Worcester F 80 Distinctiones

118 Man ought to speak of three matters (*Loqui debet homo de tribus*)

Man ought to speak of three things: of himself, of his neighbor, and of God. He ought to speak of himself. First his own iniquity in confession so that he may be absolved.

¶ So therefore he speaks of his infirmity, Job 7[:11]: “Wherefore I will not spare my mouth, I will speak in the affliction of my spirit.” But also, do this sorrowfully not boastfully, Job 10[:1]: “I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.” Thus, the poor speak to the rich, [1] Kings 1[:13]: “Now Anna spoke,” namely, for having children, Psal. [38:5]: “I spoke with my tongue: O Lord, make me know.” Prov. 18[:23]: “The poor will speak with supplications.”

¶ Second, a man ought to speak to his neighbor about works of the evil to be corrected and this either for punishment by accusing or secretly by admonishing, Isai. 16[:7]: “To them that rejoice upon the brick walls, tell their stripes.” Second, examples of good things to be imitated, just as one recites the deeds of the saints, and jesters recite the prowess of princes, Judith 8[:21]: “Comfort their hearts by your speech,

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that they may be mindful how our fathers were tempted.” Third, the rewards of the elect are to excite another. So, the good mother to her son, communicating now blandishing. Psal. [77:1]: “Attend, O my people, to my law,” etc. Jer. 4[:12]: “I will speak my judgments with them.”

¶ Man ought to speak of God in three ways. First for the benefits of clemency, Luc. 2[:15]: “The shepherds said one to another.” Mark 7[:35]: “The string of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke right.” Second, works of power that he may be feared, Psal. [105:2]: “Who shall declare the powers of the Lord?” etc. Act. 2[:4, 11]: “They began to speak with divers tongues,” the apostles “the wonderful works of God.” Third, teachings of wisdom so that he may be recognized, thus the instruction for the disciples, Psal. [118:46]: “And I spoke of your testimonies before kings.” And 1 Cor. 2[:6]: “We speak wisdom among the perfect.” But alas because some now speak of God and of their neighbor, Psal. [77:19, 31]: “And they spoke ill of God.” And it follows, “And he slew the fat ones among them,” etc. [2] Mach. 4[:1]: “Simon, of whom we spoke before, and of his country, spoke ill of Onias,” who was good. Dogs bark at the good and the evil, so such ones. Therefore, they are to be fled as dogs, Eccli. 8[:5]: “Communicate not with an ignorant man, lest he speak ill of your family,” that is, of your works. Wherefore Pope Leo,[[1]](#endnote-1) all things are full of perils, full of snares; they incite cupidities, they lay enticements; they blandish with riches, they deter with condemned things; they torture the reproach of the tongue. Not so the tongue of Christ, John 18[:23]: “If I have spoken evil,” etc. Therefore, those things are to be considered which are said, that is, whether they tickle fame or by taking it away they harm it. Again, what kind of things are said true or false, known or hidden. Again, to whom things are said, whether to one who knows something before or to him who can correct and profit.

¶ Again, why things are said, that is, whether with the intention of dishonoring, correcting, or condemning in matters or person. If therefore known things are said with an aim of suffering with or detesting, it is not serious. If, however, they are said to those not knowing nor wishing to correct with an aim of dishonoring it is mortal.

¶ Therefore it is an evil tongue or dissolute which serves idle words, indecent which serves the lascivious, boasting which serves arrogance, deceitful which serves detraction. The mouth of their lament is pride.

¶ Pride of the mouth consists in excessive talking, idle talking, and in depraved speech.

¶ Concerning the first, excessive talking is to be avoided, so also the place where there is a great deal of straw for only a few grains, many leaves for only a little fruit, Eccli. 20[:8]: “He that uses many words shall hurt his own soul.” For in excessive speaking sin

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is not absent. And Prov. 13[:3]: “He that has no guard on his speech shall meet with evils.” Cato,[[2]](#endnote-2) consider the first virtue to be to rule the tongue.

¶ Second idle talking is to be avoided, lest by lesser matters one slides into greater, because [Eccli. 19:1]: “He that contemns small things, shall fall by little and little,” etc. And Psal. [11:3]: “They have spoken vain things everyone to his neighbor.” But also, this is to be feared very much because Matt. 12[:36]: “Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall render an account for it.” The foregoing would be intolerable if one had to count every grain of the field whatsoever, but fittingly it will be heavier in the day of judgment to respond for every idle word, Job 39[:34]: “What can I answer, who hath spoken inconsiderately?” As if saying, “I know nothing,” [2 Kings 18:29].

¶ Third, depraved speech is to be avoided because [1] Cor. [15:33]: “Evil communications corrupt good manners,” and a little ferment corrupts the whole mass. And one bad apple corrupts those nearby. In a sign that the tongue ought to be guarded, it is imprisoned behind the wall of the teeth and behind the wall of the lips, Eph. 4[:29]: “Let no evil speech proceed from your mouth.” And James 1[:19]: “Let every man be swift to hear, but slow to speak.” Wherefore in the *Vitis patrum*,[[3]](#endnote-3) abbot Agathus for three years carried a stone in his mouth that he might learn taciturnity.

1. Pope Leo, cf. Augustine, *Sermones supposititios...Sermones de Tempore*, 148.2 (PL 39:2033): Plena sunt omnia periculis, plena omnia laqueis; incitant cupiditates, insidiantur illecebrae; blandiuntur lucra, damna deterrent: amarae sunt obloquentium linguae. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cato, *Catonis Disticha* 1.3 (LCL 434:596-7): Virtutem primam esse puto, compescere linguam: proximus ille deo est qui scit ratione tacere.

 To rule the tongue I reckon virtue’s height: He’s nearest God who can be dumb aright. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Vitae* Patrum 4.7 (PL 73:865): Dicebant de abbate Agathone: Quia per triennium lapidem in ore suo mittebat, donec taciturnitatem disceret. ... [↑](#endnote-ref-3)