

“Don’t Swear LIKE THAT!” **by Daniel A. Lord, S.J.**

“Don’t Swear Like That”!

I know a man who likes to think he is a gentleman.

As a matter of fact, he tries hard to be a gentleman, and maybe that’s the essence of being a gentleman.

But I happen to know that once he struck a woman. Just once. And that time both the woman he struck and he himself agreed that he was right in what he did.

He’s a good Catholic, I must explain, and a professional man. The girl was a youngster, a family friend, someone he had known since the days when she was very young and spiritually fragrant from her first Communion. He could remember when she ran to see him after her first retreat, thrilled and excited and ecstatic. Her mother was dead. For many reasons she had written to him and talked to him all through her days in school.

Despite her Catholic high-school education, she determined on a State university. He didn’t like that choice. He liked it less when she came back with a sorority sophistication that covered a still extant faith.

She sat beside his desk in his office, talking. Her degree was an accomplished fact. She was bragging a bit and being very wise and grown up.

Then, to emphasize something that she had been talking about, she threw back her head and cried vigorously, “Isn’t that the worst nonsense? Why . . .”

She spat out the Holy Name.

A Slap in the Mouth

No thought, no conscious impulse actuated his gesture. What he did was as purely instinctive as the reflex that pulls back your hand when you unexpectedly touch a hot iron. He leaned across the desk and slapped her full on the mouth.

It was just one slap, and it wasn’t a hard one—a sort of symbolic slap, I suppose. But as this young woman, whose Catholicity he had known, whose charming family he admired, suddenly spat out the Holy Name in that cheap, vulgar fashion, something very primitive yet something that came from deep conviction and custom reflexed his hand.

For the first and only time in his life he hit a woman.

She stopped talking in the midst of that sentence.

You’ve heard the phrase, “she stopped dead, as if she had been struck.” This girl had been struck; and she stopped very short. He himself sat not knowing what might happen next. For a red wave swept over her cheeks. She looked at her older friend in amazement. Neither of them said a word.

Then she dropped her eyes and rubbed her lips with the back of her hand. It was not to salve the hurt of the slap; that he knew instinctively. It was to wipe away the still remaining bad taste of the name she had used in careless oath.

When she spoke, her voice was tensely quiet.

“I had it coming to me,” she said. “Thanks a lot. I’m terribly sorry. I shan’t do that again.”
And he had not the slightest doubt but that she meant what she promised.

The Custom of Cussing

Far be it from me to suggest that any of us should go about the world slapping ladies—or men either for that matter—in the face. Yet my commonest impulse is to knock together in ringing hollowness the heads of any two men whose conversation is interlarded with fat, meaningless oaths.

And while we who love God and follow Jesus Christ and believe in the eternal truths cannot militantly crack the skulls of cursers, we can certainly do far more than we are doing about the viciously growing habit of swearing.

Let me start by admitting that this booklet will not be a scientific discussion of the varied forms of evil language. I do not mean to devote space even to distinguish between swearing, cursing, and blasphemy. I shan’t try to differentiate cussing, as it’s called, from vulgarity. Naturally enough, I am excluding entirely all questions of obscenity in whatever form. That is another question entirely, and one that I do not intend to take up here.

“Slang Words?”

Cursing and profanity have become so common that now they are often simply lumped together with slang.

Many a woman in confession startles the young confessor by saying, “I accuse myself of using slang words.” Ten to one she does not mean such slang as “Cut it out!” . . . “Beat it, kid!” . . . “That’s just baloney!” . . . “What’s cookin’?” She has in mind some sort of profanity, speech that consists of the sacred names of God, the places mentioned in Sacred Scriptures—hell, for obvious example—and those imperative verbs which in short compass include the ultimate ruin of the soul and its arrival in the place of eternal despair.

She means that she has taken very sacred, important, or terrible words and made them as common as the slang expressions she tosses about with the rest of her common-place conversation.

Pearls and Serpents

Whenever in my hearing a woman purposelessly and from casual habit swears, I think of the ancient parable or fable of the two sisters. One, you remember, was kind to the witch from the woods. The second, on the other hand, sullenly and insolently refused the witch the drink that she asked. So it happened that from the lips of the generous sister fell, with each word she spoke, a diamond, a ruby, or a pearl. (I don’t know which jewel corresponded to noun, verb, adjective.) When the selfish sister spoke, you will recall, each word brought from her mouth a toad, a frog, or a serpent.

All the fables have a remarkable element of truth about them. So when I hear gentle speech fall from the lips of a cultured woman, I think of the falling jewels. And when from red-accented lips falls a flood of cheap oaths and common vulgarities, I think, as all decent men must, of cascading vermin and reptiles.

The Man Curses

But the fact that oaths and curses are used by a man rather than by a woman doesn’t essentially change their sooty, smelly character.

Recently I was eating in the diner of an east-bound train. Into the diner walked a crowd of baseball players, members of an important eastern major-league team. Like most really outstanding athletes in private life, they were soft-spoken, quite, unobtrusive, and inclined to keep their champion strength under wraps. They took their places at tables in back of me and began low-voiced conversations.

Then into their talk was injected a new voice—loud, strident, aggressively profane. Every sentence was begun with the Holy Name or ended with an oath or a curse. I looked back, surprised that the manager travelling with the team would tolerate such speech.

Leaning on the table was a well-past-middle-aged sailor in the uniform of the lowest grade. Clearly he'd been to sea for long years. Clearly, too, he was the type that would end his career still second-class, without distinguishing stripes or marks. But to prove that, despite his obvious failure in the navy, he was full of superior manhood, he flooded the diner with oaths and curses and vulgarity that made everyone in the car shudder.

Can We Blame the War? Or the Army?

It would be comforting and soul-easing to blame on the war the increase of swearing among us. Probably all defective human conduct during the next generation will be blamed on the war. It's such an easy "out." Swearing has been, of course, from time immemorial part of the soldierly swagger. When the great Joan of Arc, saint though she was, referred to the English soldiers of her day, she invariably called them the Goddams. She had heard them referred to with that phrase so often that, without knowing what it meant, she thought it a synonym for English soldiers. And she so used it.

Yet, though many a soldier swears, has sworn, and on a battlefield and in camp will continue to swear, oaths and curses are not part of army issue or equipment. I remember being much impressed by a series of photographic posters got out by the army and navy academies for our future officers. One of these in strongest terms stated that swearing and evil language were utterly foreign to an officer and a gentleman.

A Slow Growth

Actually swearing as it exists today has nothing to do with the war. It has grown up along with the general loss of faith, which means that the words used in oaths and curses have come to mean next to nothing. It is part of the collapse of culture, which reached its depths in Germany and in Russia and in the foul language of the totalitarian armies.

Time was when only the commonest men in association with their ilk used that sort of language. Usually they got away someplace where no one else could hear their talk. Today such words have passed into the vocabularies of apparently cultured men—and whether or not women are present seems to make little difference.

On to the trolley bound for the amusement park which lies beyond the religious house in which I live stumbled two young couples, very well dressed, very happy. Cried one of the boys to the girl with him: "Well, for Christ's sake! Where the hell do you think you're going?" And the four of them laughed at this most delightful piece of fresh, vigorous, original humour.

Swearing Women

I suppose that that same furtive principle which makes women try to imitate in secret the vices of men has from an ancient day led girls and women to curse a little in private. No doubt, small girls in fourth grade got a certain thrill out of the abnormal wickedness of ripping out or tripping over a tentative damn or hell.

In the main, however, except for a brief period of shocking looseness in eighteenth-century England, women did not regard swearing as the proper thing to do. Women who had to fight for their existence in the slums or the tenements might swear. They faced a cruel competition with unscrupulous men which forced them to use their tongues and their fists roughly. But other women pitied them because of the low types of defensive weapons they were obliged to use. Cultured women or women with decent opportunities did not in surprise attack beat down the stronger male with vile tongues.

Nor did they consider that the atmosphere of the drawing room or the nursery was improved by a swearing wife or mother.

Famous Fishwife

Most of us remember the famous verbal duel between Daniel O'Connell and the foul-mouthed fishwife of his day. Her reputation for swearing and cursing was England-wide. The famous orator wagered that he could out-billingsgate her and leave her speechless. But, you will also remember, he won the word-slinging contest, not with an oath or an insulting name, but by the use of cleverness—and geometry. He left the astonished woman gaping and conquered when he called her a parallelepiped. She had no vituperation to match that.

There is something very significant, though, in the fact that when a clever man matched himself with a soiled-mouthed woman he won, not by pelting her with stale and vulgar curses, but by inventing a fresh and original form of speech.

In these days many a supposedly cultured woman accepts swearing as a matter of course.

Now, we should not be surprised that when female barflies picked up the other bad habits which men carried with them into saloons and taverns they picked up the habit of evil speech. That still does not explain away the shock we feel when a fresh-faced, apparently cultivated, and well-dressed woman comes out with language you'd tolerate with reluctance from the driver of a truck that had been hit by a meandering sedan.

Is Swearing Funny?

For some reason the world has decided that when a woman swears she runs a fair chance of being funny.

Perhaps I should withdraw that phrase "for some reason." If there is humour here, it falls under the general law that applies to all humour. That is laugh-provoking which strikes us as incongruous, unexpected, out of place: a cat in a cathedral during vespers; the valedictorian whose gown flies open to reveal that he is sans-culotte; the gentleman in evening dress who sits down on a custard pie; a senator discovered doing the rumba on top of his senatorial desk.

So a swearing woman is always incongruous and on occasion funny. We expect, you see, gentle and lovely speech from women. Your dear old aunt Susie suddenly ripping forth a lusty "Damn!" may seem laughable. On the other hand, you may to your horror decide that the precious old soul has gone mad. If there is laughter here at all, it is because a woman cursing or swearing seems so utterly out of place, so entirely out of character.

Too Easy

On the general principle that swearing is funny, all sorts of dramatic scenes today struggle for laughs through some one of the characters unexpectedly uttering a lusty "Hell!" or "Damn!"

Indeed, as the supply of really good comedians dwindled and the authors who could write funny lines and amusing situations disappeared, the producers on Broadway began to depend more and more on the use of the Holy Name for laughs and on round oaths to awaken sleeping audiences into startled guffaws. Some theatrical lightweights decided that a blistering oath was funny, even though most of the audiences don't find them at all funny.

The motion-picture Code banned early and forever [Alas! it has not been 'forever'!] that easy appeal to low-comedy tastes. It outlawed oaths and swearing in the talkies. That smart and wise move saved one of the big pictures. When "Gone With the Wind" was to be filmed, there was question whether Rhett Butler's last line should remain. After all, it did include a damn. But the Code had protected the motion-picture audiences from being presented with words like damn and hell as humour. So audiences saw the full irony and tragedy when Butler walked away from the selfish Scarlett, and, in answer to her demand about what was to become of her, retorted, "Frankly, I don't give a damn."

Even there the damn he did not give for his worthless wife may have been a tinker's dam, which is not an oath at all but a bit of metal practically without value.

Wisely the motion-picture producers realized that once their authors and producers could fling into the dialogue curse words, they would stop thinking. For cursing is the most sodden equivalent for original thinking and a poor makeshift for a decently-developed vocabulary.

A Writer Accedes

It was the fine Irish Catholic actress, Una O'Connor, who once took matters into her hands on the New York stage. One of the most famous of the authors was producing a play, the climax of which came when the heroine, distraught, rushed about the stage, screaming the Holy Name.

Miss O'Connor listened as long as she could. Then she quietly approached the author.

"I wonder," she asked, "if you have any idea how the use of the Saviour's name tears us Catholics to pieces. You are much too clever a writer to need to end a scene on a situation that will simply torture the nerves of a large section of your audience. Can't you rewrite that scene and omit the name of the dear Lord?"

The scene was rewritten—and vastly improved thereby.

A Meaningless Word

As a matter of fact, the constant use of the oaths and curses has resulted in their losing all meaning. The word damn means less than nothing to most people who use it or hear it. It has become a synonym for very, very much or a great deal. So a man can with amusing inconsistency be "damn hot" or "damn cold." Even more ridiculously, though he can be "hot as hell," he doesn't hesitate to announce that he is "cold as hell." The first is a pretty good term of comparison; the second is just about the world's most slovenly comparison.

A man finds one thing "damn funny" and another "damn sad." Lacking an adequate vocabulary to express degrees of feelings, he modifies everything by damn and compares everything to hell or the devil, thus achieving nothing more than proof of his poverty of speech and his total inability to handle the English language.

Even damn is incorrect. If he knew anything, he'd at least use the participle, damned, and not the verb, damn.

Cursing Can Be Terrible

As I announced in the beginning, it is not my intention to try to make clear the various forms of cursing; nor am I discussing the degrees of evil or sinfulness of various curses. What we are considering is how a Christian, a Catholic, ought to regard the use of profane language. For that matter, how should a cultured, educated person look at it?

Yet we cannot overlook the fact that there can be occasions in which, and peoples among whom, cursing might be something very terrible, a mortal sin in the very nature of the case. So, too, under such circumstances oaths can become significant and sinful. Men have lifted their hands in an oath that called upon God to witness as truth the lies they told. In the middle of a road or in a market place, in some small fishing boat or in the smoking car of a train men have demanded that God come and stand sponsor for their evil speech, their slandering of character, some trivial thing that was unworthy of the notice of God.

Usually they were men of twisted faith, men who still believed in God but who could yet insult Him with demands that were sinful or beneath His consideration.

"By God, man! I'm telling you the truth which I say this watch cost me twenty dollars." . . . "Before the Saviour, these goods are just as I guarantee them to be!" . . . "By Our Lady, he's a liar! And I'm warning you."

By the Saviour . . .

For most people, however, the use of the names of God and of Jesus Christ signifies little. Such usage is the sign of a complete lack of faith. God means nothing to them any more. Christ has lost all value in their eyes. So the Holy Names are tossed about in careless indifference.

Fanny Hurst established a custom for novelists years ago when she let her cheap characters use, not the full Holy Name, but merely the abbreviated form, "jeez" Miss Hurst herself, when she used this, pointed out that the constant use of the name had completely dulled the users to any sense of its importance, or even to the meaning of the word they flung about.

But in somewhat the same way children have forgotten that 'gee whiz' was originally a parody on Jesus Christ. For that matter, most origins are soon forgotten. How many realize that 'hocus-pocus', the magic formula used by magicians, originated in a Protestant parody on "Hoc est corpus meum"?

Careless vs. Cruel Cursing

Fortunately for the human race few people even stop to think what cursing means. To most people it's just a silly use of words called cussin'.

Yet a curse is one of the most horrible things that the human mind ever conceived against a fellow man. It is the deliberate and solemn calling down of evil upon someone else. To this day when a voodoo priest or devotee in one of the Indies puts a curse on a victim, he fills that curse with all the ill he can heap upon the accursed. Even the realization that he has been cursed by a voodoo doctor is enough to make a cursed native believer die of frightened expectation.

So throughout human history men and women have tried by some magic of mind to harm their enemies. Every age seems to have record of waxen figures tortured with pins and fire and curses until the victims for whom the figures stood withered to their death. Evil men and women have called down upon a man, his house, and his descendants all the evil they could conceive. Out of the malign forces of the atmosphere wizards and witches have tried to summon disease and misfortune and sudden death.

Most of this is rankest superstition.

The desire of men, however, to curse their enemies is a stark fact that repeats itself a thousand times.

Words Full of Meaning

Now, without shadow of doubt, when men first began to use our modern forms of cursing, those words were full of dire meanings and purposes. Those words are, objectively considered, terrible words. Only constant repetition and loss of faith have dulled their significance.

To this day in lands where men have strong faith and consequently can live strongly by it or sin strongly against it, they can, when they curse one another, intend to the fullest extent the meanings of the words themselves.

"God damn you!" or "God damn him!" say the thoughtless modern man and woman. The words to him and her mean hardly more than "I hope you stub your toe," or, "You old nuisance, you!" or, "May you get a wrong connection the next time you telephone!"

Luckily, I repeat, people are amazingly thoughtless. They say, "Oh, go to hell!" as carelessly as they say, "Oh, go chase yourself around the block!" or, "How about running home to mother?"

If we were to stop for just a minute and, instead of being like mindless parrots who repeat what they have heard, or like phonograph records that grind over and over again the words that were impressed on the wax discs, thought of what the phrases meant, we might drop them forever from our vocabularies.

Deep Origins

“God damn you, you old faker, you!” exclaims the man to his friend, laughing and slapping him on the back. And both of them think nothing more of it.

Yet that phrase was first born in the mind of someone who hated his enemy with a bitterness that went far beyond death itself. Of all the possible evils that could befall his enemy, far and away the worst was the eternal loss of his soul. No other pain or loss in this life could compare with the eternal ruin that might be pronounced on him at the end by the eternal judge, who casts men off for their sins and crimes.

So out of this deep, if distorted, faith the man who originated that curse put the words into horrible sequence. He cried out against his enemy in a curse that was a sort of perverted prayer: “May God damn you!” Or in preparation for the careless modern’s, “Oh, go to hell!” he cried out, “May you go to hell!”

Neither he nor his enemy had any doubt about the foulness and finality of that curse. No other curse could possibly pull together into the compass of a few words more of devastating evil, lasting ruin, human collapse, and God’s final anger. That curse contained for the victim his enemy’s savage desire for his final unhappiness. It tried to slam the door on hope and initiate eternal misery.

In a frightful explosive bomb of words the curser flung at his victim something he believed to be far worse than all the evils of life and death. This terrible fate he hoped would explode upon the accursed one. This terrible fate he perversely prayed for his hated enemy.

Vendetta

Don’t think that men in the ancient ages of faith were not capable of trying to make this horrible curse come true. If they wanted their enemies damned, they planned a revenge that might encompass even this desire of theirs.

Ordinarily when a man went out to commit the sin called revenge, he planned merely the minor vendetta. He waited until his enemy had gone to Confession and Communion, so that he could be sure that the fellow was in the grace of God. Then he slipped the dagger between his enemy’s ribs. He was content to rob him of his earthly life; that was evil enough. He preferred that in the world beyond his victim find his eternal happiness.

The major vendetta went far deeper. The man who sought revenge was not content with anything less than the eternal loss of his enemy’s soul. He wanted him damned in hell, and he plotted how this curse could be realized. So he waited until he was sure his victim had committed a mortal sin and was spiritually dead. Then with the victim on the brink of hell, the murderer plunged his dagger. He deprived the man of his earthly life, and he hurled him to eternal ruin. He had made real his curse as dagger and curse hit together: “God damn your soul to hell!”

Horrible! Yet human hatred can go that far.

Completely Thoughtless

It was left for thoughtless people of succeeding ages—and our age—to take that horrible curse and make it part of the most commonplace speech. The second baseman blocks off the runner; it’s an out; and when the runner rises to his feet, he damns the other player to eternal ruin. The girl is kept waiting for her change while the saleswoman takes care of another customer. Under her breath this sweet-faced youngster mutters words that consign the offending clerk to damnation.

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Yet back in our subconscious and often rising to our consciousness is a very clear sense of the deeper significance of the curse. Never has there been a normal child who did not hesitate on the brink of his first curse words. He might not know what they really meant. He might be very vague about the evil they implied. Nonetheless he did not miss the fact that the words were crammed with evil, that they bore some sinister connotation that he ought not evoke.

Even the child who had heard the members of his family cursing and swearing around him still drew back at first from the words. And the first time he used them, he would not have been deeply surprised if they had been followed by a bolt from the blue, some paralysing clap of thunder hurling him and the things around him to the ground.

Buried deep in the heart of these curses, which have become such casual phrases, is an inescapable significance so deep that little children are appalled when they hear them used by their elders. And only the coarsest and commonest of adults can fail to be shocked when innocent, childish lips utter one of these horrible desires for man's ruin and eternal doom.

What, then, must be youngsters' reactions when they hear the words spoken in bitterness and hate and deep invective by mothers and fathers, by older brothers and sisters toward each other, by adults really fired with hate that lavas forth in blasting words?

Why Not the Reverse?

It is a little queer, to put it mildly, that moderns go around damning to right and left and ordering off to hell in slapdash fashion anything or anyone that happens to incur their momentary annoyance. What could be more ridiculous and incongruous than the damning of a pencil that breaks in one's hand or the dish that cracks as one dries it? What more out of proportion than to damn the paper boy who's late with the sports final, or the telephone operator who gives a wrong number?

Yet a person walks through the day blithely wishing to hell the man who inadvertently steps on his toes, the careless pedestrian who makes the mistake of thinking he has a right on the street, the tax collector, the mailman who doesn't bring an expected letter, the little boy who tramples on the fresh lawn.

Wouldn't you think that it would be our natural desire to draw down blessings upon the world and to wish all manner of good things for our fellow men?

Why, for our own sweet sakes, don't we keep saying, "God bless you"?

And if we are really bent on getting rid of someone, "Go to heaven" should serve just as well as a wish projecting him to the other place.

Why, instead of bombarding God with requests to damn and destroy, which are certainly precarious processes, don't we beg Him to shower the world with graces? Why are men and women eternally asking the merciful Father to damn someone or something or to send to hell the unoffending, the slightly annoying, and the thoroughly wicked?

Asking for Good

God. Himself, if we could attribute to Him human emotions, should be amazed that His name is most frequently used, not to beseech blessings, but to invoke evil and misfortune. For one man who prays for the world's salvation, half a dozen seem perfectly willing to consign themselves and all around them to eternal ruin.

"Well, I'll be damned!" is the commonest of imprecations.

“Well, if it ain’t my old friend, Bill! Damn your hide anyhow!” is plain formula.

And “Get the hell out of here!” is said in seriousness almost as often as it is said in the spirit of sheer fun. Some fun!

Calling on God

Apparently there was never a time in history nor a parody on religion in which the people did not constantly call on God or the gods. Perhaps that is a kind of inverted proof of man’s closeness to the supernatural. The pagan nations, for instance, were eternally demanding the attention of their gods.

“By Jove!” “By Venus!” “May Bacchus hear me!”—these were merely Roman equivalents for the “By Zeus!” “As Aphrodite is my mistress!” “As true as Pallas Athena hears me!” among the Greeks. Way back in Babylon and Egypt the men who were least likely to pray to the gods and goddesses were most likely to use the names of those gods and goddesses to testify that they were not offering a bad silver coin or that the mare they were selling did not have the spavin disease.

Reverence for His Names

Against this frivolous use of the gods’ names—a custom characteristic of pagandom—the Jewish religion protected the Holy Name of their God with the most solemn laws. Lest the name of the true God be used as carelessly as were those of Osiris or Astarte or Baal or Mercury, God’s proper name was never pronounced. Only the consonants without the vowels were printed, and in place of God’s sacred name another name was substituted.

Under the direct guidance of God Himself the Jews felt that His name was too holy a thing to be dragged around the stables of the racecourse, into the taverns of the village, under the feet of the mules and camels in the inn court, or on the rug spread to receive the gamblers’ dice. That name must be kept for prayer and solemn petition.

Hence God’s name was used only with the utmost reverence and directly toward God Himself. It was a potent name which, when invoked, drew to the speaker the attention of the creator of heaven and earth. It was a name so strong that cities fell at its sound. It was the word symbol for the omnipotent maker of all things, the king of heaven and the Lord of Hosts.

So, let the pagans swear by Hercules if they wanted to. The one and only God of the Jews was no demi-deity, no mere deified hero, no human passion turned into a weakling god. If a Roman gambler called upon Mercury to give him a run of luck, it was because he regarded Mercury as a trickster who was not above loading the dice. If the name of Bacchus was tossed around the banquet table, it was taken for granted that the unsavoury god would have felt right at home with the other drunkards.

But to the Jews the name of their God was the name of the glorious maker and ruler of the universe. He was their Father, their gracious king. His name was their shield and protection in time of battle. His name was a word too sacred to be heard outside the holiest courts of the Temple.

Christ Speaks

Christ continued this command against the careless use of His Father’s name. He outlawed frivolous and purposeless oaths of all sorts. He bade His followers invoke upon one another only what was good and noble. Christ could see no possible parallel between the careless pagan’s crying out “By Jove!” to invoke that libertine of Olympus and the true believer’s swearing “By God!” and “By the Almighty!”—words which called upon the one true God to turn His attention to the affairs of men.

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His Own Dear Name

The name of Jesus Christ should have for us the loveliest and most gracious of associations.

It is the name chosen by the Almighty for His Son. It is the name that Mary whispered over the crib of her Baby. When the shepherds and the Magi asked in wonder, "What is His name?" Mary smiled and answered, "He is called Jesus."

In that name demons were hurled from their victims. At that name hell itself trembled and the prince of evil knew that he had found his conqueror.

That name blends all our hopes: The name Jesus means our Saviour; the name Christ means the one anointed by God and intended to be our king and leader.

So throughout history the Church has cried out to the Trinity in the firm certainty that she would receive grace and power and light and strength when she asked favours. ". . . through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen."

In the Name of . . .

There can be strength and meaning in the use of a name. There is the story of the general of the American Revolution who pounded on the doors of the British fort and demanded entrance "in the name of the Lord God Jehovah and the Continental Congress." Ambassadors speak in the name of the countries they represent. Even the fairy tales pay tribute to the power of the name, for the evil genii of "The Arabian Nights" were held captive in the name of Solomon, and gates were mysteriously opened when the name of a great spirit was spoken.

Divine Power

So with divine authority Jesus Christ gave to His name tremendous power.

"Whatsoever you shall ask the Father in my name," He promised, "that will I do."

He reminded His followers that hitherto they had asked nothing in His name. Henceforth His name was to be a magic word strong enough in its utterance to open the gates of heaven and to touch the very heart of the eternal Father.

No wonder that the Apostles immediately began to preach and work miracles "in His name." In His name they bade the lame man arise and walk, and he obeyed. In His name they faced the hostile multitudes and won them to truth. In His name they marched out to conquer the world of their day, and with no other power they won through to victory.

Terrible Transition

It would be interesting to know just how the Holy Name of Jesus Christ came to pass from this glorious and powerful invocation to the casual, contemptuous, and sinful use current in the world today. A dreadful sort of parody on prayer seems to be involved in the distortion. It is as if a brilliant enemy of Christ had taken the name of the Saviour and twisted it to the most frivolous and debased uses.

But how did all this happen? Originally the name of Jesus Christ was spoken by the Christians in loving reverence and with trust in its power. Did some pagan servant hear a matron say, as she cradled her child, "Jesus Christ, protect him" "Jesus Christ, make her pure"? And did that servant in contemptuous parody of her mistress use the name over her pots and pans as deliberate blasphemy? Did the persecutors of those early days catch the name from the lips of the martyrs and lisp it in obscene imitation, hissing it to echo horribly the prayers of the saints?

Did the Devil himself, fearing the power of that name, determine that the Holy Name should be stripped of its power by the mouthings of filthy lips? Did he teach base tongues to use it for the vilest purposes? Did he order his followers to drag that name from the churches into the brothels, from the homes of virgins into the taverns of water fronts?

However it was brought about, that Holy Name soon must have been invoked, as now it is, to bring luck in card playing, to accompany the beastly swillings of a low drinking house. Soon, quite too soon, the Holy Name became the common “curse word” of men and women who hated Christ, no longer believed in Him, or regarded Him as of no importance. And so it has remained to this day.

Why Not as It was Meant?

And here again, what a tragic waste of opportunity!

Originally the Holy Name was meant to be used to work miracles of grace upon the world. It was a name for blessings. It was the name that rang with the certain hope of God’s loving bounty and protection.

“Jesus Christ,” prayed the early Christians, “give the whole world the joy of your truth.” . . . “Christ Jesus, protect men against all evil.” . . . “You promised, O blessed Saviour, that whatever we asked in your name you would grant. So we ask for the conversion of our land, freedom from sin for all men, forgiveness for the dying, innocence for our children.” . . . “Grant us eternal life, beloved Jesus.” . . . “Pour forth your grace upon the earth, O blessed Trinity, through Jesus Christ Our Lord, Amen.”

How different this was and how different it could be again from the brutal slashing of Christ’s name by soldiers and sailors and labourers and professional men and by women and entertainers and children! Surely this is a time when we need over us the protection and saving power of the name of Christ! How terrible that it is used in blasphemy and contempt, in obscenity and in sin!

Utterly Without Strength

I don’t know where men got the idea that it was manly to swear and curse. “Good man’s talk” in all too many cases is just a phrase covering the right of the male to sprinkle his conversation with oaths and curses. No man can conceivably be more manly because he uses dirty vocabulary any more than he can be considered more manly because he doesn’t bathe or shave. No man is the stronger for his having lost control of his language. And if slovenly dress is the sign of a tramp, slovenly speech is the sign of a cultured hobo.

So often you hear from men—ashamed, as any decent man is when he stops to think of his oathsome, curseful speech—that cursing has become such a habit with them that they can no longer control that sort of talk in themselves. That’s a simple lie. It’s just about the weakest alibi they could present. I’ve known many a man who in the company of other men swore continuously. The moment these fellows passed into a company that would not tolerate language like that—say a group of fastidious women—their talk entirely changed. They had complete control over their speech. They swore merely because they liked it, because they thought it made them appear tough and hairy, because they felt it was a way of impressing other men with their brawn and hardness.

When unbrushed teeth, and dirty ears, and fingernails heavy with dirt become signs of strength, dirty speech will be a sign of manliness.

. . . and Utterly Without Charm

It is my simple conclusion, one that any person would reach with a little thinking, that cursing and swearing are the most unoriginal and stupid forms of speech in the world. Yet a lot of people indulge in swearing as if that were an accomplishment, and you meet young people who are brashly proud of their mastery of gutter and pigsty oaths.

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Not long ago I received a letter from a youngster, high-school age, who set herself to show off. In an obvious attempt to shock or impress me, she filled her pages with—well, what women sometimes refer to in polite understatement as “slang words.”

Of course, I wasn't shocked in the way she had meant me to be shocked. I felt only bored and disgusted and embarrassed for her. It was disturbing to think that this kid even knew—at a time of life when she should be sweet, innocent, and gay—the words she used. I was sorry, very, very sorry that a girl thought it smart to copy the language of men without faith and women without virtue.

Stale Stuff

But if she expected me to be impressed with her virtuosity, if she expected me to be amazed at her mastery of strange and esoteric words, she was absolutely mistaken. She was simply a poor imitator of experts, who themselves repeated “ad nauseam” the same old tiresome words soiled by alley use, frayed to the hem by rough handling.

I'd met a dozen truck drivers who could teach her profanity that could make her pitiful carbon copies sound like nursery rhymes. The words she uttered with such a gleam of discovery in her eyes were stale when William the Conqueror first landed in England; hackneyed when the Crusaders went off to the First Crusade. The phrases she used clumsily and fumblingly had been expertly used by pirates on Moslem fleets and camel drivers of Genghis Khan and concubines in African ports.

I've yet to hear anything new in profanity or anything fresh or original from a man or a woman who swears.

Correction

No. That is not entirely correct.

There is just one man I can recall who used a profane word amusingly. That was Ring Lardner. In one of his parody letters he mimicked the “pious” insincerity of those who do not dare print the world hell in its full form but who bowdlerize the word by omitting the vowel and spelling the word “h-ll.” Lardner's ignoramus letter writer wrote the nasty word “he-ll.”

Cursing Shows

Among the rest of mankind swearing indicates just one of several demeaning and abashful things:

It indicates a complete lack of faith in God Himself.

It shows a contempt for Jesus Christ.

It proves how little one knows about the meaning of words and the significance of ideas.

It shows a total lack of originality.

Unless people no longer believe in God, they are strange indeed if they curse and swear. For if they believe in God and call upon Him to damn others, to damn even themselves, don't they think He might in the end listen to them? Yet, on the other hand, if they do not believe in God, what value is there to cursing and swearing? They would be much smarter if they ranged the long catalogue of the pagan gods and goddesses, who not only have names that lend themselves to swearing but vices to which each oath could be attached.

Since the modern world has gone so pagan, anyhow, why not a new order of swearing? “By Neptune, I'll get that submarine!” “Holy Icharus, look at that fellow fly!” “Suffering Sisyphus, I'm tired!” “Big bulls of Bashan, I'm drunk!”

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But when pagans curse in Christian words, they are making fools of themselves. They are calling on a God in Whom they do not believe, to damn someone to a damnation they regard as ridiculous, in a hell they do not believe exists.

With curses they consign to what they regard as a non-existent punishment people they might as well invite to journey to the moon, to Tophet, to Lilliput, or to the diamond caves of Sinbad.

But, I repeat, if people who believe in God curse and swear, they had better watch their step. For I wonder whether the God called upon in prayer or imprecation may not in the end answer in proper fashion both kinds who lift or fling their voices to His throne.

The contempt that swearers show for Jesus Christ is clear enough. If they do not believe in Him, why do they spend so much time using His name? Why not take Julius Caesar instead, or Nabuchodonosor (or Nebuchadnezzar)—a lovely name to swear by—or Genghis Khan. Is their use of His name a simple proof that they do believe in Him and cannot get Him out of their minds or off their lips?

Senseless

But if a Catholic uses the name of Jesus Christ in this profane fashion, what can he expect from the Saviour in return? Accustomed to a blasphemous use of the name, how can he in any decency call upon Christ in prayer? He brings to Him in Holy Communion the very lips that used His name as a byword to the accompaniment of rotten stories and enacted vice. May the Saviour Himself have mercy on the strangely twisted creature—the man or the woman—who pretends to be His follower and yet uses His name as a constant oath.

Of all the senseless, stupid customs in the world, cursing is about the worst.

Those who do not believe in God are merely wasting their time when they curse.

Those who believe in God are running the risk of His taking them seriously when they curse.

What thoughtless, stupid creatures men and women can be!

A Really Good Cusser

The most effective cusser I ever heard of never used a really profane word in his life. He was the Catholic coach of a football team, and he believed that a team moved more effectively when it was goaded on by the spur of vigorous language. Yet he regarded the names of God and Christ as deeply sacred. And the common curses he had heard all his life he disdained as worn to pitiful shreds.

So he invented his cursing as he went along.

“Great balls of codfish!” he’d cry, and his team would wilt.

“You fat, lazy hamburgers!” he’d shout, and the team would jump as if he’d whipped them.

“I’ll horndoozle the lot of you. By the great mooncalf you can all go jump into a bed of molten lava! Dad bing you, you big white slugs!”

The team could never decide whether they marvelled more at his ability to think out new plays or his ability to dig up expurgated curses that made the plays effective.

Too Big to Swear

The most feared director in Hollywood never uses a curse or an oath. He regards his reputation for originality and quick thinking too highly to borrow anyone's stale, insipid language. So he leaves profanity and blasphemy to the small fry who can't think of clever things to say and who must depend on the dated, tiresome, man-handled, and now quite meaningless profanity of our language.

It's the blustering fellow putting up a false front, afraid of being caught and found out, arrogant in his small powers and uncertain of his ability to dominate a situation who bluffs it out with a flow of bad language. A man completely in control of the situation no more has to curse and swear than he has to jump up and down and tear paper off the walls.

Plain Stupid

I'm sorry to confess it—but whenever I hear anyone swearing fluently, I put him down as a stupid person. My first expectation is to find him to be some illiterate oaf with long-standing dirt caked behind his ears and his whole person giving forth an unpleasant odour. If he doesn't fit that picture, I put him down as weak and uneducated. He has had to fall back on rough language even though that language has been used so long and so hard that it really no longer has any vitality. Clearly he isn't aware of the barren, jejune quality of the language he uses; he still, poor fool, thinks it smart and effective.

Beyond that I decide that he is too limited in vocabulary to find the correct word for the situation. He doesn't know any adjectives, so he has to depend on damn and hell for his shades of meaning. When he wants to be emphatic, he must shout loudly or turn to oaths and curses that have for centuries been tiresome, stale, repellent tags of speech.

Then if by some chance I learn that the swearer is supposed to be clever, a man or a woman of some reputation for brilliance, I decide promptly that he has started to lose his grip. Or perhaps, he is feeling tired and flat today. Or maybe I caught him in a relaxed condition, with his mental hair all down. Or perhaps he is not so clever as he would like to have me believe. In his profanity at least he has to borrow from the illiterate tramp, the day labourer who missed both background and educational opportunity, the sailor recovering from a drunken bout, the woman of the gutters, and the children of the slums.

We Catholics

We Catholics who believe in God and love Christ and respect the pure-minded and the pure-lipped Mary simply cannot afford to be part of the national slump into swearing.

If we are, let us confess it to our shame and make amends and reparation and resolutions.

If we use the Holy Name to curse, we almost cease to be Catholics. We drag the name of our Leader into ugly situations and sinful places. We call upon Jesus Christ, not to save the world, but to have part in its evils and vices. We use that powerful name less in the wonderful strength of prayer than in frivolous contexts, silly situations, evil purposes.

If we curse, we either have to set aside our faith or cling to it. If we hold on to our faith, how can we ask God to damn anything? If we fear hell for ourselves, how can we even in the most sickly jest wish it for others? If at the moment when we utter evil language we give up our faith and make the words mean nothing, aren't we guilty of a sort of apostasy? Aren't we denying great Catholic truths? Aren't we being plain stupid?

Stupid Imitation

What we really do when we swear is ape the worst side of the pagans. Pagans have always sworn and cursed. They always will. Not respecting their gods or our God, they drag gods and God into their gutter talk and use

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them to ornament their foul stories. They call the gods to witness their lies and sins and vices and debaucheries. Caring little for their neighbours, they freely consign them to hell and damnation.

Let them act in this wise. It fits in well with their general lack of faith and their ignorance of Christ's great law of love.

But we? Their ways are not our ways. Let them curse the sun because it shines too much and the rain because it falls too seldom. Let them welcome their friends with salvos of jovial curses and pour out in vicious hatred exactly those same curses upon their most hated foes. Let them make profanity, if they must, fashionable. But even the smartest among them cannot make it other than the tiresome release of a dull mind and the frank evidence of stupid unoriginality and vulgar imitation.

We Catholics cannot follow these senseless ways.

God gave us our tongues for the purpose of speaking the truth and expressing beauty and singing songs and chanting poetry. He gave us His powerful name and the name of His Son for our strength and salvation. He gave us strong words with which to frighten the evil spirits away from our salvation. He gave us powerful, charming words to be used in prayer.

Let's call down upon the earth the living presence of God and the rains of His benefits. Leave swearing and cursing to the stupid, the vulgar, the ignorant, the pagan, the unbeliever, the vile.

It is our happy privilege to lift our voices to summon God to our side, to bring down the blessings of the Father upon all mankind, to win for our brothers and sisters, for all mankind, the benediction from on high.

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