

QUESTION 74

Gossiping

Next we have to consider gossiping or invidious whispering (*susurratio*). And on this topic there are two questions: (1) Is gossiping a sin distinct from detraction? (2) Is gossiping a more serious sin than detraction?

Article 1

Is gossiping or invidious whispering a sin distinct from detraction?

It seems that gossiping or invidious whispering (*susurratio*) is not a sin distinct from detraction (*detractio*):

Objection 1: In *Etymologia* Isidore says, “One is called a whisperer (*susurro*) from the sound of the word. For he speaks in someone’s ear (*auris*) rather than to his face, in order to detract (*detrahendo*).” But it belongs to detraction to speak about someone else by detracting him. Therefore, gossiping or whispering is not a sin distinct from detraction.

Objection 2: Leviticus 19:16 says, “You shall not be an accuser (*criminator*) or a whisperer (*susurro*) among the people.” But an accuser seems to be the same thing as a detractor. Therefore, gossiping or whispering does not differ from detraction.

Objection 3: Ecclesiasticus 28:15 says, “The whisperer (*susurro*) and the double-tongued man (*bilinguis*) are accursed.” But a double-tongued man seems to be the same thing as a detractor, since it belongs to the detractor to speak with two tongues, viz., with one tongue in the other’s absence and a different tongue in his presence. Therefore, the whisperer is the same as the detractor.

But contrary to this: A Gloss on Romans 1:29 (“... whisperers, detractors ...”) says, “Whisperers, who plant discord among friends; detractors, who deny or minimize the good points of others.”

I respond: Gossiping and detraction agree in their subject matter and also in their form or mode of speaking, since both say bad things about one’s neighbor in a furtive manner. Because of this similarity, the one is sometimes used for the other; hence, a Gloss on Ecclesiasticus 5:16 (“Do not be called a whisperer”) says, “... i.e., a detractor.”

However, they do differ in their aims (*differunt autem in fine*). A detractor intends to denigrate his neighbor’s reputation, and so he mainly proffers those bad points of his neighbor’s that his neighbor can be defamed by or at least have his reputation diminished by. By contrast, the gossipier intends to sever a friendship; this is clear from the Gloss quoted above and from what Proverbs 26:20 says, “When the gossipier is taken away, contentions die down.” And so the gossipier proffers about his neighbor the sort of bad points that can agitate the hearer’s mind against him—this according to Ecclesiasticus 28:11 (“The sinful man troubles friends and introduces enmity among those who are at peace”).

Reply to objection 1: Insofar as the whisperer speaks badly of another, he is said to engage in detraction. However, he differs from a detractor by virtue of the fact that he intends not simply to speak badly of someone, but to say anything that can agitate the mind of one individual against another—even if it is something good absolutely speaking and yet appears bad in the sense that it displeases the one he says it to.

Reply to objection 2: An accuser (*criminator*) differs from both a gossipier and a detractor. For an accuser is one who publicly charges others with crimes, either by making an accusation against them or by reproaching them (*vel accusando vel conviciando*), and neither of these pertain to the detractor or to the whisperer.

Reply to objection 3: A whisperer or gossipier is properly said to be ‘double-tongued’. For since a friendship is between two individuals, the gossipier tries to break up the friendship from both sides and so he uses two tongues for the two individuals, telling each what is bad about the other. This is why

Ecclesiasticus 28:15 says, “The whisperer (*susurro*) and the double-tongued man (*bilinguis*) are accursed,” and why it adds, “They trouble many who are at peace.”

Article 2

Is detraction a more serious sin than gossiping?

It seems that detraction is a more serious sin than gossiping:

Objection 1: Sins of the mouth consist in someone’s saying bad things. But a detractor says things that are bad *absolutely speaking* about his neighbor, since it is because of such things that infamy arises or that one’s reputation is diminished. By contrast, a gossip does not care about anything but bad *appearances*, i.e., things that displease the hearer. Therefore, detraction is a more serious sin than gossiping.

Objection 2: If one takes away someone’s reputation, then he takes away not just one friend, but many friends, since everyone avoids friendship with infamous persons. Hence, 2 Paralipomenon 19:2 says against some individual, “You are joined in friendship with those who hate the Lord.” By contrast, gossiping takes away just a single friend. Therefore, detraction is a more serious sin than gossiping.

Objection 3: James 4:11 says, “Whoever detracts his brother detracts the Law and, as a result, detracts God, who is the Lawgiver. And so the sin of detraction seems to be a sin against God, which, as was established above (q. 20, a. 3), is the most serious sort of sin. By contrast, gossiping is a sin against one’s neighbor. Therefore, the sin of detraction is a more serious sin than the sin of gossiping.

But contrary to this: Ecclesiasticus 5:17 says, “... and an evil mark of disgrace is on the double-tongued man, but there is hatred, enmity, and vilification for the gossip.”

I respond: As was explained above (q. 73, a. 3), a sin against one’s neighbor is more serious to the extent that it inflicts a greater harm on the neighbor, and the harm is greater to the extent that a greater good is taken away. Friends are preeminent among all the other exterior goods, since, as is clear from the Philosopher in *Ethics* 8, no one could live without friends. Hence, Ecclesiasticus 6 says, “There is nothing to compare with a faithful friend.” For even the best sort of reputation, which is taken away by detraction, is necessary mainly in order for a man to be fit for friendship.

And so gossiping is a greater sin than detraction—and a greater sin than vilification as well—because, as the Philosopher says in *Ethics* 8, “A friend is better than honor, and being loved is better than being honored.”

Reply to objection 1: The species and seriousness of a sin has to do more with its end than with its material object. And so by reason of its end gossiping is more serious, even though a detractor sometimes says worse things.

Reply to objection 2: A good reputation (*fama*) is a disposition for friendship, and a bad reputation (*infamia*) is a disposition for enmity. Now a disposition falls short of that for which it is a disposition. And so one who acts to bring about something that is a disposition for enmity sins less than one who acts directly to induce enmity.

Reply to objection 3: Someone who detracts his brother seems to detract the law to the extent that he disdains the precept concerning love of one’s neighbor; someone who tries to shatter a friendship acts directly against this precept. Hence, it is the latter sin that is directed against God in a special way, since, as 1 John 4:8 says, “God is love.” And because of this Proverbs 6:16 says, “Six things there are that the Lord hates, and the seventh his soul detests.” And verse 17 posits as the seventh thing “he who sows discord among his brothers.”