

# SINS OF THE TONGUE:

The Backbiting Tongue

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## 1. The nature of backbiting. Its various species. Its gravity.

In 1617 someone published a volume entitled, *The Horseman's Book: The Art of Riding*, treating the use of bridles, whips, guides, and so on. Such a title is of a nature to give rise to sad thoughts. We have learned how to make bits, bridles, halters and pincers, and how to adapt them to a horse's head or mouth; we have learned the art of directing these animals at will by means of a small bit. But we possess a tongue so ill-tempered that no bridle can curb it: this raging beast resists bits, halters and pincers alike, knocking down every obstacle in its path. It wants to be as free as a horse in the wild. Let us see what Saint James has to say on the subject: "We put bits into horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we control their whole body also. But no man can tame the tongue".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jas. 3:3–8

Without a doubt, the most poisonous tongue of all is the backbiter's. It spits its deadly venom to the four winds. It is an evil known throughout the earth. One can never stigmatise and deplore it enough.

Therefore, we shall now study the nature of this evil, its various species, and the gravity of the evils it breeds.

I.

Therefore, what is backbiting or detraction?

Here is the definition given by Saint Thomas Aquinas: "Backbiting is denigration of a neighbour's reputation by means of secret words".<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a person may wound someone by word in two ways: *openly* and to his face (that is, by insulting him); and *secretly*, when he is absent — and that is backbiting.

Palladius relates that someone once asked Saint Anthony, "What is backbiting?", and he replied, "It is every sort of wicked word we dare not speak in front of the person about whom we are talking".

This is truly the nature of backbiters. They cannot do physical harm to those who are absent, so they strike at them with their tongue. Saint Thomas Aquinas says, "Destroying a person's reputation is a very serious wrong".<sup>3</sup> And Saint Bernard declares, "Backbiting is a great vice, a great sin, a great crime".<sup>4</sup>

There are eight specific ways in which a man can backbite his neighbour:

1. When he gets carried away by vanity and imputes things against his neighbour that never happened, or when he adds to the truth imaginary circumstances that constitute either a lie or detraction.
2. When he brings a hidden or unknown fault to light. What he says is true, but he should not say it. He backbites, not by saying something untrue, but by wounding his neighbour's reputation. This is a very common sin among us.

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<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II, Section II, Quest. 73, Art. I.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Part II, Section II, Question 83, Article 2.

<sup>4</sup> Saint Bernard, *De modo bene vivendi*, Chapter 33.

Now you might object, “Do you mean to say I can’t tell the truth?”. No, my friend. It is not permitted, unless you can do so without harming your neighbour. What you say is true, I admit, but it is hidden. The sinner has wounded his conscience in God’s sight, but he has not lost his reputation before men; therefore, you may not weaken or destroy it with your tongue. And even if the sin you reveal is not altogether secret but known only to a few, as long as it is not public knowledge, you are backbiting if you reveal it to someone who was unaware of it. And thus you are harming your neighbour.

3. When he exaggerates a crime, be it true, or false. This is a danger to which we readily expose ourselves when we talk about the vices of others.

4. When he relates something about another person that is not evil in any way, but speaks as though his neighbour had done it for evil reasons and adds various explanations such as, “Yes, he did that, but not with God in mind... He’s not so pious as all that; he seeks to please men, he wants to stand out... You should know him, he’s a hypocrite”.

5. When a backbiter declares nothing but is happy to say, “I’ve heard it said that...”, or, “There’s a rumour going around...” or when he relates something as if it were doubtful: “So-and-so might not be exactly what you think, I don’t think he is deserving of confidence. His neighbours never heard anything about his holiness, except that only since yesterday has he been rated among the devout”. Or again, when he praises with coldness and reticence. Aulu-Gelle says, “It is more shameful to be coldly and reservedly praised than harshly and bitterly accused”. All these ways of acting must be avoided with the greatest care, for people always seek evil more than good.

6. Backbiting is so subtle that anyone can defame another person with a simple gesture. He hears someone being praised for his integrity, piety or generosity, and he says, “Oh, you don’t know that fellow? I see right through him. Ask me anything about him, I know him inside out”. Or he raises an eyebrow and remains silent; he shakes his head; he turns his eyes so as to have it understood that the person being praised does not deserve it. Sometimes a backbiter may keep his mouth shut and just turn his hand two

or three times to indicate that the person in question is lightheaded and changes from hour to hour.

7. He can backbite not only with body language but also with silence. He may wickedly say nothing about the integrity or morals of his neighbour, especially when he is questioned about them or when his neighbour is accused of some crime.

8. Finally, a person is guilty of backbiting if he is publicly blamed for something he did, and he denies his guilt, thereby making his accuser pass for a liar. It is surely not an obligation to publicly admit a fault committed in secret. However, one should justify himself in some other way, saying, for instance, "Those are only words, they don't prove anything. Whoever heard them may have been mistaken. Don't believe everything you hear". This way of speaking is far more acceptable than the first.

II.

That is how backbiting does its diabolical work. It changes costume so slickly, we can hardly recognise it. Malice is ingenious: It spots a beam where there is only a wisp of straw, an elephant where there is only a fly, a mountain high as the Alps where there is only a molehill. It turns dream into reality and taints the virtues of others so skillfully with its own colours that we mistake them for vices.

Look at the backbiter as he prepares to blacken someone's reputation. He begins by looking severe and modest, lowering his gaze, heaving sighs and speaking in a slow, serious voice. He takes a host of curves and detours to conceal his deadly art. He goes the long way round before shooting his poison. "It grieves me that a man of his calibre should degrade himself to that point", he says. "It's not me who would have revealed his hidden crimes, but since everyone... [missing]". Some people spew detraction carelessly and bluntly, just as it comes to their mouth. Others try to conceal the malice they cannot hold in, beneath an appearance of lying modesty. They begin by heaving sad sighs, speaking slowly and gravely, knitting their brows. Detraction slips out with a plaintive air and as though despite themselves, in contrite and grieving tones: "I'm really at a loss with him. I don't hate him, but all my words have been unable to correct him". Or else they say, "I knew

all that perfectly well; I never mentioned it, but since others have, I can't hide the truth. I admit it with deep sorrow, it is all too true".

When Esdras was pondering worriedly on how God governed the world, an Angel appeared to him and asked him three questions. Here is the first: "How do you think someone might be able to weigh fire? Attempt to do it. Clever the man who can".<sup>5</sup>

Now, every page of Holy Scripture depicts backbiting as a burning fire: "What chastisement will be inflicted on you, O treacherous tongue? Sharp arrows of a warrior with fiery coals of brushwood".<sup>6</sup> "The tongue is a fire",<sup>7</sup> says Saint James. Solomon says about the godless man, "A scoundrel is a furnace of evil, and on his lips there is a scorching fire".<sup>8</sup> Indeed, compare the power and speed of fire to the power and speed of the tongue: there is a strong resemblance. When fire breaks its bounds and strikes out, it spreads desolation everywhere. So it is with the tongue: when it escapes from its prison and flies free, it does not return without having wreaked dreadful havoc.

Therefore, the tongue is a fire, and it takes great wisdom to weigh it on an accurate scale. The wiser and more prudent a man is in everything, the more careful he is in measuring his words. "The words of the prudent are carefully weighed",<sup>9</sup> says the son of Sirach. The wise man's lips are like the two platters of a scale on which he weighs that fire. But how hard it is to weigh even sparks and wisps of straw! I call sparks the infinity of evils that spring from a single word of detraction. For backbiting harms not only one person, but many: the servants, children and friends of the person it denigrates.

A word spoken thoughtlessly or maliciously is often deadly not only to the one it strikes, but also to his wife, children and entire family. A single spark burns them all and puts them at a disadvantage. Who can say he weighs all his words properly? In the story of Tobias we read that Asmodeus, the prince

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<sup>5</sup> Esdr 4:5

<sup>6</sup> Ps 119:3

<sup>7</sup> Jas 3:6

<sup>8</sup> Prov 16:27

<sup>9</sup> Sir 21:28.

of sensuality, thought he could weigh the flames of impurity. But where is the hand so refined that it can weigh all the sparks that escape from the backbiter's mouth?

Then what is a wise man to do? He listens and holds words in his mouth when they try to fly out. As long as he keeps them in his throat, he can subject them to reason and good sense; but once they slip out, there is no way to make them return: they run, they fly, they go on an endless journey. "Fools' thoughts are in their mouths, wise men's words are in their hearts",<sup>10</sup> says the Holy Spirit. A prudent man passes all he wants to say in his heart and he weighs it all before speaking it. This counsel of prudence was religiously observed by the Mother of the Saviour. As the Gospel tells us, "Mary kept in mind all these things, pondering them in Her heart".<sup>11</sup>

III.

Sad to say, many people dislike this business of weighing words and deeds; so much so that Suidas rightly observes, "It is a weakness of righteous men that they cannot discern praiseworthy things in a vice-ridden man". One day the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, that it may be turned into gnats throughout the land of Egypt. And gnats came upon man and beast. The dust of the earth was turned into gnats throughout the land of Egypt".<sup>12</sup> Concerning this, a certain author remarks that gnats are tiny but nervous creatures whose sting is very severe.

Like gnats, backbiters' words have spread throughout the land and infested every class of society, both sexes, every age and condition, rich and poor, servants and masters alike. Many men are not blasphemers, but few — hardly any — do not backbite. Behold: two righteous men meet and strike up a conversation; you can be sure that even absent individuals will get mixed into their discussion. Then our fine talkers will be obliged to turn their backs — despite themselves, it is true — and receive the blows lying in store for them.

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<sup>10</sup> Sir 21:29

<sup>11</sup> Lk 2:51

<sup>12</sup> Ex 8:16–17

There is practically no society or gathering in which people do not denigrate others who are absent, discharging their critical zeal upon them. Backbiting is a common, vulgar evil, and a horrible, deadly one. Our Lord is so kind that He made a promise saying, "Where two or three are gathered together for My sake, there am I in the midst of them".<sup>13</sup> Understand this well, however: for His sake, and not for the devil's sake. The devil is also in the midst of every company where two or three people backbite their neighbour. Saint Antiochus declares, "Backbiting is a devil that never rests".<sup>14</sup> Therefore, let us follow Solomon's advice: "Put away from you dishonest talk, deceitful speech put far from you".<sup>15</sup> Backbiting offers immense dangers; it inflicts great harm and is very hard to heal.

It offers immense dangers, for the backbiter inflicts rash judgement on every comer. Intention is what makes for good actions; thus, a work may be excellent even though it might appear despicable. Intentions are not visible, and it is easy to think that something is wrong when it possesses all the qualities of virtue.

Look at the Pharisees. They were scandalised when they saw Jesus healing the sick on the Sabbath, frequenting the company of publicans and going out of His way for unvirtuous men. His holiest actions were turned into a subject for backbiting.

Backbiting is eminently destructive, for it robs a man of what is most precious to him: his reputation. That is why theologians are in unanimous agreement to say that it is more serious than stealing; for a sin is all the greater in that it deprives someone of a greater good. Robbing someone of his reputation is worse than stealing his money, according to the words of Solomon: "A good name is more desirable than great riches".<sup>16</sup> Backbiting inflicts great harm for it shoots three arrows in a single round and deals a triple death. Saint Bernard assures us of this: "Is this tongue not that of a viper? It is surely very fierce, for it kills three victims with a single sting. Is it not a sharp spear, for it pierces three men in a single throw? The backbiter's tongue is a sharp sword,

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<sup>13</sup> Mt 18:20

<sup>14</sup> Saint Antiochus, Homily 29, De detract

<sup>15</sup> Prov 4:24

<sup>16</sup> Prov 22:1

a double and even a triple sword, like General Joab's lance that pierced Absalom as he hung in the oak tree".

Yes, that's what backbiting is. It pierces its author, his listener and their denigrated neighbour all at once. With one difference, however: the denigrated person is the least wounded of all. The only thing he can lose is his reputation, whereas the backbiter and his listener are wounded — and gravely wounded — even unto their soul.

The backbiter does the most harm to himself, for the stone he casts at another will almost always fall back upon his head. He does harm to his listener by pouring deadly poison into his ears, as Saint Bernard puts it and by infecting him not only with deadly opinions, but also with the poison of envy. Artabanus says, "Only one receives the insult but there are two who commit it".<sup>17</sup> Finally, the backbiter does harm to those who are absent, delivering them up and betraying them with his insolent tongue.

Claude Paradin relates a fabulous tale contained in the chronicles of Lorraine, a tale thrice fabulous.<sup>18</sup>

The virtues and fortune of the House of Lorraine are still documented today in the family's ancient heralds, three birds pierced with a single arrow. Here is the story of their origin:

The famous hero Godefroy de Bouillon, Duke of Lorraine, was besieging the city of Jerusalem. He shot an arrow against the Tower of David and pierced three birds in a single shot:

Either because God willed it so, or as a result of chance.

Whatever the case, this event proved to be a forecast of the royal dignity reserved for his family. An examination of the coins and insignia of the House of Lorraine will convince anyone of its authenticity.

Whoever backbites someone shoots a flaming arrow and wounds three people at once: himself, his listener and his adversary. Rather, he commits a triple murder, for we all have three lives: the life of the soul, which is the fruit

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<sup>17</sup> Artabanus, *Apud Herod*, Book 7.

<sup>18</sup> Claude Paradin, *In symb.* Hero. Number 39.



of grace; the life of the body, which we hold in common with animals; and our social life, which depends upon our good name. Now, the backbiter attacks these three lives. He attacks the life of soul and body in himself and in his listener, and he attacks the social life of the person he backbites. Such are the evils that backbiting breeds.

#### IV.

We mentioned in the above section that backbiting is an evil that is hard to heal. The Holy Spirit declares, “A man who has the habit of abusive language will never mature in character as long as he lives”.<sup>19</sup> When we are in the act of backbiting others, would we want to admit we are backbiting? A sick person who thinks he is well refuses to believe anyone who tells him he is sick and he scorns every remedy. So it is with wounds caused by backbiting. They are healed only with great difficulty; and though they may have been bandaged, they always leave a dreadful scar. Alexander the Great’s laudator used to say, “If you have an enemy, attack him vigorously with insults. He may be able to bandage his wounds, but a scar will always remain”. Thieves speak the same language: “Steal boldly. If you are obliged to pay it back it will never be everything”.

It is remarkable how hard it is for someone to rid himself of an error once it has lodged in his mind. A few words murmured in lowered tones pierce it like a nail driven into a piece of wood; try and pull it out, all your strength will hardly suffice. Once you penetrate someone’s mind with a false opinion, you will have a hard time changing it. In vain will you repeat a hundred times, “I was angry when I said that. I spoke thoughtlessly. Jealousy made me talk that way”. No matter what you say, the first opinion is imbedded too deeply for you to be able to pull it out in one try.

Serpents provide serum against snakebite; scorpions provide oil against the scorpion’s sting; dog hair acts against dogbite. But people wounded by a backbiter’s tongue can heal only with great difficulty, and always imperfectly, even though it be the very tongue which caused the wounds that tries to repair them, as Achilles’ lance healed Telephos, whom he had wounded.

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<sup>19</sup> Sir 23:20

Saint John Chrysostom paints an eloquent picture of the evils of backbiting. “What is the use of sparing birds and fishes if we eat our own brothers?”, he says. Indeed, the backbiter rips his brother’s flesh with his teeth and tears his neighbour’s body to shreds. That is what Saint Paul wants to frighten us from when he says, “If you bite and devour one another, take heed or you will be consumed by one another”.<sup>20</sup>

And to keep us from sidestepping this admonition, Saint John Chrysostom adds, “Do not tell me, ‘I would be a slanderer only if I lied. I am committing no slander if I tell the truth’. Error! Speaking evil of others, even if the evil be true, is always a crime. Surely the publican was really a publican and a sinner; but he left cleansed of all his defilements because he was scorned by the Pharisee. You want to correct your brother? Weep, pray to God, warn him by speaking to his heart, advise and exhort him. That is how Saint Paul acted. ‘But backbiting is so sweet!’, you say. Yes, but not backbiting is sweeter still. The backbiter creates deadly anxiety for himself, he is constantly besieged by suspicion and fear. He repents, but too late; he bites his tongue, but in vain; he trembles, for as his words spread, they may cause him grave danger and expose those who repeat them to enmities which so easily could have been avoided”.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, let us eliminate every sort of backbiting, knowing full well that were we to eat ashes, all our austerities would be useless to us if we linger in this vice.

V.

Rufinus of Aquilea relates the following incident: Some brothers had been sent by their monastery to visit hermits living here and there in the desert. They came first to an elderly anchorite who gave them sincere and cordial hospitality. To relieve his road-weary visitors, he resolved to treat them as well as he could and openheartedly offer them all he had. Poverty can be generous in its way, not in what it gives but in the dispositions with which it gives. The old man wanted to show this religious magnificence so that his guests, seeing his liberality, would be at ease and freely receive what his

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<sup>20</sup> Gal 5:15

<sup>21</sup> Saint John Chrysostom, Homily 3, *Ad pop Antioch*.

charity was not embarrassed to give them. They said evening prayers after a very congenial supper, and then the old man bedded down his guests while he went to rest in another room.

To bring on drowsiness, our travellers began to talk. And one of them said, "What do you think? These hermits eat better than we do in our monastery..." The old man heard all these remarks. He was hurt because his guests were returning his kindness with calumny, but he kept silence. At dawn the next morning, the brothers said they were going to go and visit another hermit. As he bid them goodbye, the old man said to them, "Give my greetings to the hermit who is my dear friend, and tell him simply this: 'Take care not to sprinkle the oil'".

The brothers repeated his message faithfully. The other hermit understood the recommendation at once, and he served his guests an extremely frugal table, the main meal consisting in dry bread, salt and a little vinegar: that was the substance of the banquet. Soon tiring of such cold hospitality, our travellers moved out that very night with as little fanfare as possible.<sup>22</sup>

My friends, stop slandering those who treat you with kindness. Learn to stop backbiting their generosity. The first hermit treated you as guests, but the second treated you as you deserved... as slanderers.

Let us confirm the above with these remarks from Saint Bernard: The backbiter proves, first, that he has no charity. And then, what is his purpose, if not to get others to detest and hate their neighbour? Therefore, the backbiting tongue wounds charity in everyone who listens to it. It kills and stifles charity as much as it can.

Ah, how rare those who order their life in such a way as not to take pleasure in denigrating the lives of others!

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<sup>22</sup> Rufinus of Aquilea, *Pelagius*, Book 10, No. 5.

## 2. The terrible evils that backbiting breeds.

### Reparation of the damage it causes.

The thoughts of God are so very different from the thoughts of men. In the Old Testament, God says, “You shall not curse the deaf”.<sup>23</sup> Would it not have been better for Him to say, “You shall not curse those who hear well”? Why bother to take such precautions for the deaf? But the wisdom of the Lord has nothing in common with our boldness. “You shall not curse the deaf”, He says. Here is how Saint Gregory explains these words: “Backbiting someone who is deaf means backbiting one who is absent and cannot hear you. Just as a deaf man cannot hear or understand what is said, so it is with an absent person someone backbites. He cannot reply or rectify the errors of which he is the object”.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, one must not backbite the deaf. Not recognising this rule, backbiters rashly shoot down the reputation of those who are absent. This is something they would never dare to do in the presence of the people they backbite.

We have already spoken at length about backbiting. We have treated its various species and its gravity. Now let us take a look at the importance of avoiding this defect even in small things, due to its unfortunate consequences, and above all at the necessity of repairing the reputation of other people: a very difficult thing as we shall see.

I.

A master too short on words with his servant, or a man with his neighbour, obviously proves that he feels little friendship or kindness towards him. A religious once said, “If we do not cultivate them, two kinds of thoughts will stop bothering us by themselves: thoughts of fornication and thoughts of backbiting. When they call, do not answer them; whatever they say, pay them no heed. If you act otherwise, you may try to resist but you will not escape their clutches”.

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<sup>23</sup> Lev 19:14

<sup>24</sup> Saint Gregory the Great. *In prolog. III Past*, Chapter 1, *Ad Monit.*

And one must not only avoid backbiting when it attacks charity and justice directly, but even when it turns on light defects and weaknesses of little importance.

Even the worthiest of men are not always exempt from this sort of backbiting. Perhaps it is a lack of prudence or reflection, but even they take pleasure in relating the defects and faults of others to willing listeners. It would seem that we have taken this verse from La Fontaine as a motto:

I attempt to turn vice to ridicule,  
Since I cannot attack it with the arms of Hercules.

And why be surprised? The human race has an instinctive propensity for criticising other people's behaviour. We all carry the scarlet with which we paint everyone. Everything that seems blameworthy in our sight turns into vice at once, and it is all the greater in the proportion that we want to appear wiser and more religious. Saint Jerome says, "The passion of this evil has so infested the world that people who have totally renounced other vices still fall into this one. One might say it is the last trap the devil sets for them". This rashness of judgement is often accompanied by envy, the sworn enemy of the happiness of others. The envious person tries to calm his bad temper by disparaging another man's merits in every way imaginable; he suffers less when he sees others damaged by some defect.

Envy is often preceded by a secret pride, which spurs us to wish to be preferred above others, or at least to be their equal. For fear that our neighbour may rise too high and eclipse us, we craftily clip his wings.

We see that conversations which reveal good men's imperfections often result in countless evils. Upon hearing his neighbor's weaknesses related, more than one listener will be tempted to tell his friends, "Look at what he did, and everyone mistakes him for a little saint! If he committed that fault, he will certainly commit a lot more. I thought he was so virtuous, but I see him now; he has his faults too".

Many people's consciences are disturbed by such talk. If the slandered person's reputation is not totally lost it is seriously damaged. Bonds of

friendship and kindness are broken; the absent person who is spoken about will certainly be held in contempt.

And how can the accused defend himself when usually he is not even aware of the blows being struck against him, or at least of who their author is? That is how a man can be murdered and not even know it.

The sin is all the more serious when someone backbites people in honoured positions, even in light matters, and even if they are guilty. “Even in your thoughts do not make light of the king, nor in the privacy of your bedroom revile him, because the birds of the air may carry your voice, a winged creature may tell what you say”.<sup>25</sup>

You see, Holy Scripture tells us not only to avoid backbiting, it even commands us to banish it from our thoughts. You who backbite, do not think it suffices to tell your listeners, “Don’t reveal what I say, I beg of you, I confide this secret to your discretion”. You are no less guilty, and this behaviour proves how simple you are. Pray tell, why do you ask him to keep silence? You are the one who should have kept silence first. If you do not want your words to leak out then keep them to yourself! You have not remained silent and you would shut other people’s mouths!

If you are in such a rush to pull the stopper out of the spigot, then what can you expect of others?

Saint Francis of Assisi had an extreme aversion to backbiting and slanderous accusations. His biographer Saint Bonaventure relates that one of his brothers said evil about another and levelled several accusations against him. The Saint told his assistant, “Father, go and examine this affair. If the accused is innocent punish his accuser so severely that it will give others an example, and he will remember it”. Saint Francis even wanted to remove the religious habit from a brother who had not been afraid to remove the cloak of another’s reputation, so that it would be done to him as he had done to others, and in this way he would be obliged to restore the reputation he had stolen.

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<sup>25</sup> Eccl 10:20

## II.

Backbiting drags a whole host of evils in its wake: it depraves anyone who listens to it, causes the backbiter to be considered a slanderer and incurs the hatred of his neighbour.

God has attached an enormous ball to this chain: the obligation of restoring the neighbour's reputation. Saint Augustine's words here are as true for backbiting as for money: "*Non dimittitur peccatum nisi restituatur ablatum*: No restoration, no pardon".<sup>26</sup> It is a common principle among theologians<sup>27</sup> that restoring their neighbour's reputation is obligatory not only for those who have revealed an imaginary crime of his, but also those who have revealed a true but secret crime. They are held to giving him at least an equivalent compensation: and they owe this compensation to the detriment not only of their own reputation, but also their life. Along with their neighbour's reputation, they must repair all the harm he has incurred; and they must do so even if what they revealed is true. Since the thing is true, they are held to tell everyone who heard them not that they were lying, but that they were backbiting.

Even if it were only for the inconvenience of being obliged to repair your neighbour's reputation, backbiting should be avoided like the plague. How painful to have to retract what you said and undergo the shame of such a restoration! It is easy to return an item of clothing, a sum of money or personal property unjustly acquired; there are a thousand ways of doing it. But restoring a reputation, what a burden!

Now, the gravity of this sin lies precisely in the difficulty of repairing it. When an opinion has been revealed, it soon spreads all over, going through cities and empires, and a hitherto unknown person soon acquires a sad celebrity. But if you try and praise someone you have previously denigrated, you are wasting your time. What you said has taken root too strongly, and too many people know about it.

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<sup>26</sup> Saint Augustine, Epistle 65, *Ad Macedonias*

<sup>27</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II, Section II, Question 62, Article 2.

People believe evil first;  
But when it comes to the good,  
Then seeing is believing. (La Fontaine)

But you will say, “Backbiting flourishes everywhere, and no one ever makes restoration”. Ah that is precisely the evil I deplore! Do you think our worst habits can excuse our vices? Just because “everyone does it”, does that give you the right to do something? The vast number of fools is no praise for folly. Besides, it is false to say that reputations are never repaired. I would prefer to think it occurs only rarely. But I will admit that when there is any reparation, it is so slow, so late, so imperfect!

How rare it is for someone to return as much as he has stolen. Blind as we are, we prefer postponing everything to the supreme tribunal and awaiting the vengeance of the Lord, He who insists on justice with such severity that He prefers to remit what is due to Himself rather than what is due to others. Many people are obliged to restore after death all that they did not restore during their lifetime.

Saint Vincent Ferrer, a Spaniard, was one of the most remarkable brothers in Saint Dominic’s spiritual family. He spoke so eloquently that thousands of people flocked to hear him preach and Pope Calixtus III insured that his memory would ever remain. One day Saint Vincent was preaching on the duty of repairing our neighbour’s reputation. The respect due to such a great man obliges me to quote his words textually:

“The person who maliciously robs his neighbour’s reputation is held to restoring it on the same level as someone who steals. If what you said is secret even though it be true, you are obliged to restore his reputation. Otherwise you will not go to heaven.

“But how can I restore it?”, you may ask. You must tell everyone present when you spoke ill not to believe you, that you spoke out of wickedness. If the person you defamed knows about it you are duty bound to ask his forgiveness, etc. Many have been damned for such defamations because words pass and we forget having said them; they make no scruples over them and never think of confessing them”.



Thus spoke Saint Vincent, adding, “If someone neglects to do so while alive, after his death he will be obliged, despite himself, to make satisfaction to those who survive him”. He confirms this teaching with the following story:

“Two men had seriously outraged their neighbour’s reputation. One passed away and the other was still alive, along with the person who had been attacked. The dead man remained in the flames of purgatory for some time. After his deliverance, but before being admitted into heaven, he was commanded to completely repair the reputation of the person he had denigrated while alive. I know it is true that this soul returned to this world, for I am the man he defamed, and it is to me that he came to ask forgiveness”.

O God, if a reputation is such a fragile and delicate thing, why do we not fear to contract obligations we must fulfill even after death? “Your word, O Lord, endures forever; it is firm as the heavens... According to Your ordinances they still stand firm: all things serve You”,<sup>28</sup> goods of both body and soul. Therefore, a good reputation is not to be scorned, for it is especially needed in fulfilling public duties. Thus it is also necessary to restore someone’s reputation if we rob it in bad faith — even more necessary than restoring money.

III.

Raphael Maffei relates that when Chinese warriors prepared for combat they entered with splendid apparel and elegant arms, carrying four swords on their harness and manipulating two at once with great skill.

But the backbiter’s tongue surpasses them by far. It carries not four swords, nor a hundred, nor six hundred, but thousands, for fear it will run out once it enters into combat. The backbiting tongue often lights such a conflagration that four thousand soldiers — what am I saying, four thousand? — forty thousand, even a hundred thousand will not suffice to put it out. A two-edged sword, a keen knife, a piercing arrow, a cane-stiletto, a sharp razor, and a quick biting tongue all bear a striking resemblance. Listen to the Psalmist: “They have bent their bow to shoot arrows”. As the bow strikes

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<sup>28</sup> Ps 118:9

from far off and wounds a person unawares, the backbiting tongue attacks those who are absent and wreaks its havoc from a distance of many miles. Bending its bow in Germany, it strikes and wounds a Frenchman or a Spaniard in his own land. Its arrows fly across the sea, or rather they pierce all the way to heaven, for they attack God Himself and His Saints. "They set their mouthings in place of heaven",<sup>29</sup> says David. It also penetrates the very bowels of the earth and rends the dead in their tombs, for David adds, "Their pronouncements pierce the earth". It buries the living, and it digs the dead out of their tombs.

The Psalmist goes on to say, "They scoff and speak evil; outrage from on high they threaten".<sup>30</sup> When its fury is roused, a raging bull lifts its head and casts terrible eyes at its prey, aiming at him and rampaging against him with all its might. Thus does the backbiter move in with head held high; stifling the voice of his conscience, the things he has meditated in his heart spew from his mouth in contempt of every law of Christian charity.

The backbiting tongue has chosen the very motto of Death as its own: "I spare no one!". Priest or judge, known or unknown, religious or worldling, friend or foe, none of that matters to him. The backbiter spares nothing and no one, not even his father and mother. Why is this so? Because he enjoys talking, so speaking evil gratifies him. He considers it a pleasure when he finds something to criticise in others. He is filled with joy when he can invent and relate things that do not even exist.

"O Lord", cries David, "rescue my soul from the sword, my only one from the grip of the dog!".<sup>31</sup> Cassiodorus says that Saint Augustine declares, "The sword is the backbiter's tongue, and the dog is the backbiter himself". Why does David ask to be rescued from the grip of the dog? We could understand if he had said a bear or a lion, but why be so afraid of a dog?

He is right after a fashion, however. The bear and the lion are naturally fierce, but a dog may often sidle peacefully up to you and suddenly bite your leg. If it is a bulldog, it will square off against you and attack your head. David knew

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<sup>29</sup> Ps 72:9

<sup>30</sup> Ps 72:8

<sup>31</sup> Ps 21:21

this type of dog from experience. He knew Saul, Semeias, Absalom, Seba, Achitophel and Doeg; they were purebred dogs, which are the most troublesome by far.

#### IV.

Pliny relates the fact that the camel will drink only after disturbing the water with its hooves.<sup>32</sup> That proud beast does not want to look at its deformed face and see it mirrored in the water. Men without credit, virtue or reputation often act like the camel. They attempt to blacken others' reputation with backbiting so that they will not be the only ones called deformed. They have adopted this maxim of the Ephesians: "Let there be no superiority among us!". A servant's laziness is never more visible than when a more active servant is working by his side. A virtuous man's piety is never more evident than when he is next to a vain and godless man.

Therefore, in order to avoid embarrassment over their corruption, men of vice try to sully others with their backbiting tongues. They think they look better when others are ugly and wrinkled. "Say whatever you like", they declare, "the man you praise so highly is no holier than anyone else; the person you exonerate is no angel!". And when they have nothing to say, they state, "We could say lots of things about him, but we won't stir up that swamp, please God! We will say nothing instead".

Wretch, speaking that way is not keeping silence; it is a subtle form of backbiting! You murmur like this because that person's behaviour has nothing in common with yours. Why did the Pharisees pursue Jesus with their hatred? Because His life bore no resemblance to theirs.<sup>33</sup> Because of this they called Him a drinker, a violator of the Sabbath, loving people of evil life. David prophesied well of them when he said, "Those who repay evil for good harass Me for pursuing good... In return for My love they slandered Me, but I prayed".<sup>34</sup> And Saint John Chrysostom cries, "You are a man, and you would spit an asp's venom? You are a man, and you would become a raging beast? You have been given a mouth not to wound, but to heal". Saint Augustine

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<sup>32</sup> Pliny, *Historica naturalia*, Book 8, Chapter 18.

<sup>33</sup> Wis 12:15

<sup>34</sup> Ps 37:21; 108:4

declares, “Since you get angry with others when they speak evil against you, get angry with yourself when you speak evil against someone else”.<sup>35</sup>

In olden times, the Lord commanded the prophet Isaias to announce, “Every knee shall be bowed to Me, and every tongue shall swear by My name”.<sup>36</sup> Backbiters, place your tongues beneath the sway of reason once again, that they may no longer wound people’s reputations, that they may refrain from the least detraction, that they may be silent over even the slightest defects. Follow Saint John Chrysostom’s advice: “Such is the nature of vipers that, as soon as they bite a man, they enter water at once. If they find no water, they die”.<sup>37</sup> Do likewise if you have poured the venom of detraction into someone’s ears and have spoken a thoughtless word that may wound your neighbour’s reputation. Cast yourself at once into the waters of penance; repent, and promise that you will be more watchful in the future. And if you are able to repair the damage your tongue has caused, then repair it. This is hard, no doubt but it is necessary. It is better to restore something you have taken than to perish with it.

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<sup>35</sup> Saint Augustine, Homily 89, *Ad Pop.*

<sup>36</sup> Is 45:24

<sup>37</sup> Saint John Chrysostom, Homily 3, *In Matt*

### 3. Appropriate names for backbiters. Usual chastisements to which they expose themselves.

Plutarch says that nature has thought of everything: it has given man two ears and only one tongue, since he should listen more than speak. Such was the opinion of a sage formed in the school of Christ: Saint James says, "Let every man be swift to hear and slow to speak".<sup>38</sup> The tongue is a member hard to govern; it rarely moves without harming itself or others. Anarcharsis the philosopher states, "It is better to trespass with your feet than with your tongue". We are rarely sorry for keeping silence and often sorry for speaking. The poet Ausonius declares, "You harm no one by your silence, but by your words".

Xenocrates confirmed this truth by his example. As he listened without a word to a conversation in which his neighbour incurred detraction, someone asked him why he alone maintained a stubborn silence. He answered, "I have often regretted speaking in public, but never not speaking". This quiet reply closed the mouth over those evil tongues.

We have treated the vice of backbiting, its various species and its gravity. We have demonstrated how difficult it is, though necessary, to restore our neighbour's reputation. Let us now draw the true portrait of a backbiter.

I.

We do no one harm in saying that a spade is a spade, and a cat is a cat. We should call all things by their name.

Now, backbiters have as many names as species. They attack first this person and then that one, putting on a fox skin today and a lion skin tomorrow. Among all the splendid names that apply to flatterers, only one applies to backbiters:

1. Backbiters are dogs. Scripture tells us, "Like an arrow lodged in a dog's thigh is gossip in the heart of a fool".<sup>39</sup> A dog will have no rest till he is rid of something lodged in his flank. So it is with a backbiter: as soon as he sees

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<sup>38</sup> Jas 1:19

<sup>39</sup> Sir 19:12

anything with his curious eyes or hears anything with his long ears, he broadcasts it everywhere.

The food most suited to dogs is dry bread and bones. But dogs with faces of men eat not only bones; like famished wolves, they need flesh... human flesh. When Job was struck down he said, "Why do you hound me as though you were God, and insatiably prey upon me?"<sup>40</sup> I see you gnashing your teeth like dogs. You insult me; and you bite, devour and swallow my reputation and good name.

Saint Gregory declares, "There is no doubt that those who indulge in backbiting others, feed on their flesh"<sup>41</sup> Making himself equal to God, the backbiter pretends to examine hearts and discern the most secret things in man, even his intentions. He would wrest God's sword from His hand if he could. The backbiter is so fond of human flesh he often spares not even his own relatives.

After Actaeon had been turned into a deer by the goddess Artemis, his dogs attacked him. He fought like a madman and cried out in vain:

My name is Actaeon, recognise your master!<sup>42</sup>

But none of the dogs would recognise him as Actaeon. Such are backbiters. They know neither father nor mother; they tear into everyone. Their main activity consists in biting the first comer. The prophet Ezechiel predicted, "Fathers shall eat their sons in the midst of you, and sons shall eat their fathers"<sup>43</sup> And Jeremias adds, "Everyone shall eat the flesh of his friend"<sup>44</sup> With a single bite, the backbiter tears into bishop, archbishop or pope, king or emperor. Though he should be satisfied with beef or mutton on fast days, he must absolutely have human flesh. With his bloody mouth, the backbiter streaks through the public square like a dog. Beware of the dog! Run from him when he barks, "Come along with us! Let us lie in wait for the honest

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<sup>40</sup> Job 19:22

<sup>41</sup> Saint Gregory, *Moral*, Book 14, Chapter 14.

<sup>42</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, Book 3.

<sup>43</sup> Ez 5:10

<sup>44</sup> Jer 19:9

man; let us, unprovoked, set a trap for the innocent; let us swallow them up like hell, alive and in the prime of life, like those who go down into the pit!”<sup>45</sup>

2. The sea urchin, armed with points which it uses as feet, is the terror of every fish. Likewise, the backbiter is armed with thorny spines inside and out. No matter where you touch him, beware! Beware of his traps, or you will get caught by his hook! There’s the sea urchin: the backbiter is coming! If you ask him, “What’s new?”, he will answer you at once, “So-and-so got drunk yesterday. Someone else was gambling with infernal passion. I saw this man entering a house of ill-repute; that one is always fighting; and that other one cheated a salesman out of twenty dollars”. These are the barbs of that sea urchin, these are his words. Therefore, he is the terror of every man. For the Holy Spirit says, “A man full of tongue is terrible in his city, and he that is rash in his word shall be hateful”.<sup>46</sup>

3. The backbiter is a beetle and a leech. Saint John Chrysostom remarks, “Everyone flees a backbiter like unhealthy mud, like a leech that feeds on blood, a beetle that feeds in the mire — that is, on others’ defects”. As for you, act like bees: gather flowers from thorns and use them to make your honey.

Guillaume Perald says, “The mouth of the backbiter and slanderer is the basin the devil uses to wash his hands”. That basin contains not holy water, but the impure water of detraction. The devil pours this filthy water onto many; not on their face, true, but on their back. For the backbiter harms people who are absent, not present, just as the leech draws blood from behind. Now, let all who are in the habit of backbiting others learn that oftentimes those who reveal the crimes of others are more sinful than those who commit them.

4. The backbiter resembles a hog. When it enters a garden, a hog does not run into the flowers, but into the manure. The backbiter does not seek to edify, but scandalise; he feeds off forbidden objects.

When Balaam refused to curse Israel, King Balac told him angrily, “Come with me to another place from which you can see only some and not all of Israel,

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<sup>45</sup> Prov 1:11–12

<sup>46</sup> Sir 9:25

and from there curse it for me”.<sup>47</sup> The king thought the great throng of people was preventing Balaam from cursing it. It is characteristic of backbiters to criticise only a part of what others have done. If they said what their neighbour did before or afterwards, they would be giving their listeners a very different opinion of him.

Besides, is anything in this world free from all imperfection, safe from all criticism?

The moon is a magnificent heavenly body, but it does have its craters. The sun is far nobler and brighter than the moon, yet it is not perfect in every point.<sup>48</sup> In order to be mistaken as little as possible, look at something on the whole, and its collective symmetry will justify its less perfect parts.

5. The backbiter resembles the lion and the hyena. Someone once asked Theocritus, “What is the most ferocious animal of all?”, and he replied, “In the mountains and forests, I think it is lions and bears. In the cities and towns, it is money-lenders and backbiters”.<sup>49</sup> And since they do not spare even the dead, it is only fitting to compare them to the hyena. Like the wolf, the hyena is so avid for human flesh that it digs into graves and unburies corpses in order to eat their flesh.

The discreet and prudent man must take great care to safeguard his reputation from the tongues of others. If he knows something blameworthy about others, he should bury it in silence as in good ground. But the backbiter drags the nauseating, rotten flesh of corpses out of their tombs, bringing hidden vices to light and reminding us of crimes that should be forgotten. He resembles the lion and the hyena.

6. The backbiter is a counterfeiter and a thief. He wears down coins so that no one wants them any more. “Let’s get rid of this coin”, people say. “It is eaten away, it is no longer any good”. This is how backbiting tongues, with the traps they set, prevent so many from emerging from their tombs; or if

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<sup>47</sup> Num 23:13

<sup>48</sup> Christopher Scheiner, *De macul sol*

<sup>49</sup> Aristotle, *De animal*, Book 7, Chapter 4



they do come out they force them back into their former darkness as soon as they spy an occasion to attack their reputation or fortune.

Many who would behave like honest men and Christians have been bitten so hard by backbiters and so blackened by wicked words that people always find something wrong with them. Emperor Vespasian ordered backbiters and gossipers flogged with rods and then sent into exile. Augustus wanted them burned alive. Antoninus wanted them put to death. For, according to Solomon, it is backbiting “that men find abominable”.<sup>50</sup>

True, it is not the worst of evils to be loathed by all, since Christ told His Apostles they would be hated by all men, adding that it would be for His name’s sake.<sup>51</sup> The backbiter, however, is hated not only by all men, but by God Himself. Saint Paul says, “Detractors are hateful to God”.<sup>52</sup> Follow the advice of Solomon: “Have nothing to do with backbiters, for their destruction arises suddenly, and who can measure their ruin?”.<sup>53</sup>

II.

Finally — and this is the most appropriate name, more appropriate than any other — the backbiter is a serpent.

The Book of Ecclesiastes says, “If a serpent bites in silence, the hidden backbiter is no less loathsome”.<sup>54</sup> This expression, “bites in silence”, illustrates the genius of backbiting perfectly. Theologians recognise a difference between backbiting and insult: an insult wounds and outrages one who is present; backbiting attacks those who are absent and seeks to weaken their reputation.

Of all the animals, the serpent is the only one the Lord cursed. And among the great multitude of men, if there be any that God especially loathes and detests, it is the backbiter. There are serpents that kill their own mother in order to live; before harming others, the backbiter is of serious detriment to

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<sup>50</sup> Prov 24:9

<sup>51</sup> Mt 10:22

<sup>52</sup> Rom 1:30

<sup>53</sup> Prov 24:21–22

<sup>54</sup> Eccl 10:11

himself and his loved ones. And just as a single snakebite is so infectious that it poisons the entire body, the backbiter uses few words to rob others of their reputation and sometimes their life. The backbiter makes himself the equal of the devil, who justly received the name of serpent. The backbiter poses as a denunciator of his brothers; and when he cannot accuse them, he slanders them. Here is how the poet of Venusia depicts the vari-coloured skin of the backbiter, similar to the serpents:

“To tear apart an absent friend; to not defend him when he is attacked; to work at inciting indiscreet laughter and to build your reputation on an attitude of mockery; to invent happenings; to betray confidential secrets: such is the behaviour of a despicable person. Romans, beware of such a man!”.<sup>55</sup>

Saint Bernard says, “Run from a backbiter as you would run from a serpent”.<sup>56</sup> Serpents do not store venom in their tail. They reserve it in a little sac beneath the tongue or in the hollow of their teeth. Most snakes inject their venom with their bite. Others eject it by spitting; for this reason, Avicenna refers to them as spitting serpents. Like these serpents, backbiters conceal deadly venom beneath their tongues, spitting it out as they speak. Although the deceptively small mouth of this species of viper leaves barely a trace of its bite, it deals out death.

Cleopatra had a horror of swords and wounds. When she requested a quick and easy death, she was killed by a snakebite. The backbiter often delivers great blows while making little noise. The wounds he leaves are scarcely visible, but he inflicts mortal damage to the reputation of others.

Beware of him! Run from him! The backbiter is deadlier than a snake in the grass, and there is practically no remedy for his venom. Such was the chastisement with which the Lord once threatened the Hebrews. “For behold, I will send among you serpents against which there is no charm: and they shall bite you”.<sup>57</sup> According to the Roman philosopher Seneca, a snake is

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<sup>55</sup> Horace, *Satires*, Book 1, Satire 4

<sup>56</sup> Saint Bernard, *De modo bene vivendi*, Sermon 17

<sup>57</sup> Jer 8:17

easier to handle when it is very cold.<sup>58</sup> Its poison is still potent, no doubt, but the snake is too numb. If we lend credence to Elianus and Pliny, serpents at the mouth of the Euphrates River are very dangerous to foreigners but not to natives of the region; the serpents of Syria, especially those by the Euphrates, will not harm Syrians in their sleep. Syrians, the Psyllae in Africa, the Ophites of Cyprus and Hellespont, and the Marsi in Italy are all anguigenous, and they have no fear of any serpent. The Egyptians even tame asps.

It is not so with the backbiter's tongue. Nothing can temper it and everyone fears it, natives and foreigners alike. It attacks, bites and kills everyone, friend or foe, good or evil, asleep or awake. Saint John Chrysostom states, "A person who backbites performs the devil's work. Backbiting is an unruly demon".

III.

"God is all feet, all hands, all eyes", says Saint Augustine. And I would add that He is also all ears; for nothing escapes Him, and "detractors are hateful to God". Do not attempt to excuse yourself by hedging, "That's what people are saying, and they are convinced. I'm just telling you what I heard". My friend, it is illegal to resell adulterated or stolen merchandise. You heard something? Well, act as though you had not. This is advice of the son of Sirach: "Let anything you hear die within you; rest assured, it will not make you burst".<sup>59</sup>

IV.

Do not excuse yourself by saying, "But these are only petty sins", for a little spark is often enough to produce a conflagration. This is always true with the backbiting tongue. You say they are petty sins. So if you knew more serious things, wouldn't you say them? No, wounding your neighbour's reputation, even lightly, is no little thing. Killing someone with the pen is no less a homicide than killing him with the sword.

Cassian was killed by the hand of a child and pierced with little wounds, but he was no less dead than if he had fallen beneath the hand of Hector or

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<sup>58</sup> Seneca, *Epistle 42*

<sup>59</sup> Sir 19:10

Achilles. The weaker the hand that strikes, the slower the death and the more painful the torment. The smaller the pinpricks of backbiting may seem, the more dangerous the wounds they make. God never lets them go unpunished. Scripture tells us, “He who speaks against his brother, or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law”.<sup>60</sup>

Thomas of Cantimpre, the coadjutor of the Bishop of Cambrai, declares that with his own eyes he saw how horrible and surprising was the vengeance reserved for this vice: “I once knew a religious man (*sacerdotem*), more religious in name than in deed, whose tongue reached such a point of shamelessness that his only pleasure lay in covering others with infamy and in relating every lie one can imagine. Finding himself at death’s door, he was whipped into such a frenzy that he began beating himself and tearing his tongue with his teeth, thus showing everyone that his tongue was the real cause of his torment”. The Book of Ecclesiastes says, “Be not hasty in your utterance. God is in heaven and you are on earth; therefore let your words be few”.<sup>61</sup> You have not yet gone to that land beyond the blue. Nor shall you enter it if you do not amend your vicious ways; you will fall into the pit of fire. Do you want to save your soul? Then hold your tongue and swear off the passion of backbiting.

There was another religious in England, a monk more by his habit than by his habits, rather like the one we just mentioned. His backbiting tongue had such a hard bite that he slashed everyone he met. He was about to die, and his brothers implored him to think seriously about the journey he was about to make, since it was a matter of eternity. “Spare your exhortations”, he said, “they are totally useless!”. They spoke to him of divine mercy, trying to get him to trust in God, using every possible means to lift his thoughts to the things of heaven. The dying man stuck his tongue out and tapped it with his hand, saying, “This evil tongue is what has damned me!”. Scarcely had he spoken these words when his tongue suddenly swelled so greatly that it was impossible for him to return it into his mouth. Thus, while breathing his last,

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<sup>60</sup> Jas 4:11

<sup>61</sup> Eccl 5:1

this unfortunate man taught us with his dreadful example to learn from others' mistakes and watch what we say.<sup>62</sup>

“He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from trouble”.

#### 4. Listening to backbiters is a great sin.

Certain experiments prove that magnets possess a mysterious and wonderful power. According to Jerome Cardan, if you rub a dagger with a magnet, those it pierces afterwards will not feel it: “In the home of Dr. Lawrence Guascus I saw a needle or a metal point rubbed with a magnet; one could then stick the needle or point into any part of the body without causing any pain. This seemed incredible to me, and I wanted to make sure it was true. So I took a needle, rubbed it with a magnet and stuck it into my arm. I felt the needle's presence when it had penetrated completely, but I felt no pain whatsoever. In order to be really sure I turned the needle, still stuck in my arm, in every direction. But I felt nothing and shed not a drop of blood. Afterwards, only the point where the needle had entered could be seen”. Cardan adds that Alexander of Verona was the first to perform this experiment, in Milan: he rubbed a sword with oil in order to be able to wound and heal whoever he wished without any pain.

Backbiting resembles that dagger perfectly. You thrust it in, it enters and causes a wound to three people at once: the backbiter, his listener and the person he backbites. The most seriously wounded one of all, the backbiter, feels absolutely nothing.

But we have already talked about him in the preceding chapter. Let us now take a look at his listener.

We will show what an enormous sin is committed, not only by backbiters, but by those who listen to them willingly, and we will enlighten the backbiter and his listeners at the same time.

I.

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<sup>62</sup> Fr. John Major, S. J., *Theologia Specul exempl.* P. 265

Homer, the prince of poets, relates how Ulysses acted with his seafaring companions. That prudent fellow knew that the sweet, languorous siren's song usually softened men and then lured them into the depths of the sea. To safeguard himself and his friends on their way through this hazardous zone, he had them stop their ears with wax and bind him to the ship's mast until the moment of danger had passed. Thus there are dangers for the ears as well as for the eyes, and one must make sure that they are hermetically sealed.

It is nothing new to encircle fields and gardens with hedges, but it may seem strange to do so for our ears. Yet the Holy Spirit judges it necessary. "Hedge in your ears with thorns", He says, "listen not to the wicked tongue, and make doors and bars to your mouth".<sup>63</sup> The Holy Spirit does not want this hedge protecting our ears to be a flower hedge, but a spiny thorn hedge, to keep the backbiter away.

Hedges protect fields against animals and gardens against thieves. So must we have thorns to guard our ears against backbiters. When they come near, they run into brambles when you show absolute disapproval of what they say. Take heed not to lend an ear and listen willingly to them. On the contrary, let them see that you do not care for this sort of conversation. For if you listen willingly to everything others whisper in your ear, what sort of people will you be compared to?

Two dogs gnawing on the same bone is a rare sight, practically a phenomenon. Now, if you see a backbiter and his listener in perfect agreement, the one to speak and the other to give ear, would you not say that they look exactly like two dogs gnawing on the same bone? Two evil people who analyse the behaviour of a good man weigh him, sift him and grind him with their words. This is truly the equivalent of chewing bones and cracking them between one's teeth.

Saint Bernard discusses the gravity of the sin that both the backbiter and his listener commit. "I would have difficulty deciding which of them is more damnable", he says, "he who backbites or he who listens to the backbiter. Even if we excuse it as wit or banter, every jesting word must be banished

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<sup>63</sup> Sir 28:28

not only from our mouth, but also from our ears”.<sup>64</sup> Another man has cleverly remarked, “The devil dances in the backbiter’s mouth and in his listener’s ear”. If you lend a favourable ear to a gossip and spur him on to speak, you incite him to proceed with still greater freedom, boldness and excess. “The burglar who holds the bag and the thief who slips in the spoils are equally guilty”, says the proverb. The perpetrator and the consenter are both deserving of the same punishment; the same is true of the backbiter and his listener. Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches, “He who hears someone backbiting and does not oppose him appears to approve the author, thus participating in his sin”.<sup>65</sup> Saint Jerome speaks in the same vein: “Beware that your restless ears and tongue do not listen to or engage in backbiting”.<sup>66</sup>

“I don’t backbite”, you may say, “but how can I stop others from talking?”. Look at what sort of pretexts we invent to excuse our sins! Tell me then: If you were passing in front of someone’s house, and his dog came running after you barking and ready to bite you, would you be pleased if his master’s servant did not prevent him? And if he even encouraged the dog to press on after you, would you be able to contain your indignation? Now let’s change the circumstances: When you listen quietly to a backbiter, you are not only letting this dog attack passers-by and bite them, but you are urging him on, for you lend credence to what he says.

II.

“Well, who would ever dare to interrupt someone who is speaking?”, you may ask. Listen, and Saint John Chrysostom will answer your question: “I must not limit myself to addressing backbiters, but also implore their listeners to stop their ears and walk in the footsteps of the holy king, who said, ‘Whoever slanders his neighbour in secret, his enemy will I become’”.<sup>67</sup> Tell the person who comes to you and speaks about others, ‘Are you here to praise someone and raise him in my esteem? Then gladly will I give ear and savour all your sweet conversation. But if you intend to speak ill, let me stop you right now; I cannot stand filth and stench. What have I to gain by

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<sup>64</sup> Saint Bernard, *De consideratione*, Book 2, Chapter 13

<sup>65</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II, Section II, Question 83, Article 2.

<sup>66</sup> Saint Jerome, *Epistolara ad Nepotium, ad Rustic*

<sup>67</sup> Ps 100:5

knowing that someone is evil? Would I not be losing something instead? Talk to him yourself, and let us mind our own business”<sup>68</sup>.

If you follow Saint John Chrysostom’s advice and shut the backbiter’s mouth in this manner, he will either keep silence or praise the person he came to denigrate. If, on the contrary, you pretend not to notice, and if you do not have the courage to reproach him, you are acting with modesty, I admit; but this is inopportune, and both you and your neighbour will suffer as a consequence.

Saint Augustine, an exemplary bishop, detested backbiters so strongly that he posted the following words on the wall of his dining room as a warning to his guests:

Quisquis amat dictis absentum rodere famam,  
Hanc mensam vetitam noverit esse sibi

That is, “People who take pleasure in defaming the reputation of absentees are not welcome at this table”. An excellent maxim for your dining room! This bishop castigated the perverse habit which prevails in meetings, circles and banquets, of gathering information about those who are absent. How often have you heard people say, “He’s got his weak points, you know!... He’s certainly a remarkable person, but his behaviour is anything but moral... That preacher speaks divinely; too bad he doesn’t practice what he preaches... That man had every opportunity, but he never learned how to take advantage of them... That person is a veritable paragon of justice, but all he ever thinks about is his pocketbook — money is his only god”. Unfortunately...

Those who have the most laughable behaviour  
Are always the first to backbite others.

Thus they amuse themselves by making a sport out of detraction and biting their neighbour. That is why, wishing to banish it from his house, Saint Augustine always had someone read at his table, thereby feeding the soul while feeding the body.

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<sup>68</sup> Saint John Chrysostom, Homily 3, *Ad pop. Antioch.*



One day, however, relates Possadius in an eyewitness account, Saint Augustine had at his table several illustrious guests who forgot the holy bishop's maxim. Since they were talking too freely about their neighbour, he told them outright, "My lords and brothers, stop your conversation or leave this table. Otherwise, I shall have to retire to my room".

Saint John the Almsgiver, Patriarch of Alexandria, so remarkable for his charity, provides us with a similar example. As soon as he heard anyone backbiting, he would warn him or artfully turn the conversation in another direction. If the backbiter carried on, the patriarch would fall silent and jot down his name. After the person had left, he would give his chamberlain orders to deny that man entry in the future. Saint Jerome rightly observes, "Where there are no listeners, there are no backbiters: the combat will close for want of combatants".<sup>69</sup>

King Edmund of England held Bishop Dunstan in high esteem, admiring his virtue and learning alike, and he habitually consulted him in important matters. The king loved the vigour with which he defended justice.

The devil waxed exceedingly jealous over this state of affairs. Hoping to sunder the harmony of these two souls, he conspired with certain men who despised Dunstan, although they feigned friendship and deference. First they assailed the ears of the king, striving to blacken the bishop's reputation by crafty insinuation. Soon they began backbiting Dunstan openly and moving the king to hatred with sweet flattery, then denigrating the bishop without mercy. They succeeded so well with the credulous king that Dunstan's entry was forbidden in the royal court.

Several days later, the king went hunting in the forest. The wildwood was situated on a mountain rimmed with dreadful bluffs. From the very start of the hunt, the first sizeable prey was a handsome stag, worthy of the king's skill. As the king and his sons pursued it, the animal fled towards the cliff and leaped off, followed by the baying hounds. The king and his mount came upon the fatal precipice at full tilt.

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<sup>69</sup> Saint Jerome, *Ad Celant*.

Faced with sudden death, Edmund thought of Saint Dunstan and implored God to save his life in consideration of the holy bishop's innocence. Imminent danger often wakens lightning inspirations, and frequently the Lord answers with equally blinding speed. At that very moment, the king's horse was brought to an astonishing halt. The king returned to his castle at once. Speaking to the royal household with mingled joy and dread, he related the wonder that had just been wrought in his favour. "I am twice beholden for my life", he declared. "I owe it both to God and to His friend Dunstan".

King Edmund called for the bishop immediately and received him with great honour, asking his forgiveness for having believed the backbiters' words, and swearing faithful friendship to the end of his days.

This illustrious example shows us how those who lend an ear to backbiting must repair the reputation of others. You can find thousands and hundreds of thousands of backbiters, but where can you find a single person who will restore a reputation unjustly stolen?

III.

People who listen to backbiting can be classified in two different groups. First there are those who hear it reluctantly, and not without certain pangs of conscience. These people are guilty of nothing; they even deserve a reward from God, especially if they express their disapproval with unmistakable hints.

Others remain silent, however, letting no one see whether they agree or not with what is said. When they are blamed for this not very praiseworthy silence, they usually excuse themselves by saying, "I won't shut anyone's mouth. Let others say what they like, I wash my hands. I'm not responsible for criticising everything people say".

These pacifists are just cleverly fooling themselves. Do they mean that it does not displease them to hear someone outraging their neighbour's reputation and offending God? Let them know this: they commit a serious sin when they remain silent on hearing such words, especially if they have some authority over the offender. Not resisting error is approving it; not defending the truth when one is able, is oppressing it. If you are content to say nothing when you

hear ill spoken of others, people will hardly believe you do not keep bad company yourself.

Other people do not only listen to backbiters, they spur them on to continue their stories by their eagerness in hearing them. They say, “Finish relating the details of what you started saying about that person; I’m anxious to hear the truth. I had already heard something about it, but it was still a bit vague. Tell me everything!”.

Still others softly entice and incite backbiters, saying, “People are saying such things about you, and you remain silent? How strange!”. This provides a perfect occasion for the backbiter to freely give vent to all the bile that is in his heart. Those people are the guiltiest of all, for they take delight in the evil they hear spoken about others.

Thus, both the backbiter and his listener have got the devil in them, one in his mouth and the other in his ear.

Normally, people who are so credulous as to believe all they hear spoken in this manner will quickly manifest anger and impatience, heaping word upon word, insult upon insult, outrage upon outrage. From this stem unending arguments and enmities: the bonds that hold men together are broken, charity is snuffed out, sincere affection and mutual trust vanish. From this also stems an unbridled desire to do harm, urging us to reveal the weaknesses of others. Hidden beneath a cloak of kindness, we disguise vice with a semblance of honesty and start thinking that it is no longer vice.

Such is not the case, and these words of Saint Bernard will always be true: “Backbiters and their listeners are guilty of the same sin”.<sup>70</sup> When you speak ill of others, or even when you listen to someone backbiting, you should get just as angry with yourself as when someone else backbites you. The man who drinks poison counselled by an evil tongue will die. Therefore, let us teach backbiters these three lessons:

IV.

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<sup>70</sup> Saint Bernard, *De inter. Dom*, Chapter 42, and *Serm. De tripl. Custod.*

## Lesson I: Look at yourself and discover your own wretchedness.

Why waste your time with the affairs of others? Take care of your own instead. Whoever named you a reporter of the lives and deeds of others? Curious and absurd man, why do you set foot in other people's gardens? Find out what is going on in your own house instead, and say with La Fontaine:

Happy the man who stays at home,  
Occupied with governing his own desires.

You may have heard about the porbeagle, or white shark. When safe inside its nest, it draws its eyes into a sac; when it leaves, they reappear on its forehead. It is blind at home and clear-eyed outside. As Socrates once stated concerning an aged man:

He knows everything from afar,  
But he sees nothing nigh.

This occurs with many elderly people: show them an object close up, and they cannot see any details; draw it back and they see it better. Thus are many people shocked by the petty sins of others, whereas they are perfectly indulgent regarding their own serious faults. One might say:

The sovereign Maker  
Created us all beggars in the same way,  
Those of times past and those of today.  
For our own faults He made the pocket in the back,  
And the one in the front for others who slack.

So then, move the back pocket round in front. And if you examine it well, no doubt you will find the defect you are complaining about. All of life's woes stem from the fact that each person flatters himself, and makes himself as much an enemy of others as a selfish friend of himself. We pluck out the straw from our neighbour's eye, and we do not see the beam in our own. Like the eye, which does not see the defects of the cheek because it is so close, we are perfectly blind regarding our own weaknesses. Very clever in discerning the slightest imperfections in others, we walk right by our own like blind people, although they are so close we could touch them. And the more sensitive we are when someone speaks ill of us, the bolder we are and the

more pleasure we take in glutting ourselves on our neighbour's vices. We take delight in plunging our eyes and teeth into others' moral behaviour. "They devise a wicked scheme, and conceal the scheme they have devised".<sup>71</sup> The back pocket is for our own defects, and the front pocket for the defects of others. We do not see the pocket that lies behind our back.

Solomon speaks well of men of this calibre. "There is a group that is pure in its own eyes, yet is not purged of its filth",<sup>72</sup> he says. If an earthen pot were blackened with soot and looked in the mirror, it would not say to the smoked-up kettle, "Woe to you, you are all black!".

Christian law speaks in the same manner. When Jesus Christ said, "Let those who believe they are without sin cast the first stone against this woman accused of adultery",<sup>73</sup> no one dared to be the first. Christians, let us do likewise. If we look at what is going on inside ourself and take care of our own business, we will find no one who better deserves to have stones cast at him than ourself. But the crafty devil catches us one way or the other: either we commit sin ourself, or we accuse those who do. Saint John of the Ladder explains it thus: "The devil tempts us to commit sin; and when he does not succeed, he points scornfully at those who have fallen". We do not understand our task very well when we neglect our own nettle-choked garden and go to pull up weeds in someone else's flower bed. Look my friend, stay in your own garden! There are enough burdocks, tares and nettles to weed out right there. Take a hard look at yourself and you will no longer see defects in others. Saint Bernard says, "If you examine yourself well, you will never backbite others".<sup>74</sup>

## Lesson II: Change the subject.

If you are being chased by a mad bull, throw a coat over his head; while he is wrestling with the coat, run away as fast as you can. When you hear someone backbiting, the best thing you can do is throw a coat in his face — that is, confront his language by changing the subject. And it is not always

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<sup>71</sup> Ps 63:6

<sup>72</sup> Prov 30:12

<sup>73</sup> Jn 8:7

<sup>74</sup> Saint Bernard, *De inter. Dom*, Chapter 42

necessary to take great precautions and act with circumspection, either. Sometimes you can put a sudden halt to a conversation.

Thomas More, the glory of England, renowned for his holiness and learning alike, gave the finest example in everything. No matter where he was, as soon as he heard someone speaking rashly about his neighbour and insulting people who were absent, he would strive to change the conversation. “No matter what one may think”, he would say, “that house is exceedingly well built. Certainly, the one who constructed it has proven that he knew what he was doing”. Thus would he punish or disconcert backbiters.

Plutarch relates that Alcibiades, one of the wisest and greatest men of Ancient Greece, once learned that people were spreading unkind stories about him. He had the idea of replacing them with other stories which, if not better, were at least more innocent. Having recently purchased a magnificent dog, he cut off its tail and let it run rampant through the streets of the city. Some of his friends got upset over this and reproached this great man for doing such a ridiculous thing. “Don’t get angry”, said Alcibiades in his sweetest voice. “The only reason I did it was so that people could aim their malicious zeal at a petty brute. Let them talk about Alcibiades’ dog as much as they like, as long as Alcibiades himself can escape their teeth”. If a tiger kidnaps a little dog, just give it a mirror and it will quickly forget all about the dog.

Shrewd enough to realise how hard it is for a man in the public eye to escape evil tongues, Alcibiades offered the people of Athens an insignificant creature on which to exercise their petulance in a more harmless manner.

Men with sober tongues should imitate Alcibiades’ example in order to silence hissing backbiters. If you cannot interrupt the conversation, at least try and temper it. Presume the good intentions of those who are absent by saying, “We never really know all the extenuating circumstances. Rumour always swells things way out of proportion”. Thus you will dash cold water on an intemperate tongue and moderate the backbiter’s passion, and possibly even change the course of the conversation.

### Lesson III: Withdraw from backbiters' deadly conversations.

Freeze their tongue with a sudden departure, so at least they know that you disapprove of such language. That is Saint Jerome's advice: "If you hear someone speaking ill of another, cast him far from you like a serpent; so that, overcome by shame, he will learn to be silent regarding the actions of others".<sup>75</sup> He learned this from Saint Paul, who says, "I write to you not to associate with one who is called a brother, if he is immoral, or covetous, or an idolater or evil-tongued".<sup>76</sup>

Cassian relates having seen an elder called Machelus who had obtained a very singular grace from God: as long as people were talking about the things of God he would not feel sleepy, even if the conversation lasted night and day; but if, on the contrary, people were speaking useless words or beginning to backbite their neighbour, he would fall asleep at once.

Those who do not want to imitate this elder, who cannot fall asleep or do not want to, should at least show that they are Christians by indicating their displeasure with some sign. They should do this right at the start of the conversation, when a bucket of water will suffice to put the fire out. For you will have a hard time mastering the fire once it has become a conflagration. "The north wind drives away rain, as does a sad countenance a backbiting tongue".<sup>77</sup> And Saint Jerome adds, "if you listen to a backbiter with a happy look you encourage him to continue backbiting; he shakes the coals, and then you add the wood. If, on the contrary, you listen to him with a sad, unhappy look he will learn to spare his words when he sees that you are not listening to him willingly. If you do not do this, you show that you are a false brother of the one who is backbiting, or that you are a cowardly friend".

V.

My friends, by acting otherwise — by showing less care for others' reputation than for our own — we violate the law of Our Lord, who tells us to love our neighbour as ourself. The person who sets fire to his neighbour's house is sinful, but so is the man who warms himself by the heat of the burning

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<sup>75</sup> Saint Jerome, In Reg. Mon, Chapter 22

<sup>76</sup> I Cor 5:11

<sup>77</sup> Prov 25:23

house. If he is not an enemy, then let him carry some water to put out the fire. In the same way, we do harm not only by backbiting others, but also by not stopping those who backbite, encouraging them with praise and applause. A sincere friend not only avoids backbiting, but also does everything he can to bring it to a halt. A devoted brother hides his brother's dishonourable vices from others, revealing them only to those who are able to remedy them.

Apelles depicted King Antigone as a person with only one eye. However, he also disposed the king's portrait at an angle whereby his physical defects might be attributed to the painting, showing only that part of his face which could not be seen to disadvantage.<sup>78</sup>

Such are the portraits drawn by a truly Christian hand. It neglects anything vicious in the face of another and shows only whatever is worthy of being seen.

Plato imitated Apelles perfectly, not by hand or brush, but by his care in hiding the vices of others. Someone came to inform him that his disciple Xenocrates had been telling all sorts of malicious stories about him. Plato, careful to avoid believing this badly motivated report, replied, "It is highly improbable". Since the accuser insisted with every appearance of truth, Plato added, "I cannot believe that I am not loved by someone I love so much". It availed nothing for the accuser to swear that what he said was true. Not wanting to test whether the man was lying, Plato simply said, "Xenocrates would not have spoken thus unless he thought he were doing me a favour".<sup>79</sup>

That is how we should attenuate and cover the vices of others, instead of exaggerating and proclaiming them everywhere. Solomon advises us, "Do not give heed to every word that is spoken".<sup>80</sup> And Saint Bernard confirms what he wrote on this subject by saying, "Backbiters pour poison into the ears of those who listen to them".<sup>81</sup> Both the backbiter and his complacent listener commit sin. If a man with a perfidious tongue advises someone to swallow

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<sup>78</sup> Phil., Hist. Nat. lib, Book 35, Chapter 10

<sup>79</sup> *Valer.*, Book 4, Chapter 1.

<sup>80</sup> Eccl 7:22

<sup>81</sup> Saint Bernard, *De modo bene vivendi*, Chapters 17 and 37; *Serm. De Tripl.*



poison, that person will die. The backbiter furtively robs you of the virtue of charity, and he makes your fraternal love grow cold without your even being aware of it.

In order to arm himself against this trap, Emperor Constantine said that even if he saw the Head of Christianity commit an atrocious act, not only would he not reveal it, but he would cover it with his cloak. Let us do likewise. Let us keep a mutual watch over our reputations and flee even the shadow of backbiting like the plague, according to the formal exhortation of the great Apostle Saint James, “Brethren, do not speak against one another”,<sup>82</sup> for God will treat us as rigorously as we have treated others. The person who refuses to cover the weaknesses of others will see his own crimes come to the light of day. Do you want others to keep silence regarding your miseries? Then keep silence regarding theirs; put a lock over your mouth and a brake on your tongue. Praise everyone as much as you can. If you cannot, then abstain from condemning them. If you encounter only enormous vices and no virtues, say not a word. If others mention them, change the subject. If you consider it impolite to sharply interrupt the conversation of people older than you, then keep silence. If they ask you what you think about it, be indulgent and temper any excess in their actions by the mildness of your words. Mildness is never lacking to those who seek it.

If someone relates certain things you have witnessed, limit yourself to talking about human weakness, and celebrate the virtues of the man whose vices they expose. Say, “Even the greatest men have done things that need to be forgiven”. If they continue condemning your neighbour, see if there is not something praiseworthy in him; and instead of his defects, bring out his virtues, even if he is an enemy. It is surprising how such praise can help to calm hatred and heal wounded friendships. Even those who condemn you for it will secretly approve you and begin loving you for praising their enemy.

Before concluding this treatise on backbiting, which is a vice we can never sufficiently detest let us relate a memorable story:

Two people attached to religion by special bonds were close friends. Unfortunately, one of them had such a venomous tongue that he spared no

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<sup>82</sup> Jas 4:11

one in his attacks. When this man was laid low by a serious illness, his friend advised him to think about his salvation and do penance to expiate the sins of his life. But it was as if he were preaching to a deaf man. “Well then”, said the friend, “at least let us make a pact, a pact that will endure beyond the grave. If you die before I do, you will appear to me within a month unless God opposes the idea, and you will teach me the mysteries of the other life”.

To reward the constancy of his friend, the sick person promised he would do it; and God was not opposed. Some time after his death the backbiter emerged from hell all covered with flames and came to see his friend. Recognising his deceased friend at once, the man was seized with such trembling that he was unable to speak a word or even look upon the flaming ghost.

But the spirit spoke and said, “It is I, your friend, condemned to eternal hellfire. I was brought to the tribunal of the Sovereign Judge at the very moment of my death, and my accusers were all the people I had dishonoured by my tongue. Since I could neither deny nor excuse of what they accused me, the Judge — alas! thrice alas! — sentenced me to eternal damnation!”.<sup>83</sup>

If such torments are reserved for backbiters, Saint Augustine is certainly not wrong in saying, “When the devil cannot devour someone by leading him into evil, he attempts to defile his reputation in order to weigh him down beneath the outrages of men and the backbiting of evil tongues, and thus draw him into his clutches”.<sup>84</sup>

“Guard against profitless grumbling, and from calumny withhold your tongues; for a stealthy utterance does not go unpunished”.<sup>85</sup>

“Which of you desires life, and takes delight in prosperous ways? Keep your tongue from evil”,<sup>86</sup> and especially from backbiting. As much as you will have spared the reputation of others, so much will you spare both your own reputation and your own life.

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<sup>83</sup> Fr. John Major. S. J., *Theologia Specul. exempl*, p. 264.

<sup>84</sup> Saint Augustine, Epistle 137

<sup>85</sup> Wis 1:11

<sup>86</sup> Ps 33:13–14