation. Unless we have an objectively valid reason for doing so, it would be a sin against justice and charity to reveal the hidden truth about another. An objectively valid reason might be to alert a parent to the serious misconduct of their child.

#### CALUMNY OR SLANDER

And so we move on and further up the ladder to calumny or slander. There are no shallow waters where calumny is concerned. It's straight off the high board into the deep end, thus creating a wave that could completely submerge another's reputation. Calumny is a lie, a serious lie, and if given under

oath, it is perjury, and can contribute to the condemnation or increased punishment of the innocent and the exoneration of the guilty.

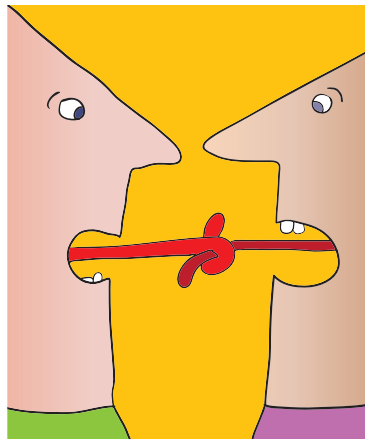
At the gossip level some people, seeking attention, try to add spice to their conversation. For the unfortunate victims, however, the lie can be devastating. It can make them lose their job, break up their marriage, force them to change their place of residence. The further the lie travels, the more it grows, like a rolling snowball, and the truth rarely catches up with it.

More maliciously, some may spread slanderous remarks about others in revenge as, for example, students taking revenge on their teacher. Or what about the man who thought there was money to be made in compensation if he made a false allegation of abuse against a priest! The Redemptorist saint, Gerard Majella, was falsely accused by a jealous woman of improper sexual behaviour. For months he suffered the consequences of this slander. The Redemptorists' founder, St Alphonsus, confined Gerard to the monastery and

deprived him of Holy Communion until the perpetrator of the calumny recanted on her sick bed and told the truth.

Even Jesus fell victim to the calumny of his enemies. They said he was immoral, that he was a drunkard, possessed by a devil, an extreme revolutionary and a blasphemer.

There is something very evil about calumny because it is so hard to defend yourself against the slanderous lie. And the best advice is to keep away from it altogether. "Live in such a way that you would not be ashamed to sell your parrot to the town gossip," said Will Rogers. Now that's a line well worth passing on. ■■



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