

Honestly?

*“The eighth commandment forbids misrepresenting the truth in our relations with others. This moral prescription flows from (our) vocation to bear witness to (our) God who is the truth and wills the truth.”*¹

What colour is the truth?

People will sometimes confess to telling a “white lie”, however lies don’t really come in colours! The phrase “white lie” does appear in the dictionary and is defined as “a diplomatic or well-intentioned untruth”, but a lie is a lie no matter how diplomatic or well-intentioned. Politicians will often accuse one another of being “economical with the truth” which doesn’t imply that they have lied but that they haven’t necessarily told the whole truth – which is still dishonest and perhaps even deceitful.

Even though it may be fictional, we see so often in television plays and films that lies trip so easily off characters’ tongues – more easily than the truth a lot of the time – which serves only to portray casual lying as being the norm. The catechism says that “the *gravity* of a lie is measured against the nature of the truth it deforms, the circumstances involved, the intention of the one who lies, and the harm suffered by its victims.” (para 2484) However no lie is ever excusable: “Lying is the most direct offence against the truth...by its very nature, (it) is to be condemned.” (para’s 2483/86)

At its most basic level, just like swearing and using bad language, telling lies is an abuse of the gift of speech. More than that, however, it also involves something we don’t always consider and that is how lying affects other people, possibly even putting them at risk, leading them astray, deceived by the lies we have told. People sometimes use the word “fib”, which the dictionary defines as “an inconsequential lie” as if there are no consequences to telling lies. I’m sure we’ve all experienced being lied to and so we all know what that feels like. Sometimes it can be over something quite trivial in which case it probably causes us nothing more than a feeling of disappointment toward the person who told the lie. On the other hand the experience of being deliberately deceived, being taken advantage of and having our trust abused, can have very negative and long-lasting consequences.

The catechism refers to such consequences (or at least the lying that caused them) as an offence against justice and charity. Most priests regularly experience such “offences against charity” on the part of the very people who come asking *for* charity. The stories of those knocking on presbytery doors looking for hand-outs are legendary, every possible heartstring-tugging, hard

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Chapman 1994), para 2464

luck story you can imagine, we have heard them all. Sadly experience shows that, unlike in the days when such callers were genuinely in need (what we used to refer to as “tramps”), these days most are con artists to the point that, here in Whitby for example, the various church leaders have found it necessary to introduce a system of alerting one another by phone to callers doing the rounds.²

As I try to say to people in confession, to be known as someone who can be trusted with the truth is a very precious quality and, once lost, it can be very difficult to regain. If, sadly, we have given grounds for people to think we can't be trusted with the truth or to tell the truth, how can we persuade people to the contrary? – our efforts at persuasion may themselves not be trustworthy. We can probably only persuade by the example we then set and this can take a long time. Better to safeguard the quality in the first place.

In many cases telling a lie is probably a defensive reaction that happens before we can stop ourselves – which is a possible explanation, but not an excuse. We tell a lie in order to avoid the consequence of something we have done that was wrong, but now we have done two things wrong - the original action and then the lie to cover it up. The obvious, though possibly less pleasant, option is to tell the truth and accept the consequences of what we did, but that may take decision-making and some degree of courage and the lie can slip out more easily - again an explanation, not an excuse.

There may be situations in which we may feel it is justified to tell a “white lie”, for example in order to protect someone, a “well-intentioned untruth” as the dictionary puts it. But then we have to remember that no lie is ever justified and we may have to bear this in mind one or two stages earlier in our decision-making so as not to put ourselves in a situation where a lie results. The catechism cautions us that, in a given situation, “we must judge whether or not it is appropriate to reveal the truth to someone who asks for it.”(para 2488) But this means discerning the situation before we get into it. “The good and safety of others, respect for privacy, and the common good are sufficient reasons for being silent about what ought not to be known... No one is bound to reveal the truth to someone who does not have the right [or, we might say, the need] to know it.” (para 2489). Silence may be our only option, rather than telling a lie.

One of the things we must also think about is gossiping. The basic problem with gossip is that it usually involves talking about another person in their absence and, apart from being uncharitable, it may also involve either what the catechism calls “detraction” or “calumny”.³ A person is guilty of detraction

² All they want is money, usually for drugs or drink. You can offer to buy them food at the supermarket or to buy them a bus ticket to the family funeral they've told you about, but they will refuse. What they want is cash in hand for drink or drugs or whatever, and they will tell whatever story they have to, to con that out of you.

³ Both of these are discussed as offences against the truth and the eighth commandment – bearing false witness against our neighbour.

“who without objectively valid reason, discloses another’s faults and failings to persons who did not know them”, or of calumny “who, by remarks contrary to the truth, harms the reputation of others and gives occasion for false judgments concerning them.” (para 2477) The latter is easily put right because, as it says, calumny involves telling an untruth about someone and so we can hopefully persuade everyone whom we told that what we said was a lie.⁴ However we can never undo the harm we cause to someone by detraction given that what we said of the person was the truth. If we said we had lied that in itself would be a lie. “Detraction and calumny destroy the reputation and honour of one’s neighbour and everyone enjoys a natural right to the honour of his/her name and reputation and to respect” (para 2479) – no matter what we may know to be true about them.

Whatever happened to integrity(not to mention trust and confidentiality)?

It was Francis Bacon (1561-1626) who said that knowledge is power. The purpose of the childhood taunt: “I know a secret, I know a secret”, was to instil both jealousy and curiosity until we let the other person in on the secret. Some people are good at keeping secrets (to this day my mother won’t talk about what she did during the Second World War because she signed the Official Secrets Act at the time). Others are absolutely hopeless at keeping something to themselves that they have been told “in confidence”. The fact that they know something that others don’t eats away at them until they leak like a sieve.

The word “confidence” means that something is shared “in great trust” (*com-fidere*) – that something private is entrusted to another - and it’s that aspect of trust that is important. We know only too well from everyday examples involving butlers or housekeepers or private secretaries to the rich and famous that people can’t always be trusted to keep confidences or to respect another’s right to privacy. Media money talks and so do they. There is nothing, in fact, to stop them talking except the basic principles of trust and confidentiality, but neither one seems to mean anything anymore.

It’s one of the reasons why it can be difficult for people to accept – and trust – the *seal of confession*: that a priest is forbidden to reveal anything to anyone under any circumstance whatsoever that he has heard within the context of the sacrament. The fact that he is forbidden under threat of excommunication doesn’t seem to help people’s sense of trust in that most sacred of confidences. They think that most people can’t keep a secret - or, perhaps, they know that they can’t - and therefore they don’t accept that a priest can and will... and yet he does. Before God he has to.

⁴ Something we are obliged to do in conscience. Every offence committed against justice and truth entails the duty of reparation (para 2487).

In the normal circumstances of everyday life, experience seems to show that there isn't a lot of integrity around these days. Defined as "strict adherence to a code of moral values or other standards; complete sincerity or honesty", it's the glue of integrity that holds so many facets of our society together. There isn't actually anything – nothing physical that is - to stop us from acting in a way that lacks integrity. Integrity is governed by internal principles and it is the strength of those principles, and the degree to which they are governed by honesty and trust, that will influence our actions. If someone tells us a secret or tells us something in strict confidence⁵, how do we handle that knowledge? Does knowledge become power? Does the fact that we know something that someone else doesn't become too much for us to handle, or do we have sufficient principle and self-discipline to maintain the confidentiality and so justify the trust that has been placed in us? If we can't, then it's dishonest of us to pretend otherwise.

Everything comes back to honesty and whether we can be trusted – whether with the truth or with anything else. "It is in accordance with their dignity that all people are both impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth once they come to know it and direct their whole lives in accordance with the demands of truth."⁶

Honestly? Yes, honestly.

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⁵ And it is never an excuse to pass on that knowledge to someone else "in strictest confidence".

⁶ para 2467 of the catechism