



Salutatio February 2006

Good and not so good words

(Virtues and vices of the tongue)

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Father General

What man is he that desireth life, and loveth many days, that he may see good? Keep thy tongue from evil and thy lips from speaking guile. (Psalms 34, 12-13). *We all know that well. Our tongue is at times unruly like an uncontrollable runaway horse, like a ship adrift; at other times it is like a flame that burns or a poison which ends all relationships with other people. In the Constitutions of Saint Joseph of Calasanz, the Holy Father warns us against this risk which is so harmful for Piarist brotherhood life: "It is written that the monk who does not control his tongue, deceives himself" and, in consequence, the Saint orders that "there should be no whispering about those inside or outside the house" (CC of 1621, nos. 49, and 168). In reality, Calasanz is only echoing the Letter from Saint James which says "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, his religion is vain (Jas 1, 26). This apostolic letter, in effect, dedicates the whole third chapter to the correct use of the tongue. Why write a whole chapter on this topic? Because the tongue "is a small member and yet has great pretensions" (Jas 3, 5). Equally for good as for evil, because of all that is explained in the cited chapter.*

It would be sufficient to turn to the personal experience of each person. It offends us greatly and we are indignant when people speak badly about us if it is done behind our back, or if what is said is not true. However, we are all given - myself included - to spreading rumours against people and institutions (Community, Province, Order) without stopping to verify if what we say is correct, suitable or convenient. We shield ourselves with false sincerity or I say what I think. If that were acceptable, it couldn't become a principle because there are things that are known but are better left unsaid. There are cases when respect for people is not safe, or their name becomes besmirched. Although things may seem to be authentic or perhaps they are really, the way we usually spread them by word of mouth does not always reveal a good or correct observation about others. Rumours, false reports and gossip are transmitted more easily and faster than positive and good things about people, their actions, institutions.

Are we conscious of the harm done with this way of using the tongue? Our tongue can become a poison which ends up killing the good relationships between ourselves and others; it can discredit people and create a climate of suspicion and distrust with the result that it is practically impossible to

follow the only supreme commandment of loving one another in a Christian manner.

For living together, the destruction caused by the tongue is what we should most fear. That's why the tongue is the part of the body that should be most controlled; it causes we humans to fall, easily and seriously, into sinning against love. A teenager told me that when questioned by the confessor about which sin was the most horrible, and which you should protect yourself from at all costs, he answered spontaneously and without hesitation: whispering. The confessor wanted to make him see, however, that, given his age, it would be more fitting to think about sexual sin. This teenager, who is grown up now, still thinks that his answer to the confessor was not wrong.

Many years ago, with more time to spare, it occurred to me to comb the whole psalter looking for verses referring to man's speech and to things pronounced by his mouth. I found 96 references to this topic within the 150 psalms; that shows the importance it has in the Bible. The majority try to guard against bad language use, swearing and deceit; there are frequently prayers by the psalmist for God to free him from a deceitful tongue; other times the tongue is invited to praise God as the most noble of its goals. I offer just a few examples: *"Whoso privily slandereth his neighbour, him will I cut off;... he that telleth lies shall not tarry in my sight; I will early destroy all the wicked" (Ps 100, 5. 7-8); "Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips, and from a deceitful tongue. What shall be given unto thee or what shall be done unto thee, thou false tongue? Sharp arrows of the mighty, with coals of juniper"(Ps 119, 2-4); who sharpen their tongue like a sword (Ps 56, 5); swords are in their lips (Ps 58,8).*

Devastating criticism, gossip, intrigue and machination are denounced in the Scriptures as the greatest sins after idolatry, because they are all violence against our brother, the image of God. Indignation, scorn and rejection, therefore, should be shown for the backbiting, connections or associations of ideas that maliciously lead to insinuate fault or smears against someone. They are ways of sinning with the tongue. That's why the Book of the Wisdom of Soloman recommends: *"Therefore guard against profitless grumbling, and from calumny withhold your tongues; For a stealthy utterance does not go unpunished, and a lying mouth slays the*

soul (Wisdom 1, 11). If you speak badly about your brother, your neighbour, you are loosing that bad tendency all men possess, you are letting yourself be dominated by the destructive cast that is also hidden within the human heart. What fills the heart is spoken by the tongue: from a good heart, good words are born, and no gossip stems from it against a brother. Speaking badly about others leads us to check how much love there is in our hearts. *“A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, but an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil; for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks” (Lk 6, 45).*

The psalmist, who represents the just wise man, prays thus to God: *O Lord, place a guard on my mouth! Protect the opening of my lips”.* (Ps 140, 3). Because a good man can control his speech and use his the tongue for blessing God and to say good things about others. It is said about a saint that whenever he heard criticism about someone he would look for something good in the person being criticised and would say it to him, inviting thus that one should not think only evil of people. If we look at the end result of everything, from God’s viewpoint and from his creative projection, the tongue was given to us for praising above all and to tell his “wonders” carried out in man and his history. Saint Bonaventura left this written about Saint Anthony of Padua, whose tongue is preserved uncorrupted: *“O blessed tongue, which always blessed the Lord and made others bless him, there now appears how much merit you earned from God”.* We could say the same about Saint Joseph of Calasanz in veneration of the reliquary of his also uncorrupted tongue. Example attracts imitation. Let’s direct our tongue towards good speech and God’s praise. *“My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord, and let all flesh bless his holy name for ever and ever.* (Ps 144, 21). Let our speech be like that encouraged by the wisdom of a good just person: its form of being is “pure” and transparent and, besides, it is a lover of peace, *“peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (Jas 3, 17).*

On re-reading what I have written as a *salutatio* for this month of February, I wonder if I have painted too dark a picture; if my own words are going to help or not. Let no-one see in these words any complaint on my part, but a common wish to purify our speech so that our community environments exude health, a warm welcome and gratifying mutual relationships, and that they help everyone to grow as whole religious people. The fruits of our mission will be, besides, better guaranteed, free from the discord that can put them in danger of being lost. This is the sole intention of my words: to purify our speech so that the spreading of the Gospel may be more transparent and direct, attracting others to it through the strength of the coherency of those we have embraced as guides in our lives.

The month of February opens the door to Lent: the first of March is Ash Wednesday this year. The *salutatio* can be a preamble or announcement of the authentic Word which one more year is going to call us to conversion. Let's welcome it and not squander it. With the usual affection and esteem towards you