

The Truth About Lies

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A LITTLE personal reminiscence that has the happy merit of being true may serve as an introduction to this booklet on Lying.

In January, 1937, I happened to be travelling by train from Dublin to Cork. My immediate neighbour in the compartment was a middle-aged gentleman of obvious education and culture, with whom a friendly cigarette soon brought me into conversation. What first served to fix the incident in my memory was the nature of the topics we discussed. They were all of a serious kind, so different from what one might have expected in the circumstances. The weather, for example, and the superficial political issues of the moment were not mentioned, but we spoke, instead, of the different vocations in life, of the value of discipline in the training of youth, and so on. My companion had refreshingly independent views on all these matters. He had, I really believe, the temperament of a pioneer scientist, who tries to bring an unbiased and unprejudiced mind to bear on all the problems that confronted him. He was a Catholic, which possibly explained his apology after more than an hour's conversation for having taken up so much of my time.

"You, of course," he said, "will want to read some of your breviary." "That may be," I replied, "but I should like to say I have found this conversation very pleasant. Too many people are so unlike you, unfortunately, in that they take ready-made views on life."

Then came my surprise, for he answered: "Yes, they do; and as a child I did also. I even believed absolutely and unquestioningly in every word of the Catechism." "But you don't still? I asked. "Oh, no," he said. "I know most of it is true, but there are several things I see are put into it somewhat equivocally, because children couldn't be brought up to understand a more accurate expression of them."

Curiosity compelled me to ask him for a sample. "Well," he said, "take lying. The Catechism says lying is wrong and no motive, however good, could excuse a lie, because a lie is always sinful and bad in itself." "And what do you find wrong in that?" I asked. "It seems very clear and unequivocal to me, and even a child could see some force and meaning in the explanation."

"Oh," he said, "I don't believe any more that all lies are bad, and I think there are many motives could excuse a lie. I should not hesitate to tell a lie, if it would get another person out of serious trouble. I should feel bound to do so."

"Now, Father," said one of our fellow-travellers, "you'll have to stand up for the Catechism and I am afraid we'll be in Cork before you get a chance to read that breviary." I laughed, and remembering the principle we learned in our Logic class, that an argument should begin with an attempt at defining the terms to be used in it, I asked the sceptic what he meant by a lie. The question took him by surprise. Like Saint Augustine with regard to time, he said he knew what it was quite well, but couldn't explain it properly.

Finally, he decided it was “saying what you don’t believe.”

“Very good,” said I; “and now if I were to tell you that I jumped over the moon last night, would that be a lie?”

“I wouldn’t believe you,” he said. “I should hope not,” I answered, but it seems to fit your definition of a lie just the same, and I want to know would you call it a lie.”

He pondered for awhile, and to the great amusement of the rest of the company, said:

“Begor, Father, I don’t know. It is, and it isn’t.” I suggested he was being rather unreasonable in criticising the Catechism doctrine on lying without knowing what a lie was, and then followed up this argumentum ad hominem, (an argument against the opposing person) which was in reality too like taking a mean advantage of an honourable gentleman, with a more satisfactory defence of truth.

This seemed to interest my listeners so much that there and then I decided on trying at some future date to commit my ideas to print. It is most fitting that my little idea should come to realization through the kindness of a Society devoted in vocation and name to the spread of the Catholic Truth in Ireland.

A lie is one of those things that are so simple that it is next to impossible to define them clearly and comprehensively. My friend in the train was however, right when he remarked that a lie is “saying something you don’t believe” – though he would have put the thing more accurately, more comprehensively, had he used the word “conveyed” instead of “saying.”

Obviously, a lie can be told in other ways besides by speech. I can shake my head in denial, for instance, when my conscience tells me that the correct, the truthful thing to do is to nod in assent. I can put an enquiring traveller astray by pointing to what I know to be the wrong direction. More pertinent still, I can write my falsehoods in a letter, or spend a lot of time industriously concocting false returns for my Income Tax Inspector. So, any form of expression can be used falsely.

But not all false expressions of thought should be labelled “lies.” To rank as lies, properly understood, they must be intended or calculated to deceive. This is common sense.

Tales that are too tall to be believed by any normal person, for example, are not regarded as downright lies. They are only yarns. Take the story of the heavily-bearded man who was having his teeth seen to.

“Open your mouth, please,” said the dentist. The beard replied: “But it is open.”

Or take the tale told by the traveller from darkest Africa.

“There I was, unarmed and alone. Suddenly, a huge lion came dashing up to devour me, his slavering jaws wide open. Methought my last hour had come.”

“And what did you do?”

“What did I do? I reached down his throat, caught him by the tail and pulled him inside out.”

Wild flights of fancy and extravagant imagination of this kind are not genuine lies. They deceive nobody outside the ranks of the feeble-minded.

Another way by which a lie ceases to be a lie is by convention – particular or general.

Particular convention: the private code. One may make an arrangement whereby the person for whom alone the statement in question is intended will understand its true meaning. Thus, a businessman may instruct his agents to send him messages in code to protect him against unscrupulous competitors; and a message from an agent reading: "Don't buy" will be interpreted by him, correctly, as meaning: "Get hold of all you can."

General convention. This method of eliminating the deceptive element in false statements explains away many of the apparent lies of civilized society. Regard for the neighbour and a desire to make the truth less hurtful and less unpleasant have evolved a number of formulae, of which normal people easily understand the correct significance. Society has tacitly agreed that if I anticipate trouble from a visitor and have no wish to interview him, I may lawfully tell the maid to say I am "not at home," or "I am engaged," and she will tell no lie in following these instructions. Social usage has crystallised these conventional formulae, and any deception of the caller is more correctly attributed to his own folly than to the use of the false phrase. Human society demands of those who enter it a minimum of education in manners and in social standards of behaviour, and any material disadvantage that might result from a failure to observe this minimum is regarded as due to one's own neglect. It is one's own fault.

Similarly, the meaning of the conventional phrases of polite society is clear enough to ordinary sensible people, and it is a personal deficiency of intelligence or experience that may cause them to deceive a hearer in a particular case. If I walk across a busy street with my eyes shut, I am asking for trouble, and nobody will sympathise with me if I am injured. Similarly, nobody can justly nurse a grievance if he has been deceived by the formulae of polite usage: "Not at home," "So glad to have met you," et cetera. It should be remembered however that maids and others have no carte blanche to weave, in confirmation of such phrases, fanciful tales, that might deceive even the normal person, for then the evil of the resulting error is no longer attributable to the folly of the hearer, but to the malice of the one who deceives him.

We are now perhaps in a position to evaluate our notion of a lie more completely. We have seen that the "tall yarn," which nobody in his senses would believe, isn't a lie, nor are the conventional phrases, which the current custom of society has sanctioned. One may therefore describe a lie as a statement against one's belief, which, in the circumstances, would deceive a normally prudent listener, a person with average common sense.

The meaning of what is said in conversation depends in no small degree on what one might call "atmosphere," the circumstances of time, place, manner, et cetera, that tend to restrict the sense of the expressions, so that phrases repeated without this atmosphere can seem to have a much different meaning. I could do a lot of harm by reporting the actual words of a speaker, for example, if I conceal the context, or atmosphere, which modified their literal meaning in the first instance. If my partner in a game of cards has played badly and I so far forgot myself as to term him a fool, with several adjectives thrown in to reinforce the noun, no reasonable person can fail to see that my words refer merely to his want of skill at cards. If he, or any tale-bearing busybody, interprets it in a broader way, to let it be thought that I considered him a fool in his business or domestic capacity, I am being misquoted.

It is part of prudence to take account of circumstances as they affect our acts, and it must play a part also in enabling us to interpret the statements of others correctly.

Hence, it is that the believer of some utterly absurd story has only his own folly, his own imprudence, to blame. And the same is true of one who accepts a conventional phrase at its face value, rather than according to social usage. When, therefore, others imprudently and impertinently and without any right ask an embarrassingly direct question. I am justified in using a form of words that serves to put them off the scent, the reason being that their deception is attributable to their own imprudence, perhaps even to their malice, in asking the question. A prudent man would, in the circumstances, realise that my reply could hardly be expected to reveal what I have in my mind.

Thus, for example, a priest would deny any knowledge of the matters he has heard in the confessional and reasonable people would readily appreciate his denial at its true value. Doctors, lawyers, et cetera, must be similarly protected against nosy-parkers and busybodies, and may, in ordinary circumstances, justifiably deny the possession of knowledge which their profession obliges them to keep secret. They do not defend themselves by a lie in the strict sense, for no reasonable person could be deceived by their denial. A criminal before the court may plead "not guilty," and no sensible person sees in the phrase any more than that the criminal thinks he has some chance of an acquittal for lack of evidence, and, wants to avail of it. His "not guilty" is understood to mean: "Let's see what the opposition really knows. Let them prove me guilty if they can."

The common good does not ordinarily demand that people should be bound to reveal their secret crimes in court. And certainly the virtue of truth does not compel us to lay bare our minds to every impudent, prying, ill-mannered newsmonger. We may protect the secrets of our home by physical force against the unjust aggressor, the thief or the robber, who invades that sanctuary; in the same way we may defend the secrets of the heart and mind against unwarranted intruders by moral force, which is never antagonistic to what is good – to justice and prudence and the other virtues – but which will serve us against the dark powers of hate and malice.

"Are you in love with Tom Jones? Aren't you engaged to him?" asks the prying gossip. If poor little Nelly Kelly hesitates, she is lost, and in an hour's time the entire village will hum with the news of her little romance. To answer: "It is none of your business," will not extricate her from the clutches of the fiend, so she is quite justified in saying that Tom Jones "leaves her cold," that he is the "last man she thought of marrying"; thereby showing her intelligence and love of truth, since Thomas is undoubtedly the "last" man, for whose happiness she considered the purchase of a veil and orange blossoms.

The liar has, as a rule, some intention and hope of deceiving: otherwise, he has no reason for withholding the truth. Deceitfulness does not, however, have to be very consciously or explicitly intended. It can be pragmatic, implicit in the use of words, which, we know, would, in the circumstances, lead an average prudent person into error.

The intention of an agent cannot really dissociate the direct result of his act from the act itself. It is no justification for the deliberate use of insulting words and behaviour to say that no slight was intended. In the same way, the intention alone cannot purge the lie of its malice: in other words, the deliberate lie necessarily implies the acceptance of its natural consequence, namely, the deception of others.

It is not necessary, of course, that the lie should result in actual deception. Many a liar has to regret the failure of his efforts to deceive. But even should his perspicacity or caution preserve the liar's victim from being misled, it doesn't exculpate the one who tried the deception. I am guilty of murder, if I wilfully inflict on another the violence I expect to prove fatal, although, in actual fact,

his abnormal physique, or very special medical care may save him from death. Still more truly may I be guilty of lying, even should my victims escape the snares I have laid for them. (Footnote: Because, according to Saint Thomas, part of the malice of lying consists in the abuse of the faculty of speech. (Summa, II II; question 110, article 3, answer 6).

DIFFERENT KIND OF LIES.

Theologians, as a rule, distinguish three kinds of lies in ascending order of wrongfulness: lies for amusement or fun, usually called jocose lies; lies for profit or convenience –officious lies; and lastly harmful, injurious, destructive lies, technically known as malicious lies.

The jocose lie, it must be remembered, is not the same as some utterly absurd tale that nobody will believe. This, as we have seen, is not a lie at all. The difference between the two is in the fact that even prudent people might be deceived by the real jocose lie, and that the liar usually tells it with a view to deriving amusement from their deception.

The carefully-planned deceptions inflicted on Fool's Day belong to this class, and to it also belong the multitude of untruths told from boastfulness, petty pride and so on. The exaggerations to which fishermen and golfers are almost proverbially prone are of this type. Elderly people like to try to curb the self-opinionatedness of the young by telling the deeds of their own early years. How easily they fall into the fisherman's vice of exaggeration is, alas, but too obvious. I might add that those who fall unconsciously into this habit are even the more lovable for being so human.

To the category of jocose lies belong also the additions that many younger storytellers make to their tales. "To add a species of verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and uninteresting narrative," in other words, to make it more likely to deceive others, they give the tales they have heard "a local habitation and a name"; they appropriate the adventures, real or fictional, of others, and relate them as having happened to themselves personally, with all appropriate local colour well splashed on. Their stories as mere flights of imagination, or as real occurrences, are not lies, but are falsified, and tend to deceive, because of the additions made to them. Their malice may not be very great, indeed, because they harm nobody but their authors, but it is nonetheless very real. A private act of hatred of God is damnable, even though it does no material injury, and, similarly, even the jocose lie may not be excused on the utilitarian and hedonistic excuse that "it hurts nobody; and it is good a bit of fun."

The second class of lies embraces those told for the benefit of the speaker or somebody else. To it belong the untruths by which one escapes from an awkward position, forestalls future embarrassment, or tries to obtain a material advantage, some honour, a reputation, anything attractive. Again, we must point out the difference between these lies and the lawful denial by which one may defend oneself against inconsiderate and prying troublemakers. The real lie could deceive careful people; the lawful denial could not do so. The real lie is told to those who have some right to the truth; the lawful denial is a defence of one's right to secrecy against those who have no just claim to the truth.

To cover up my laziness I may explain my unpunctuality at the office by saying my cycle was punctured and I had to have it repaired. This is the officious lie in its simplest form. Sometimes it has a trifling admixture of truth in it, which does not, however, change its essentially deceitful character.

When Nelly Kelly's love for Tom Jones is on the wane, she will come late for her appointments with him, and excuse herself somewhat after this fashion:

"I just missed one bus, and then had to wait such a dreadfully long time for another. I am terribly sorry you had to wait so long, but, really, it wasn't my fault."

Actually she missed the earlier bus through her laziness and carelessness, nor did she just miss it, nor was she waiting more than a few minutes for the next car, nor is she really so terribly sorry, and she knows well how truly her unpunctuality is her own fault. Tom has some right to the truth, and she just as certainly has no right to cheat him so.

Little James has broken a neighbour's window, and to avoid the moral anguish of a scolding, or the more physical pain of corporal punishment, he arranges an alibi with a school chum. Later, when questioned, he denies all knowledge of the occurrence, and his pal confirms his story, so that the "affair of the broken window" becomes one of history's unsolved crimes. James and his friend rejoice in their triumph, but their success is the surface only. Character has suffered. They have found out that "crime does pay", quite often a very prompt and appreciable dividend, and their childish deceit may be father to much more elaborate frauds in adult life. Success of this sort in a few more difficulties involves this fact, that the parents are deceived about the child's character, and cannot take measures to improve it. A jocose lie may not "do much harm"; a lie of convenience almost certainly involves some damage.

James makes it impossible for his parents or teachers to educate him properly for the business of life. Nelly Kelly's lie causes Tom to waste his time, money and emotion on a very worthless object. So it is that, in one sense, officious lies can be more malicious than is ordinarily thought; but let us see what the real malicious lie is.

In the case of the officious lie, the injury to another results as it were quite indirectly. By the malicious lie, on the contrary, harm to another is deliberately sought either for itself or as a necessary means to the author's profit. In many cases, however, it will not be easy to decide in which of the two categories a particular untruth should be placed.

I have a grudge against somebody, and falsely accuse him of some crime. No direct advantage accrues to me from my unjust and cruel act. I am guilty of a typical malicious lie. In very many cases, however, the malicious lie will injure the neighbour while at the same time benefitting the liar.

The unscrupulous quack will advertise some medicine he knows to be utterly unequal to the claims he makes for it. Sufferers pay to use it, to his gain and their own loss.

A candidate for some position of responsibility presents false testimonials, thus obtaining it at the expense of those better qualified, of those who appoint him, and, perhaps, of those over whom he is unfortunately placed. Money is obtained from insurance companies on false claims, or in excess of the damage done.

In all these cases, however, there is some fairly obvious direct and foreseen injustice to another that distinguishes this type of lie from those others we have mentioned, and it is precisely this additional malice that renders them more sinful and immoral.

ALL REAL LIES ARE WRONG.

That all real lies are immoral may be shown by reason and by the unqualified condemnation of the liar in Holy Scripture.

REASON.

A first simple proof of the malice of lying may be drawn from the general obligation there is on men of treating their fellows as they wish to be treated by them in turn. All men are essentially equal. I have, therefore, no right to do to others what I should justly resent were the positions reversed, and they put in my place. Now I should feel very aggrieved were I to be made the victim of deceitful and lying impostors. Hence, I am abound to act truthfully and uprightly in my dealings with my neighbours. If our friend, Nelly Kelly, were to discover that her lover, Tom, had been playing her own deceitful game with her, how furious she would be. She should remember that if one wrong doesn't make a right, neither can two. It is because she is bound to be truthful with him that he is similarly obliged towards her; and the same argument shows why, on the larger scale, we are each of us bound to be truthful with all mankind.

It is the same argument, under another aspect, that proves the malice of lying from the fact that human society could not long survive were it impossible to trust one's fellow-men. From my earliest years to the end of my life, I am guarded and preserved by the strength of truth, and the mutual trust men place in each other. A young man and woman come from the altar where they have vowed to each other a most complete and absolute trust. He devotes his life to her support and that of her children, because he believes that she was sincere at the altar and still continues so. The children and he eat the food she places before them, and trust her that it will nourish rather than poison them, just as she has already relied on the word of the shopkeeper from whom she purchased the food. She and the children rest and sleep peacefully at night, without anxiety or care, because they know he will protect them from harm, because they know he is a true father, and an upright man. If illness comes, they trust the doctor, and when death itself comes, they go through the shadows trusting the priest who speaks in the name of the Saviour, who said: "I am Truth, I am Life."

Surely human life demands truth, and all social values postulate sincerity and veracity, a real equal right to truth between man and man. As a confirmation from actual life, only the recent dreadful war need be mentioned. When States have lost their mutual trust, when they are ruled by nothing higher than opportunism and craftiness, the illusion of security is soon dissipated: their immediate fate is to drift into the hell of war, the dreadful horror of which is too sad a proof of that other more dreadful hell, "where no order, but everlasting horror dwells." (Job 10:22)

Let it be remembered that the State is, in the order of being, less than the individuals who comprise it, and think then what would be the well-nigh unspeakable condition of things in a world where men were no longer bound to truth and justice in their mutual intercourse. The savagery of the jungle could not be compared to it, or the violence of wild beasts has no intellect directing it. Humanity without the moral virtues of truth and justice would be far worse than a society of beasts. So it would even be an understatement to call it a society of beastly men.

The primary, or most fundamental argument, however, by which Saint Thomas believed the malice of lying could be absolutely proved, is not based on the rights of others to the truth, nor on the social evils that would result from the universality of untruthfulness, but on the fact that the lie is in its essence by its very nature, an abuse of the faculty of speech. As the essential malice of birth-prevention derives from its being a direct frustration of the generative faculties, or as one of the serious features of suicide arises from its direct frustration of the God-given gift of life, so too, because every lie violates the fundamental purpose of the gift of speech, it is evil in its essence, and, being so, can never lawfully be used even as a means, since "the end does not justify the means" if these are bad in themselves.

Speech is the most striking factor by which man is distinguished from the brute creation. Without this faculty, each of us would be a lonely prisoner in a world of his own; utterly isolated from his fellows in the very thing that raises him above flesh and blood.

Man's power of communicating his thoughts and inner aspirations to other men is so spiritual and other-worldly indeed, that many great philosophers have considered that it must be directly divine in its origin: that man, if left to himself, could not have formed a language, or developed any means of communicating his inmost mind to others. But whether or not that be so, it is quite certain that speech is directly intended by Nature, and, therefore, by God, the Author of Nature, to enable us to manifest our thoughts and desires to others, to show forth our spirit and soul, our real humanity, to illuminate the dark chaos of matter by which one human mind is separated from another. Without speech, our existence would indeed be dreary, unbearably lonely; we should live as hermits in an endless, Arctic night, seeing no higher life around us than that of the animal kingdom, with no ray of light or warmth shining from the souls and hearts of others above the horizon of the senses. Never could we share our joys with another; never could we find the solace of sympathy in our trials; never could words of love, rising like sparks from a hidden furnace, reveal the intensity of the hidden flame, or help to kindle that living fire in the heart of another.

Now the lie is the frustration of speech. It makes of speech a distorting mirror, one that reflects falsely. When the images in such a mirror can be compared with the originals, they are seen to be gross, horrible, repellent, devoid of real grace and beauty. The natural purpose of a mirror is to reflect things as they are, and if we know one to be "false," to be "untrue," we take care to avoid being led astray by it. We put it aside, to be used perhaps as an amusement when without being deceived by it, we watch its ludicrous and unreal exaggerations. So with speech. Its *raison d'être*, its essential purpose, is to reflect the mind as it is for other men to see. It is of service in the serious business of life only while it continues to mirror mind faithfully. In our idle moments now and again, we may find diversion and fun in ridiculous exaggerations and impossible stories, but we take pleasure in these because we are not deceived by them and because we are quite aware that the speaker does not mean us to be led into error by them. The lie is different: it is, of its nature, something deliberately unnatural, and is, therefore, essentially wrong and sinful.

Seeing then that the lie is intrinsically evil, a thwarting of the natural purpose of speech, a canker in the heart of society, a violation of the rights of others, we need not wonder that Holy Scripture should forbid lying in unmistakable fashion.

SCRIPTURE.

In olden times deceitfulness was regarded as a characteristic of the impious: the Psalmist prays God to "scatter His enemies, and bring them down... for the sin of their mouth, and the word of their lips... and for their cursing and lying they shall be talked of when they are consumed... by Your wrath." (Psalm 59:11-13 or Vulgate Psalm 58:12-14) "The Lord hates... a lying tongue." (Proverbs 6:17) "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord: but they that deal faithfully please him." (Proverbs 12:22) He "will destroy all that speak a lie." (Psalm 5:6-7) "A false witness shall not be unpunished; and he that speaks lies shall perish." (Proverbs 19:9) We are told that "the mouth that lies kills the soul." (Wisdom 1:11)

Christ is "full of grace and truth." His Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, Who teaches all truth. Hence, lying and duplicity were utterly incompatible with the character of our Holy Redeemer. Never could He compromise in any degree with deceit: on the contrary, He castigated it in all its forms with a

terrifying intensity. As the devil is the personified hatred of the Supreme Truth, so does Christ say: "He was a murderer from the beginning: and he stood not in the truth, because truth is not, in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks of his own; for he is a liar and the father thereof." (John 8:44) The hypocritical, lying Pharisees were Satan's children: "You are of your father, the devil, and the desires of your father you will do." How prophetic! For as the liar hates and destroys the truth, these deceitful men hated Jesus, and ultimately murdered the incarnate, true Word of God.

His keen theological instinct enabled Saint Paul to perceive the fundamental value of the love of truth, and he warns the early Christians to be sincere and to avoid all duplicity. "Wherefore, putting away lying, speak ye the truth, every man with his neighbor... Give not place to the devil." (Ephesians 4:25) "Lie not one to one another" (Colossians 3:9) "Stand having your loins girt about with truth." (Ephesians 6:14) "That you may be blameless and sincere children of God... in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation: among whom you shine as lights in the world." (Philippians 2:15)

And, like Saint Paul, his brother Apostle, Saint James, perceived that the love of truth is an absolute condition of real religion: "Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves... and if any man think himself to be religious, not bridling his own tongue but deceiving his own heart, this man's religion is vain." (James 1:22-26) "Glory not, and be not liars against the truth." (James 3:14)

Heaven itself, intimate friendship with the Lamb of God, is the reward of the truthful according to the vision of Saint John. In the mouth of those who "follow the Lamb whithersoever He goes... there was found no lie." (Apocalypse 14:4 5) While Hell, on the contrary, is peopled with liars: "Without are dogs and sorcerers and the unchaste and murderers and servers of idols and every one that loves and makes a lie." (Apocalypse 22:15) Alas! Dear Saint John! If you could return to the world today, how your heart would be grieved and tortured by its disregard of truth, natural and supernatural. You would see falsifications and deceptions accepted in private and public life: men priding themselves on their business acumen, which is so often nothing more than a 'useful' ability to lie plausibly and consistently, leaders dignifying and justifying the most gross distortions of truth under the name of Propaganda: rulers, who, like Pilate, do not want the truth. (See John 18:38)

And you, noble Saint Paul, who accepted imprisonment and punishment, stoning and shipwreck, even death itself, rather than be false to your high principles, you would find again on earth those "who change the truth of God into a lie... who like not to have God in their knowledge... full of deceit... inventors of evil things... without affection, without fidelity, without mercy." (Romans 1:25-31) Pray for mankind that our hearts may be changed before the awful, revealing judgment of God comes upon us, according to your own warning: "For the wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness and injustice of those men that detain the truth of God in injustice." (Romans 1:18)

LIES AND LIARS.

Catholic moral theology is marvellously broad-minded: it takes every factor of an act into account. In this matter of lying, for instance, it shows that if there were only the mere lie to be considered it would be never more than a venial sin – something loathsome and wrong, of course, but still far short of mortal sin. Speech is for the communication of our thoughts to others, but no man has absolutely all truth locked up in himself, hence the harm done by the lie is not a complete frustration of Nature: the truth can be learned in other ways than by speech, and from more people

than one. Hence, although the lie is undoubtedly an interference with Nature, it is not as final and absolute as is suicide, for example; and if there were no other factor to be taken into account, the lie would never be a cause of damnation. It is rare, however, that the lie stands all alone. Even in its simplest forms, in those told for amusement or for convenience, there is found, as a rule, some admixture of pride, envy, disobedience, sensuality, et cetera, that adds to the evil-doing.

The motive behind the lie, and the circumstances in which it is told will affect its malice. To deny one's faith would be seriously sinful, even were the lie in itself only a lie of convenience; while to perjure oneself by lying under oath, by calling God to aid one in deceiving His creatures, would dishonour Him gravely and make the act a mortal sin.

Many lies become serious because grave injury to an innocent party is intended, or is foreseen to follow from them. The malicious gossip who relates his foul suspicions as certain truth, and foresees that his victim's reputation will be grievously injured thereby; the vindictive person, whose passion for revenge moves him to disrupt the good relations between man and wife, between employer and employee, et cetera, by spiteful, lying tales; the avaricious individual, who does not hesitate to conceal the grave defects in his wares or in his abilities under such a veil of falsehood as deceives even the cautious and prudent purchaser or employer – all these sin grievously, because in addition to the violation of truth, a grave injustice is also committed.

Who could compute the number of lies told through lust? How many innocent and happy lives have been wrecked by the lustful lies of unscrupulous blackguards? A trusting young girl is treated to a pleasing tonic of well-timed flattery, that seems to come from the purest affection. Her interest is carefully nursed until it has grown into confiding love. Then, when it is too late, after the alluring prospect of a good marriage had blinded her to the more immediate dangers of unmarried love making, she realises her mistake, being left to mend her broken heart amid the scorn and contempt of a pitiless world. Not all lies of lust have such grim results. Not all men, fortunately, are so unscrupulous. Lovers must be allowed the extravagance in expression that real emotion always demands – their prudence enables them to interpret much of it for what it really is – but “truth is calm” and the simple praise and unstudied outpourings of pure love, are far different from the deceitful, calculating compliments of some crafty Don Juan, on the one hand, or from the meaningless absurdities of intemperate and uncontrolled passion on the other.

LAWFUL RETICENCE.

While we are obliged to practise sincerity, and to avoid deceit, it does not follow by any means that we must tell all the truth all the time to all enquirers. We must keep legitimate secrets from those who have no right to know them, and we must often, for the sake of harmony and charity, resist the urge to criticize truthfully those who don't want to hear the truth about themselves. He who is utterly sincere even with himself will welcome truth wherever it is found and from whatever source it comes, but very, very few of us are cast in such a heroic mould; we like to fool ourselves, at least in little things, and to keep up these petty deceptions, which protects our tinsel paradise against the stern, pitiless forces of truth. Because charity, the greatest virtue, “is patient, is kind... bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things,” (1 Corinth 13:4-7) the real Christian is considerate for this human weakness; he is careful not to wound others unnecessarily with ill-timed truth.

He is not a troublemaker, and knows how to preserve a prudent silence when, without the sacrifice of any principle, he sees that plain speaking would be either unwelcome or useless.

ENVOI.

Here then is the little booklet that I have so long wished to write. It is far from saying all that I should want said in praise of truth: it doesn't say even all I should like said against lying. I have not appealed to the respect in which all right-minded people hold the man of integrity, the man who can be believed; nor to the universal contempt that is felt for the treacherous and cowardly liar. I might have pointed out the implications of that greatest insult: "You are a liar!" Space did not permit me to do so, and I could only try to include as much as possible of the fundamentals, to show the real depth and essential evil of the lie.

If I have succeeded in achieving this, my readers will have no difficulty in seeing that "no motive, however good, can excuse a lie." If the motive justifies the means, there is an end of all real morality. If the "great personal inconvenience" of a schoolboy justifies his "small lie," a "greater inconvenience" of the grown-up justifies a "big lie," and the "superlative inconvenience" of the State, of reformers, enemies, helpless invalids and the incurably insane would make lawful the infamous lies of propaganda, the murder of the innocent, and a thousand other horrible crimes by which might tries to preserve a temporary supremacy over right.

The little Catechism is correct in this doctrine on lying as in its other teachings, because it is firmly established on the first Truth of God, and seeks only to teach men the way to their First Beginning and Last End. If we love the truth, and are ready to follow it where-so-ever it leads, if we "harden not our hearts" when it speaks, and if we echo it in our human way, by word and work, we need not fear the "father of lies."

"Doing the truth in charity," (Ephesians 4:15) in the might of that abiding Charity that is the Spirit of God indwelling within us, we shall be in this life the "light of the world," (Matthew 5:14) and in the world to come we shall "shine in the Kingdom of our Father," (Matthew 13:43) as lamps filled with "the oil of gladness," (Psalm 45 or Vulgate Psalm 44) that is "the only True God." (John 17:3)

"Open you all, the gates: and let the nation that keeps the truth enter in." (Isaiah 26:2)
