

Last week, the week before Lent started, our Lord, through His Church's liturgy, seemed to be emphasizing use of the gift of speech and the importance, the seriousness, of how this gift is used. This was perhaps most explicit in last week's liturgy with an event in the life of St Scholastica, whose memorial was last week.

St Scholastica was born around the year 480 AD. Her brother was St Benedict, who is known as the father of western Monasticism. Monasticism just refers to living the life of a monk in a monastery. Monasticism is a way, a vocation, of completely sacrificing one's self to God. Monks live together and often have just 2 main activities – manual labor and prayer, although prayer would usually include study and contemplation as well. Now whenever someone founds a religious order, they draw up what's called a "Rule of Life," which is submitted to the Holy See for approval. This Rule of Life is often rather detailed, spelling out how they live and what they do in everyday life. So for example, it might say things like: rise at 5 am, prayer, Mass, manual labor, breakfast, rest, prayer, manual labor again, and so on. St Benedict wrote up a rule of life for his monks.

This brings us to St Scholastica and the event in her life that we want to touch on here. St Scholastica was also a religious sister and apparently her convent was close to Benedict's monastery and he would, from time to time, come to visit her there. On one of these visits, Scholastica and Benedict were having deep and profound conversations about our Lord, the goodness of God, the mysteries of the faith. At one point, apparently towards evening, Benedict got up to leave; one of the rules of life, it seems, was to be home at night if you had to leave during the day, unless there was a special need to be out and you had permission. So again, Benedict got up from their conversation to leave and Scholastica was so engrossed in their holy conversation that she pleaded with her brother to stay; their conversation had become prayer. No sister, Benedict said, you know I have to return to the monastery. Scholastica folded her hands, put her head down, and prayed to the Lord that He intervene and keep her brother there so that they could continue their conversation. Upon Scholastica's prayer, a severe thunderstorm immediately broke out, so bad that Benedict couldn't possibly leave. He looked at Scholastica and said: sister, what have you done? She said – I asked you and you said no so I asked the Lord and He said yes. Benedict stayed and they continued their conversation through the night. A short time later Scholastica died and Benedict was given a vision of her soul being taken up to Heaven.

Now what can be drawn out of this event? First, we should say that St Benedict did not do wrong by insisting that he go home. He wrote the rule, he should follow it. To dispense himself casually would have been prideful and presumptuous. It was the Lord who dispensed him and when He did, Benedict accepted it.

But there is a greater point here. It is clear that our Lord intervened, which means that He was pleased with their conversation. He was pleased with the way they used the gift the speech. This is by no means the only time that our Lord has brought out the importance of how language is used and for what purpose. St Anthony, Doctor of the Church, was well known as a great preacher and teacher of the faith. When his cause for canonization was initiated, his body was exhumed. He was completely decomposed except for one part – his tongue. Our Lord was once again emphasizing the importance of how the gift of language is used, He is pleased with good use, and quite displeased with poor use. There is much more than these just these 2 instances. In Scripture, speech is often a source of either commendation (good use of speech) or condemnation (evil use of speech). The Pharisees are frequently chastised by our Lord because of their hypocritical language. The issue of speech comes out explicitly in the 10 commandments (e.g., Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain) as well as our Lord's Sermon on the Mount (e.g., whoever says Raqa is liable for judgement). Perhaps most explicitly of all is the 3rd chapter of James, verses 1 through 12; go and read them. James calls the tongue "a world of unrighteousness," for example. He says simultaneously: "if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man." Even the Mass itself, in the words used for the Confiteor, express the seriousness of language: "... I have greatly sinned in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do." We will be judged on how we use speech.

We are now in the Lenten season, a season focused especially on penance, yes, but especially repentance. John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord by preaching repentance. In other words, to really receive the Lord, repentance is necessary. Our Lord's own first words in His preaching were: Repent and believe in the Gospel.

Like many things, the gift of language can be used for good or evil. The Lenten season is a good time to stop and think about how we use the gift of speech. So many people are afraid of this. So many people pridefully refuse to really acknowledge their sin and thus exclude themselves from the Kingdom of Heaven, perhaps all the while priding themselves also on what good Christians they are. For those who have fallen into such a deadly trap, have you never heard the words: "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the Kingdom of Heaven?" Repentance *is* the first step towards our Lord; it can't be skipped. The prideful have always and will always exempt themselves from God's word; let us move on to those who have a willingness to receive it.

Language can be and is used for evil in so many ways. Swearing, cursing, using the Lord's name in vain. Foul language seems to have increased exponentially now. It seems that if you're not using the foulest of words at least once in every sentence you utter, you're not in with the times. I don't believe that Mass-attending Catholics are very often guilty of outright blasphemy – uttering outrightly words against God – but it is common in the world today; do I speak against it, stand up for my Father, or tacitly go along with it? How about vicious gossip, tearing other people down, constantly casting stones at others, constantly criticizing; or perhaps a closely related sin – detraction which means telling another person's faults without a good reason? Frequent complaining, blaming others. Shouting, screaming, using language for blind rage. Using language to manipulate others in order to get what I want. Demanding the worship of my feelings. Expressions of outright arrogance and countless other subtle ways to express my supposed greatness. Prodding others to do or participate in sinful things. Telling dirty jokes, dirty stories, or other lewd expressions. Lying, propagating or going along with falsehood. Hypocritical language – saying one thing, to make oneself look good but not meaning it, meaning and/or doing the opposite. Do I use flattery to curry favor for myself? Or, perhaps language to intimidate, implicitly threaten others, so as to get what I want – conform to my desires or I will get you? Do I flap my gums, with a great aura of authority, about things (especially related to the faith) that I know little or nothing at all about? There are countless ways in which speech can be used to demand: my will be done. Affirming people in their sins is another sinful use of language; it is especially prevalent today in the area of sexuality, affirming others in cohabitation, artificial contraception, same-sex acts, and maybe even abortion.

Man's capacity to speak is something created by God and given to man as a free gift. To misuse it is to spit on a Father's gift meant for good. So how can it be used for good? The first thing is to **choose** to stop *misusing* language. There's no getting around this. I have to stop and think about it and make up my mind to stop doing it in everyday life. I have to make an act of the will and then carry through with it. Too often the importance of free-will is underestimated. How is language to be used rightly? One thing we might say is that this doesn't mean that we can never talk about more secondary things (relative to God) like work and human relations or the weather and so on. It does not mean that every other word out of my mouth has to be Jesus. But do I *ever* talk *explicitly* about higher things, especially with family members? Do I ever talk about the purpose of life and how that purpose is accomplished or the goodness of God or the sacrifice of Christ or the Mass or something in Scripture? Speech can be used in more everyday things, though. Do I ever talk about what is right and good and true or do I remain silent on such things? Do I know what things like pragmatism and relativism are so that I can recognize them in everyday life and say no? How about all of the activities, especially kids' activities, that are now encroaching on Sundays? Do I use the gift of language to stand up for my Father and say no?

As far as using language rightly, though, the most important question is: where do the things that come out of a person's mouth come from? They come, of course, from our minds, our thoughts. So if I find that my speech is not really in service to my Father, then it indicates that I need to change my thoughts. I need to start thinking about the goodness of God, His great sacrifice for us, what He has taught us, what is right and good and true, As these thoughts occupy a person's mind more and more, their speech will become more and more like that of Sts. Scholastica and Benedict's.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn