

## QUESTION 73

### Detraction

Next we have to consider detraction (*detractio*). And on this topic there are four questions: (1) What is detraction? (2) Is detraction a mortal sin? (3) How does it compare to other sins? (4) Does someone commit a sin by listening to a detraction?

#### Article 1

##### Is detraction the denigration of someone else's reputation by furtive words?

It seems that detraction is not, as some have defined it, 'the denigration of someone else's reputation by furtive words (*denigratio alienae famae per occulta verba*)':

**Objection 1:** *Furtive (occultum)* and *open (manifestum)* are circumstances that do not constitute the species of a sin, since it is incidental that a sin should be known about by many or by few. But what does not constitute the species of a sin does not belong to the nature (*ratio*) of that sin and should not be placed in its definition (*definitio*). Therefore, it does not belong to the nature of detraction that it is done by means of furtive words.

**Objection 2:** Public knowledge (*publica notitia*) is relevant to the nature of a reputation (*ad rationem famae pertinet publica notitia*). Therefore, if someone's reputation were denigrated by detraction, then this could have been done only by words spoken in public (*in manifesto*) and not by furtive words.

**Objection 3:** Someone 'detracts' when he 'subtracts from' or 'diminishes' something that exists. But at times an individual's reputation is denigrated even if nothing is subtracted from the truth, e.g., when someone spreads news about that individual's real crimes. Therefore, not every instance of denigration counts as a detraction.

**But contrary to this:** Ecclesiastes 10:11 says, "If a serpent bites in silence, he is no worse than someone who detracts in secret." Therefore, to detract is to 'bite' someone's reputation furtively.

**I respond:** Just as there are two ways in which one individual harms another by *deeds*, viz., (a) *openly (manifeste)*, as with robbery (*rapina*) or any sort of inflicted violence (*quacumque violentia illata*), and (b) *furtively (occulte)*, as with theft and surreptitious beatings (*dolosa percussio*), so, too, there are two ways in which one individual wounds another by *words*, (a) *in public (in manifesto)*, and this, as has been explained (q. 72), is done through vilification, and (b) *furtively*, and this is done through detraction.

Now by the fact that one individual speaks openly against another, it is apparent that he thinks little of him, and so by that very fact the man is dishonored; and this is why vilification brings a loss of honor to the one against whom it is spoken.

By contrast, someone who speaks furtively against another individual appears to respect him rather than to think little of him. Hence, he directly inflicts a loss on his reputation (*fama*) rather than on his honor (*honor*). For just by the very fact that he speaks words of this sort furtively, he makes those who are listening to him form a bad opinion of the individual against whom he is speaking. For the detractor seems to intend, and aims at, having his words believed.

Hence, it is clear that detraction differs from vilification in two ways:

First, as regards the *way of speaking the words*, since the vilifier speaks against someone *openly*, whereas the detractor speaks against him *furtively*.

Second, as regards *the intended end, i.e., the harm to be inflicted*, since the vilifier diminishes someone's *honor*, whereas the detractor diminishes his *reputation*.

**Reply to objection 1:** In the case of involuntary exchanges—which is what all the harms inflicted on one's neighbor by word or deed amount to—*furtive* and *open* diversify the kinds of sin, since, as was

explained above (q. 66, a. 4), the nature of what is involuntary through violence is different from the nature of what is involuntary through ignorance.

**Reply to objection 2:** Words of detraction are called *furtive* not absolutely speaking, but relative to the individual about whom they are spoken, since they are spoken when he is absent and does not know about them (*eo absente et ignorante dicuntur*). By contrast, the vilifier speaks against a man face-to-face (*in faciem contra hominem loquitur*).

Hence, if someone speaks badly of another individual in front of many people when the individual himself is absent, it is *detraction*, whereas if he does this when that individual alone is present, it is *vilification*. Still, even if he speaks badly to just one individual about someone who is absent, he damages his reputation—not totally, but partially.

**Reply to objection 3:** Someone is said to engage in detraction not because he diminishes the truth, but because he diminishes the other individual’s reputation. This sometimes happens *directly* and sometimes *indirectly*:

*Directly*, in four ways: (a) when he attributes something false to the other individual; (b) when he exaggerates the sin by his words; (c) when he reveals something hidden; and (d) when he claims that something that is good was done with a bad intention.

*Indirectly*, either (a) by denying something good about the other, or by maliciously remaining silent.

## Article 2

### Is detraction a mortal sin?

It seems that detraction is not a mortal sin:

**Objection 1:** No act of virtue is a mortal sin. But revealing a hidden sin, which, as has been explained (a. 1), pertains to detraction, is an act of virtue, either (a) an act of *charity*, as when someone denounces his brother’s sin while intending his improvement, or (b) an act of *justice*, as when someone accuses his brother. Therefore, detraction is not a mortal sin.

**Objection 2:** A Gloss on Proverbs 24:21 (“Have nothing to do with detractors”) says, “The whole human race is in peril because of this vice.” But no mortal sin is found in the whole human race, since many abstain from mortal sin, whereas venial sins are found in everyone. Therefore, detraction is a venial sin.

**Objection 3:** In his homily *De Igne Purgatorii* Augustine claims it to be “among the small sins when we speak badly of another easily or with temerity”—which pertains to detraction. Therefore, detraction is a venial sin.

**But contrary to this:** Romans 1:30 says, “... detractors, who are hateful to God ...,” and this is added, says a Gloss, “lest detraction be thought a slight sin because it consists in words.”

**I respond:** As was explained above (q. 72, a. 2), sins involving words are to be judged especially on the basis of the speaker’s intention.

Now detraction is by its nature ordered toward damaging someone’s reputation. Hence, speaking *per se*, the one who engages in detraction is the one who speaks against an individual when that individual is absent, in order to damage his reputation. But diminishing someone’s reputation is very grave, since among temporal possessions an individual’s reputation seems to be very precious, and by having it damaged a man is prevented from doing many things well. For this reason Ecclesiasticus 41:15 says, “Take care of your good name. For this will remain with you longer than a thousand great and precious treasures.” And so detraction is in its own right (*per se loquendo*) a mortal sin.

However, it sometimes happens that (a) one speaks certain words by which an individual’s

reputation is damaged but that (b) he intends something else and not this. Now this counts as detraction only materially and, as it were, *per accidens*, and not *per se* and formally. And if it is for the sake of something good or necessary that someone utters words by which someone else's reputation is diminished, then, as long as the right circumstances are preserved, this is not a sin and cannot be called detraction. On the other hand, if he utters such words out of light-heartedness (*ex animi levitate*) or for the sake of something unnecessary, then this is not a mortal sin—unless, perhaps, the words he utters are so grave that he damages someone's reputation in an extraordinary way (*notabiliter famam alicuius laedet*), and especially in matters that have to do with latter's uprightness of life, since this has the nature of a mortal sin by the very genus of the words. And one is obligated to make restitution for a reputation, just as one must make restitution for any possession that has been taken away, in the manner that was explained above when we were talking about restitution (q. 62, a. 2).

**Reply to objection 1:** As has been explained, it is not detraction to reveal someone's hidden sin by denouncing him for the sake of his improvement or by accusing him for the sake of the good of public justice.

**Reply to objection 2:** The Gloss in question does not say that detraction is found in "*the whole*" human race, but instead adds "*almost*."

It makes this claim because (a) "the number of fools is infinite" (Ecclesiastes 1:15) and there are few who walk along the way of salvation (cf. Matthew 7:13-14), and also because (b) there are few individuals or none at all who do not sometimes say something light-heartedly that results in someone else's reputation being harmed in some aspect or in a slight way, since as James 3:2 says, "If there is any man who does not offend with his words, then he is a perfect man."

**Reply to objection 3:** Augustine is talking about cases in which someone says something slightly bad about another, not with the intention of harming him but light-heartedly or by a slip of the tongue.

### Article 3

#### Is detraction more serious than all the other sins that are committed against one's neighbor?

It seems that detraction is more serious than all the other sins that are committed against one's neighbor:

**Objection 1:** A Gloss on Psalm 108:4 ("Instead of loving me, they detracted me") says, "Those who engage in detraction against Christ in His members, because they kill the souls of future believers, do more damage than those who have destroyed the flesh, which is soon to rise." From this it is apparent that detraction is a more serious sin than homicide, to the extent that killing the soul is more serious than killing the body. But homicide is more serious than all the rest of the sins that are committed against one's neighbor. Therefore, detraction is the most serious, absolutely speaking, of all the sins that are committed against one's neighbor.

**Objection 2:** Detraction seems to be a more serious sin than vilification, since a man is able to repel a vilification but not a hidden detraction. But vilification seems to be a greater sin than adultery, because adultery unites two individuals in one flesh, whereas vilification divides those who were united into many. Therefore, detraction is a greater sin than adultery, which still has a great seriousness among the other sins that are directed against one's neighbor.

**Objection 3:** As is clear from Gregory in *Moralia* 31, vilification arises from anger, whereas detraction arises from envy. But envy is a greater sin than anger. Therefore, detraction is likewise a greater sin than vilification. And so the same conclusion as before follows.

**Objection 4:** A sin is more serious to the extent that it induces a more serious defect. But

detraction induces the greatest defect of all, viz., the blinding of the mind. For Gregory says, “What do detractors do other than blow on the dust and get dirt in their own eyes, so that they see less of the truth?” Therefore, detraction is the most serious of the sins that are committed against one’s neighbor.

**But contrary to this:** To sin by a deed is more serious than to sin by a word. But detraction is a sin involving words, whereas adultery, homicide, and theft are sins involving deeds. Therefore, detraction is not more serious than the other sins against one’s neighbor.

**I respond:** Sins that are committed against one’s neighbor have to be weighed in their own right (*per se*) according to the harms that they inflict on the neighbor, since it is because of this that they have the nature of a sin (*rationem culpae*). And the harm is greater to the extent that a greater good is lost.

Now there are three types of human good (*bonum hominis*), viz., the *good of the soul* (*bonum animae*), the *good of the body* (*bonum corporis*), and the *good of exterior possessions* (*bonum exteriorum rerum*). The good of the soul, which is the greatest, cannot be taken away from an individual by anyone else except as an occasional cause (*nisi occasionaliter*)—e.g., by evil persuasion, which does not impose necessity—whereas the other two types of good, viz., the good of the body and the good of exterior possessions, can be taken away from an individual against his will by someone else (*possunt ab alio violenter auferri*).

Now since the good of the body is more important than the good of exterior possessions, the sins by which harms are inflicted on the body are more serious than the sins by which harm is inflicted on exterior possessions. Hence, the most serious of the sins committed against one’s neighbor is *homicide*, by which the life of a neighbor who is already actually existing is taken away; after that, there is *adultery*, which is contrary to the appropriate ordering of human generation, through which there is an entrance into life.

Next come the exterior goods. Among them, reputation (*fama*) is more important than wealth (*divitiae*) because it is closer to the spiritual goods. Hence, Proverbs 22:1 says, “A good name is better than a multitude of riches.” And so by its genus *detractio* is a greater sin than *theft*, though a lesser sin than *homicide* or *adultery*. However, there can be a different order because of aggravating or extenuating circumstances (*propter circumstantias aggravantes vel diminuentes*).

On the other hand, the incidental (*per accidens*) seriousness of a sin has to do with the sinner, who sins more grievously if he sins with deliberation than if he sins out of weakness or carelessness (*ex infirmitate vel incautela*). And on this score sins of speech are somewhat less serious (*habent aliquam levitatem*) because they proceed easily from slips of the tongue without much premeditation.

**Reply to objection 1:** Those who engage in detraction against Christ and impede the faith of His members derogate His divinity, on which the Faith depends. Hence, this is blasphemy and not simple detraction.

**Reply to objection 2:** Vilification is a more serious sin than detraction insofar as it harbors a greater contempt for one’s neighbor—in the same way that, as was explained above (q. 66, a. 9), robbery is a more serious sin than theft.

However, vilification is not a more serious sin than adultery, since the seriousness of adultery is calculated not on the basis of the conjoining of the bodies, but on the basis of the disordering of human generation.

Now the vilifier is not a sufficient cause of enmity in another individual; instead, he divides those who are united only as an occasional cause (*occasionaliter*), viz., insofar as, by presenting someone’s bad points, he separates others, to the extent that it is within his power, from friendship with that individual—even though they are not forced to this by his words. In the same way, a detractor is a murderer as an occasional cause, viz., insofar as by his words he provides someone else with an occasion to hate or disdain his neighbor. It is because of this that it says in *Epistola Clementis* that detractors are murderers, viz., as occasional causes, since, as 1 John 3:15 says, “He who hates his brother is a murderer.”

**Reply to objection 3:** As the Philosopher points out in *Rhetoric* 2, anger seeks to inflict vengeance openly, and so detraction, which is hidden, is not a child of anger in the way that vilification is. Rather, it is a child of envy, tries in some way or other to diminish the glory of one's neighbor.

However, it does not follow from this that detraction is more grievous than vilification, since a greater sin can arise from a lesser vice, in the way that homicide and blasphemy are begotten by anger. For the origin of a sin has to do with one's inclination toward the end, which concerns the 'turning-toward' (*est ex parte conversionis*), whereas the seriousness of a sin has rather to do with the 'turning-away' (*ex parte aversionis*).

**Reply to objection 4:** Since, as Proverbs 15:23 says, "A man rejoices in the word of his own mouth," someone who engages in detraction begins more and more to love and believe what he says—and, as a result, more and more to hate his neighbor and so more and more to recede from cognition of the truth. However, that effect can likewise follow from other sins involving hatred of one's neighbor.

#### Article 4

##### Does a listener who puts up with someone engaging in detraction commit a serious sin?

It seems that a listener who puts up with someone engaging in detraction does not commit a serious sin (*audiens qui tolerat detrahentem non graviter peccet*):

**Objection 1:** No one is obligated more to someone else than to himself. But it is praiseworthy if a man patiently puts up with his own detractors; for in *Super Ezechiel*, homily 9, Gregory says, "Just as we should not, by our curiosity, stimulate the tongues of detractors, lest they perish, so, too, we should tolerate those tongues with equanimity once they have been stimulated by their own malice, in order that our merit might increase." Therefore, one does not sin by not resisting other people's detractions.

**Objection 2:** Ecclesiasticus 4:30 says, "Do not contradict the word of truth in any way." But as was explained above (a. 1), one sometimes engages in detraction by speaking words of truth. Therefore, it seems that a man is not always obligated to resist detractions.

**Objection 3:** No one should impede what is advantageous for others. But detraction is frequently advantageous for those against whom a detraction is directed. For Pope Pius says, "Sometimes detraction is aroused against good men, with the result that the detraction makes humble those whom either the adulation of their families or the favor of others had exalted to the heights." Therefore, one should not hinder detractions.

**But contrary to this:** Jerome says, "Beware against having a prurient tongue or prurient ears, either by detracting others or by listening to those who detract others."

**I respond:** According to the Apostle in Romans 1:32, "It is not only those who commit the sins that are worthy of death, but also those who consent to those who commit the sins." This can happen in two ways: (a) *directly*, viz., when someone induces someone else to sin or is such that the sin pleases him, and (b) *indirectly*, viz., when someone does not resist the sin even though he is able to resist it; and this sometimes happens not because the sin pleases him, but because of some sort of human fear.

Now one should reply that if someone listens to detractions without resisting, it seems that he is consenting to the detractor, and so he becomes a participant in his sin. And if he induces him to engage in the detraction—or, at least, if the detraction pleases him because of his hatred for the individual against whom the detraction is directed—then he sins no less than the detractor, and sometimes more. Hence, Bernard says, "It is not easy for me to say which is more damnable: to detract or to listen to the detractor."

On the other hand, if the sin does not please him but he fails to repel the detractor because of fear

or negligence or even a certain sort of shame, then he does, to be sure, sin, but he sins much less than the detractor, and in most cases this is a venial sin. Still, sometimes it can be a mortal sin, either (a) because it is incumbent upon him in light of his position (*ex officio*) to correct the detractor, or (b) because of some danger that follows upon the detraction or (c) because of the source [of his omission], given that, as was established above (q. 19, a. 3), human fear can sometimes be a mortal sin.

**Reply to objection 1:** No one hears detractions against himself, since, as has been explained (a. 1), bad things that are said about someone who is listening are, properly speaking, vilifications and not detractions.

Still, detractions made against someone can come to his notice if he is told about them by others. And then it is up to his own judgment whether to put up with a loss of reputation—unless, as was explained above, this leads to danger for others. And so one can commend his patience, in that he puts up patiently with detractions against himself.

By contrast, it is not up to his own judgment whether to put up with a loss to someone else's reputation. And so it turns into a sin for him if he does not resist when he is able to resist—for the same reason that one is obligated, as Deuteronomy 22:4 commands, to lift up someone else's ass that is lying prone under its burden.

**Reply to objection 2:** It is not always the case that someone should resist a detractor by disputing with him about falsehood, especially if he knows that what is being said is true. Rather, he should counter (a) by pointing out that the detractor sins by engaging in detraction against his brother, or at least (b) by showing with a frown (*per tristitiam faciei*) that the detraction displeases him. For as Proverbs 25:23 says, "A north wind dissipates the rain, and a frown dissipates the detracting tongue."

**Reply to objection 3:** The advantages that emanate from a detraction fall outside of the intention of the detractor and occur by the ordination of God, who elicits good from every evil. And so detractors are no less to be resisted than robbers or those who oppress others, despite the fact that the merit of those who are oppressed or robbed increases because of their patience.