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## THE MORALITY OF LANGUAGE

What are words? And how do we use them? Either words mean something or they mean nothing. If they mean nothing then we can use them arbitrarily, capriciously, whimsically. If they mean something, then we should use them as they are.

Used arbitrarily, words have no meaning or relevance or consequence. They simply come forth, mere expressions of the will that forms them, uttered into thin air, or scratched upon a piece of paper, to be for a moment and then to pass away. It matters not what is said or how it is said or why. If words mean nothing, then their use is less than a footprint in the sand, which the tide covers and smoothes away.

But if words are something, then we are faced with the fact that they convey meaning. As Fr. Ralston used to say, "Words mean what they say." And their use has relevance and consequence.

It was St. Augustine, following Plato and Aristotle, who said that words are signs, images of what is thought. As signs, words may be written or spoken. They may have different sounds and different forms, but their meaning as signs is to convey what is thought, the notion, the idea. As such words become the precious vehicle of our communication.

We find words at the heart of our Religion. Indeed at the very center we find The Word. Jesus Christ is the Eternal Word, the only begotten Son of the Father, "begotten of his Father before all worlds," the Word which utters all that the Father is. And so St. Thomas Aquinas, following St. Paul and the author of Hebrews, calls him the Divine Image - all that the Father is in nature, but begotten as the Son and therefore distinct.

And so at the very center of our Religion, in the Godhead, is the Word. He is the Word through whom all things are made, all things conceived and spoken. And because we ourselves are made in the image of God, in the image of the Trinity, we are made to live in the Word. At the center of our Religion is the reality and substance of the Word, first in God and then in us. The word has an ontological meaning in the most profound sense.

And so our life, as the image of God, is always concerned with the life of knowledge and the articulation of things known. And once things are known, then they can be loved. Unless one has an inkling of

something, unless one knows something at least just a little, that thing cannot be loved. Let me give a simple example.

Suppose I say "I love it!" Most probably you will ask what it is. And then I will tell you, if I want you to know. Suppose you ask what it is I love, and I reply, "I love breakfast!" which I do. And then you ask what I have for breakfast. And I answer that my favorite breakfast must include at least coffee, eggs, bacon, grits, and biscuits. Then you have a notion of what it actually is that I love. Now suppose you declare that, for breakfast, you like none of the things I like, and that your favorite breakfast is yogurt, granola, and orange juice without the pulp. Well, at that point we have had some communication. We know what we prefer for breakfast. You have an immediate notion of what it is that I love. And I know what you prefer for breakfast and wonder..

But that is only a mechanical example. The fact is that we love only certain things that we know, and we articulate what we know and love through the signs of language.

And herein is the problem. It concerns the morality of language. What we know and signify by spoken words, or written words, or various signs, may be mistaken. We may have misunderstood and the result is a mistaken communication. Our loves then may be misdirected. Or worse, we may take what we know and manipulate it, bend and distort it, magnify and embellish it, for our own selfish purposes and impure motives. In this sense, language becomes a fallible instrument at best and a tool of pride at worst. It is an indisputable fact that what we say is invariably attached to our will. If our language is said with the intention of charity, then it is used properly, to uphold and support, to build up and to forgive, and to love. But all too often our language is not that.

All too often language becomes the instrument of our meanness, and by meanness I do not imply ugliness so much as smallness. It is the whisper, the innuendo, the parenthetical remark, the "I heard" that becomes "That is all that I am going to say." It is the "private conversation between friends" that is really intended as malicious gossip and is by intent slanderous, meant actually to defame and injure. It is often said under the pretence of concern while the parties conversing know full well that the dagger has been drawn and used quickly. It is subversive, pernicious, and damnable.

The truth is that in our fallen world, and even in the church, language has suffered the violence of an evil will. What was meant to convey the good, the true, and the beautiful, is the weapon of evil, what is false witness, and down right ugly.

This is why our Lord took our speech seriously. Jesus told us to refrain from swearing and trying to legitimize our pledges. A simple yes or no would suffice. He said that our words would be brought up in the judgment and that by them we shall be justified or condemned. And he prayed that his disciples would be sanctified in the truth which is the word of God.

St. Paul pleads for the same thing, that we would be slow to speak and slow to wrath, that our speech would always be seasoned with grace knowing how to respond to each person and edifying to those who hear. As Christians, as those who are made in the image of God, and

who live in and by and with the Divine Image himself, we are to speak the truth in love.

And finally, St. James concurs. The tongue sets on fire the course of nature and is set on fire of hell. It is an unruly evil full of deadly poison. With it we bless God and curse men who are made in God's image. St. James concludes, "My brethren, these things ought not to be."

So how do we do away with such an evil? It is not easy, but by grace we can begin. How do we do away with it? Stop it. It is that simple. Stop it. And turn our heart to praise.

**The Rev'd Dr. Michael L. Carreker**

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