

SPEECH, A MIDDLEMAN

MAURICE CONLON, O.P.



BETWEEN the beginning and end of anything there must always exist a middle, even though we are only talking about old rags. Not only do old rags have a middle but very often they command the attention of a middleman as well. All through New England, as a matter of fact, merchants buy from the textile manufacturers the small ends of cloth which have been cut off here and there as the great rolls pass from machine to machine. Such men merely sort the bits of cloth in order to resell them at a vast profit. They are middlemen between the manufacturer of these rags and the merchants who transform them into paper and other useful materials.

Something similar happens in the musical world. Traveling minstrels, or indeed any minstrels, usually employ an interlocutor who is nothing more than a middleman between them and their audience. Through him the idea behind the program as well as its sequence is transmitted from the players to those beyond the footlights.

The middleman, however, is not always identical with the man in the middle; in fact he is sometimes not in the middle, and sometimes not a man at all. Indeed if he were always a man we might reasonably expect him to care for himself. But since such is not always the case, at times it becomes imperative that we control and guide our middlemen; and particularly the one called "speech," for speech really belongs to the middleman class. It performs the function of interlocution by bridging the chasm, as it were, between the minds of people in all classes. Did you ever notice the reaction of an enthusiastic young man when a "swell idea" strikes him? The immediate effect is tremendous, and a longing to share the phenomenon with a friend causes his lower thorax to swell and recede as the waves of the deep. As a result of all this he transfers his idea through speech to the mind of his friend. Nothing extraordinary has taken place, however, because speech is the usual middleman in such cases. Of course many people talk with their hands to a great extent; but

we can be thankful that such is not the ordinary manner of communication, otherwise the majority of us would leave crowded elevators and street cars with blackened eyes and similar decorations.

Yes, the tongue has its proper place as well as a definite duty, and long may it wag. We agreed in the beginning, however, that speech is not a man in any real sense. Therefore we must train and guide it; we must place a meter upon vocalization. Speed regulators control the rate at which an automobile travels, and tracks guide the course of a train. In this respect speed and speech have something in common, for if speed must have its regulator speech is useless if not on the right track. Each must be controlled. The track, though, cannot be two steel rails because words do not run on wheels. In fact words cannot be controlled adequately by anything from without but rather require an internal regulating disposition. The loud speaker must be adjusted from within and must work, as it were, automatically or habitually.

A habit must be the guide of every word we say and of the manner in which we say it. Naturally every normal person has a habit of speech. But there are habits and habits, some virtuous some vicious; and consequently in speech there are virtues and vices because the former are nothing more than good habits, while the vices are bad habits. Nature herself demands and imposes the obligation of acquiring a habit of correct speech. It is the virtue of *affability* the true interior and exterior decorator of speech.

Some think that to be affable means to be laughable; but that is not the idea. We are not obliged to become buffoons. It is obligatory, however, to speak to others with becoming gravity and respect, to display suitable sympathy for their misfortunes, to give evidence of happiness at their successes. In other words, justice demands the practice of this good habit of speech, the virtue of affability. "Make thyself affable to the congregation of the poor."¹ And who will dare deny the right of the congregation of the poor to the enjoyment of at least verbal kindness and consideration from us?

Since affability may be considered as a certain congeniality in speech, and since we do not talk to ourselves, this virtue cannot be exercised towards ourselves. Therefore affability is, in that respect, a *social* virtue which springs from the natural obli-

¹ Eccl., iv, 7.

gation which constantly commands us to live peacefully with others. To become an automaton or a "yes-man," however, is not a requirement of affability. Machines and brutes can be regulated or trained to respond regularly to definite stimuli; nevertheless neither the machine nor the brute could be affable, not even if they possessed the faculty of speech. Affability sometimes requires the expression of joy and sometimes of sorrow, but machines and brutes could not recognize the proper time for each. "The principal act of a virtue is the interior election (or choice)."² Consequently unless the power to perform that interior act of choice be present virtue cannot exist. Man alone among earthly creatures is so blessed and endowed. Affable people are far then from being perpetual automatic assenters. They radiate rather the true character and greatness of their nature as well as of the virtue which motivates them because they speak with perfect freedom yet do not become offensive.

But just as all trains do not complete their trips on time and without accident, so neither do all men speak affably. Some are like trains which get ahead of schedule thereby endangering lives at every crossing. These men are, so to speak, ahead of themselves. They are flatterers, arch-opponents of truth and justice. And they are such because a flatterer is "one who wishes to speak according to the good pleasure of another in all things, provided he does so with the intention of acquiring some lucrative gain."³ Although it deceives at first this vice ordinarily reveals its inherent offensiveness through overeagerness. Flattery is fundamentally praise, which each one of us enjoys. In that fact lies not only the danger of this vicious habit but also its hideousness. Flattery aims to deceive and because of its malicious purpose resembles highway robbery committed on the principal roadway of social intercourse. Flattery seeks lucrative gain or vainglory; it is praise for a price. Flattery is unjust; it is an embryonic theft, a lie in action, an affront to good judgment. Moreover, being opposed to charity it really scoffs at its victim. Certainly give praise to whom it is due; but let not the purpose of praising be to acquire something in return. Praise should be accorded the virtuous qualities or acts in another but should not be made use of to acquire unjust dividends for oneself. Praise should seek neither price nor prize.

² Saint Thomas, *Summa Theol.*, IIa IIae, q. 114, a. 3, ad 4um.

³ IIa IIae, q. 115, a. 1, corp.

A flatterer does seek these, not only once in a while but repeatedly; for he acts by force of habit, almost automatically.

Now in the circulatory system of the human organism, low blood pressure ranks with its opposite in seriousness. The patient suffering from either high or low blood pressure is a sick person. One extreme is as bad as the other. Our speech, likewise, has its ups and downs. Flattery may be considered as high pressure in conversation; and, like the person with high blood pressure, our speech suffers when surfeited with praise. The verbal malady may be termed high praise pressure. Certainly, speech is on the wrong track when using flattery; but when the low pressure of quarrelsomeness creeps into it, speech not only misses the right track but misses even the wrong one, and a catastrophe results.

Surliness is positively offensive. It produces quarrels, contradictions, and contentions with no other object than offense and no reason for being other than malice. Prodded on by the lack of love which produced it, this social sickness offends against fundamental justice and decency. It is inhuman because unsocial. Boldly and openly it manifests ignorant opposition to primary truths and to social solicitude. Flattery attempts to delight unduly by praise but surliness, on the contrary, attempts to sadden a victim by displaying a hard and disrespectful opposition. This defeat, or this low praise pressure, if it may be called such is an open affront and for that reason surpasses flattery in malice.

As a person opens his mouth to speak, then, three possibilities present themselves; affability, flattery, or surliness. Like most virtues, affability holds the middle place. Excessive praise is on one side, while malicious quarrelsomeness is on the other. Or, to put it in economic parlance, this middleman which is not a man can undercharge or overcharge unless it be carefully regulated. It will undercharge by flattery in order to cheat and, in the end, to acquire lucrative gain. It will overcharge by surliness and contention; not, however, for purposes of gain but rather to injure the unfortunate purchaser of its wares. To flatter people in order to help oneself, or to contend unnecessarily with them or to contradict them out of a spirit of malice bespeaks a middleman who is unfair and unjust in the all-important business of verbal intercourse. But, properly used, speech will give to each one the consideration to which he is entitled. It will be affable, civil and respectful.

And this is a most important element in the large field of human relations for we talk more than we eat. If the uttered word is properly adjusted to the rights of each individual listener then we may indeed be indicted for the virtue of affability, but of course the indictment would really not be an indictment at all. It would rather be a coronation, and certainly a perfection. And this perfection, this properly moderated speech, this affability is as pleasing as the sound of an accurately adjusted radio. There are none of those harsh, gritting and unbearable sounds of the overcharged set, nor is there present that exaggerated softness which makes tone unreal as well as untrue. In a word, such speech does not display a surly contentious spirit, is not enervated by a flattering spirit. On the contrary truth and reality are the materials which go to form its backbone.

TO JUDAS

MARK BARRON, O.P.

*By false disciple to be given
To foemen for His Blood athirst,
Himself, the Living Bread from Heaven,
He gave to His disciples first.**

O thou poor hapless wretch! And didst
Thou think to block the Way of those
Who choose to bear the Cross; to drive
The Truth from out the hearts and minds
Of men; to choke the Life of those
Who truly live? No; thou didst
But purchase to thyself despair.
Thought ye Such a One
Could be bought and sold
Who would, unstinting, give
Even Himself?

* From the Hymn, *Verbum Supernum*, for Lauds of the Office of Corpus Christi.