

Gossip

The dictionary defines gossip as: *often groundless rumour, usually of a personal or sensational nature*, and a gossip as: *a person who habitually talks about other people and their private affairs, especially in a disparaging way*.

Somewhat amazingly the catechism doesn't mention gossiping per se, and I say "somewhat amazingly" because I really would have expected it to come up at some point in the Church's teaching on what is considered a sin against charity and a sin against at least one of the commandments, the eighth, which deals with bearing false witness and respect for the truth. Those who think that gossiping is therefore vindicated are in for a bit of a disappointment, however, because it's the content and purpose of gossip that may make it sinful.

What the catechism does say is: *charity and respect for the truth should dictate the response to every request for information or communication. 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*,¹ a statement that contains all sorts of considerations that we really need to look at in more detail.

One of the first things we have to say about gossiping is that it usually involves knowledge that the "gossiper" has and the "gossipee" doesn't and knowledge is power. We know something other people don't know and in our own minds that gives us status and the power that comes from being in a position to decide whether we will share that knowledge with them or not. Already that can be verging on a sin of pride, or perhaps a sin against humility, because of the sense of self-importance we have adopted. The paragraph from the catechism refers to our *response to a request for information or communication*, but no one is necessarily making such a request. We create the request by dangling a carrot in front of them, hinting at this great something that we know and (we hope) they don't, but which are willing to divulge if they make it worth our while by indulging our ego.

At this point we need to mention a few things that we ought to be considering before the gossiping begins, namely: prudence, integrity, respect, trust, a person's right to privacy and, finally, self-control.

Prudence means exercising judgment, deciding whether this is something we should even be doing in the first place. From a Christian morals point of view, what is the gossip about? If, as the dictionary definition says, it involves talking about other people, pointing out their faults and failings, criticising something they have done or said, then that will involve us in at least a sin against charity, but it may also involve calumny or detraction which both involve taking away a person's good name – which everyone has a right to – and that can involve a sin against the eighth commandment. We are also being judgmental when we decide we don't really care what damage we do them.

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, para 2489.

If, on the other hand, the gossip is about *something* rather than *someone*, is it any of our business? Should we be talking about it or spreading it around? In what way might it involve, or reflect on, someone else? What about their right to privacy? If we were in their position, would we be happy with such gossiping going on and other people knowing our business? We mentioned integrity – a personal quality that calls us to act according to certain moral standards, most importantly demonstrating our trustworthiness, that we can be trusted with the truth, trusted to keep that knowledge to ourselves. It also involves a deep respect for other people which in turn lies at the heart of Christian charity.

What holds all of these things together and protects them is the essential quality of self-control. Knowledge is power, but so what? Just because we know something doesn't mean we have to tell someone else. It may be something we heard from a gossip in which case how reliable is that information anyway and might it be totally irresponsible to be a part of the process of passing it on? It could be sinful for us to do so because we would then be responsible for any hurt or harm that might result regardless of how we came by that information. And if it is something that someone has told us in confidence, or which our right judgment tells us should be treated as confidential, then we could be guilty of any number of sins against trust and honesty. In addition, the damage we cause could be difficult, or even impossible, to put right because of the truth that has been exposed and the trust that has been broken.

The aspect of self-control is also bound up with discretion – exercising prudence and wise judgment, keeping another's secrets, being trustworthy. It can be very difficult to be in possession of knowledge that must remain confidential. Confidentiality doesn't seem to mean very much anymore and confidences can be sold to the highest bidder, a sad reflection on our society and our understanding and acceptance of privacy and respect. We can't contribute to that process of compromise.

So let's say we hear something about someone or learn about a situation that others may not be aware of. How did we come by that information? How reliable is it? Were we told in confidence or is it rumour or gossip? What do we intend to do with what we know? Is it really something we ought to be telling others? What makes us think we have a right to be a purveyor of such information? More importantly, why is this any of our business anyway? It doesn't matter how we dress it up, gossiping is gossiping – no one needs to know what we know.

We said that knowledge is power, but the *real* power is to be found in breaking the chain by not contributing to gossip in the first place. We shouldn't be party to gossiping and we should have the courage to say so. We should politely (or, if necessary, not so politely) stop the conversation or walk away the minute gossiping begins. It may not be an easy thing to do, but it's the right thing to do and that's what's important.

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