

(When) Is There a Christian Responsibility to Gossip?

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This paper offers a Thomistic defense of gossip as a licit means of protecting third parties from harm by known offenders. After first clarifying what constitutes gossip, it draws from Thomas Aquinas to identify the narrow set of conditions under which gossip might be both permissible and obligatory. It concludes by specifying how the duty to gossip might work in Christian institutions, and especially within institutions where there are weak systems of formal accountability.

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I. Introduction

On November 14th of 2018, Pope Francis used his general address to denounce gossip in spectacular terms. Gossipers, he proposed, not only kill, but are “like terrorists because their tongues throw a bomb and then they calmly walk away...but what they say with that bomb destroys the reputation of others.”¹ It was not the first time Francis had taken such a stand: in

2015, he criticized the ‘terrorism of gossip’ while chastising the lack of fraternity in the presbyterate and religious orders.² Yet his remarks in 2018 drew heightened scrutiny, as Roman Catholics had spent the year encountering horrifying allegations about sexual abuse and institutional coverups.³

Prohibitions on gossip have deep roots both in Scripture and the Christian tradition, and arise from the ordering of Christian speech toward blessing.⁴ Such a norm governs speech both about God and humanity: we are not permitted to live in the contradiction of blessing God while cursing our neighbor that James warns against (James 3:5-11). Impugning our neighbors’ reputation keeps them from enjoying the freedom and trust that are essential for both receiving and distributing goods, alienating them from the life of the community. As Solomon warns in Proverbs, “death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21). While Pope Francis’ rhetoric of ‘terrorism’ is extreme, the strong presumption against gossiping they signal is warranted.

Even so, the speech that falls under the absolute prohibition on gossip has often been left underspecified. Such a gap is problematic, as overly restrictive prohibitions on gossip create moral hazards for a community. Consider the cascading revelations of sexual abuse across a range of institutions we have witnessed the past few years. Redress for wrongs demands formal accountability. But as a means of social control, formal mechanisms are inherently limited in their scope, and generally function retrospectively. Additionally, a concern to protect victims’ privacy while avoiding defamation lawsuits has led many institutions to adopt minimalist policies about what they disclose regarding ongoing or completed investigations of offenders. These dynamics combine to create an information vacuum that allows those who engage in misconduct to enjoy a reputational cocoon, even if temporarily. These hazards of overly

restrictive speech norms are especially acute for Christian universities like my employer, Baylor, which often add divine sanction to prohibitions on gossip, while emphasizing the extra-curricular aspects of educational formation. The combination of the two dynamics is perilous: in a community with considerable informal social contact between professors and students, complete reliance on formal accountability leaves bad actors who enjoy good reputations free to exploit them without detection. Prohibiting too much in our norms against gossip creates opportunities for abuse.⁵

In this essay, I want to rehabilitate gossip's reputation as a legitimate mode of Christian speech. Christian ethicists have had little to say about the ethics of reputation in recent years, a gap that correlates with the discipline's disinterest in casuistry. As Julia Fleming observes in a rare (and excellent) contribution to the subject, an ethics of "reputation requires casuistry, in the best sense of the term," as it involves weighing a variety of factors against each other to know how to proceed.⁶ On its own, the question of whether gossip can be licit is uninteresting: the action instead lies in the details of when gossip might be required and how one can undertake it justly. As such, I first examine what constitutes gossip, what makes it valuable for a community, and its characteristic dangers. I then undertake a dialogue with Thomas Aquinas's accounts of fraternal correction and sins of speech, in order to determine whether gossip can ever be justified on Thomistic terms. The stringency of Thomas's thought makes him a useful interlocutor for determining whether and in what manner defamation might be licit. While Thomas' account is underdeveloped, I suggest that a Thomistic account of gossip could both permit and even require defaming others behind their backs to prevent vulnerable people from unwittingly placing themselves in the way of harm. Restoring gossip's reputation within Christian communities begins by seeing how it can be animated by our duty to protect others. Finally, I argue that such a

duty depends for its effectiveness on robust prohibitions on idle gossip and on formal processes of accountability. Protective gossip is not a replacement for institutional efforts to bring about justice. Nor is it only a remedial form of correction when such institutional efforts fail. Instead, just gossip is a necessary supplement to formal processes of accountability, which extends their scope throughout the community.

II. The Nature and Dangers of Gossip

Novelist George Eliot's Victorian skewering of Middlemarch's gossip networks neatly distills its natures and dangers. In her novel by the same name, the overtly pious arch-evangelical Nicholas Bulstrode hastens the death of the only man who knows the illegitimate source of his fortune. Word of the scandal, Eliot writes, "spread through Middlemarch like the smell of fire." With her characteristically dry wit, Eliot excoriates the religious community for indulgently feasting on the salacious news: "The business was felt to be so public and important," she writes, "that it required dinners to feed it, and many invitations were just then issued and accepted on the strength of this scandal concerning Bulstrode...; wives, widows, and single ladies [...] went out to tea oftener than usual..."⁷

The moment captures a variety of features of gossip. Crucially, conversations about Bulstrode's behavior happen behind his back, in informal contexts: only when he is formally denounced at a public gathering of the hospital board does he learn the damage his reputation has suffered.⁸ Linda Radzik helpfully distills gossip as a "private, informal, some will say idle, evaluative communication about persons who are absent."⁹ Additionally, the 'evaluative' nature of gossip is often disparaging or defaming--which is why the term 'gossip' is frequently used

equivalently to ‘slander.’¹⁰ However, gossip need not be animated by malice, as it is responsive to a salaciousness that mere negative news lacks: while any similar crime might have drawn interest, Bulstrode’s spectacular hypocrisy renders his misdeeds especially scandalous.¹¹ This salaciousness makes gossip a vector for rumor, in which details of an episode are quickly exaggerated. Middlemarch residents quickly lose touch the real story: the “more definite scandal concerning Bulstrode's earlier life,” Eliot writes, “was, for some minds, melted into the mass of mystery, as so much lively metal to be poured out in dialogue, and to take such fantastic shapes as heaven pleased.”¹²

Gossip is more than a mere transmission of negative information about a person without their knowledge, though: it is a social phenomenon that has distinct and potentially important social functions. In his influential 1963 essay, anthropologist Max Gluckman proposed that gossip contributes to group cohesion: it invites participants into a deepened trust and intimacy, and so functions as a type of ‘social glue.’¹³ Gossip makes it easier to find collaborators (much like a letter of reference), or it alienates its subject from the center of the community’s life for violating its norms.¹⁴ At the same time, it reinforces the possible social consequences of bad behavior for the gossipers.¹⁵ In that way, gossip serves an important pedagogical function: it binds people together around a shared set of moral or social norms.¹⁶

Yet these benefits are accompanied by dangers, which arise especially from gossip’s pleasures. As Sally Farley points out, gossiping enhances the gossiper’s social status.¹⁷ This benefit need not be intended: gossip locates the gossiper at the center of a community and gives them the power and privilege of being a gatekeeper for otherwise private information. As Farley observes, research indicates that those “with a high propensity to gossip are often quite powerful individuals at the center of communication networks.”¹⁸ Gossipers advertise their position inside

the community's 'inner ring,' as C.S. Lewis named it.¹⁹ As a practice, gossip tempts us to revel in others' downfall--a disposition akin to envy--while reinforcing our own privileged position within the community.

Additionally, the pleasures of gossip are frequently detached from any practical decision we must take, making it an occasion for *curiositas*.²⁰ Gossip makes us alive to the otherwise hidden dramas behind mundane affairs, and so risks running afoul of the cautions Augustine levied against the vanity of tragic emotions.²¹ When our gossip has no immediate purpose, we risk merely delighting in the discovery of an individual's wrongdoing and the corresponding diminishment of their reputation.²² The idleness or aimlessness that often characterizes gossip seems to be animated in part by these pleasures, which further the practices' tendency toward exaggeration: the tongue, as the Epistle of James so aptly puts it, is a spark that sets a forest on fire (James 3:5).

The fact that gossip is an occasion for vice does not entail it is intrinsically wrong as a discrete act. But its hazards call into question whether the form of speech is value-neutral, as cultural anthropologists seem to imply. The pejorative connotations that English-speakers hear in the term have warrant: the risks embedded within the practice seem sufficiently grave as to establish a presumptive norm against it. This is especially the case if we take into account the reputational harms that gossip can impose on its subject, and the dangers of imposing those risks on innocent persons. Yet as noted above, the threshold for Christian speech is higher than a framework of 'risk management' would establish: the Christian responsibility to use the tongue for blessing means we have obligations to not only avoid vice but to act for the good of others. Gossipers might be sinning not only by commission, but by omission. If gossip is ever to be just, any obligations we might have to speak directly to the subject of gossip must be annulled. As

such, we must first consider whether charity requires us to always undertake fraternal correction, which would preclude gossip as a just response to wrongdoing. To consider this question I turn to the thought of Thomas Aquinas.

III. Is Fraternal Correction Always Necessary?

On Thomas's view, those who are animated by charity are responsible to undertake the fraternal correction of a sinner. Yet that obligation is conditional and can be waived under the right circumstances. Thomas argues that correcting a wrongdoer is a spiritual almsdeed, in which we aim at expunging the offender's evil instead of remedying the effects of their wrong on others or the common good.²³ As the end of fraternal correction is the good of the sinner, it is a matter of positive precept: in undertaking fraternal correction, we give our neighbor their due. Yet as positive precepts "inculcate acts of virtue," their obligatory force depends upon the requisite circumstances obtaining. Because circumstances matter for our obligations, the scope of who we are obligated to fraternally correct is limited: while those who have spiritual authority must seek a wrongdoer out, others are responsible to fraternally correct others only "when the opportunity occurs."²⁴ Thomas also argues that the obligation to fraternally correct might be waived if the intended end is unlikely or impossible, even if the requisite circumstances obtain.²⁵ If we think that admonishing the wrongdoer might be ineffective or make them worse, there is no obligation to fraternally correct them. Charity might require fraternal correction in principle, then, but might also require forgoing it in practice.

Thomas's emphasis on the value of reputation and the dangers of disclosing sin prompts him to put significant constraints on publicizing others' sins, which are partially grounded in the

value Thomas puts on reputation. In general, fraternal correction should be done in such a way that the offender can preserve their reputation.²⁶ Thomas supplies two reasons for such discretion: first, a good reputation is a prophylactic against vice. Those whose reputations are destroyed lose a reason to not embrace further degradation. Second, he cites Augustine's dictum that infamy begets infamy: when "a few of those who bear a name for holiness are reported falsely or *proved in truth* to have done anything wrong," Augustine writes, people will "seek by busily repeating it to make it believed of all."²⁷ Though Thomas does not elaborate about why publicizing truths about bad actors is injurious, he argues in his discussion on scandal that publicizing sin functions as "injunction, inducement, or example" for other people.²⁸ Insofar as publicizing sin tempts others to do likewise, then, the possibility of scandal seems to supply an additional reason to omit fraternal correction.²⁹ Yet this emphasis on discretion in publicizing sins is not absolute. Crucially, Thomas argues that wrongdoers engaged in secret sins should be publicly denounced when *third parties* are in danger of being harmed.³⁰

Thomas's account of fraternal correction is limited by its lack of specificity, but it does seem to leave some room for judicious, non-scandalizing gossip. Thomas's criterion that fraternal correction must have some probability of success indexes the responsibility to a community's norms for social relationships. Yet that means the obligation to fraternally correct would be more qualified in some contexts than in others. First, Thomas does not address whether fraternal correction is situated within bonds of partiality: if we learn of wrongdoing by someone who attends our church, but with whom we have never spoken, does the precept to admonish still obtain?³¹ What about strangers on the internet? Presumably, the farther away from an offender one is, the less probable successful admonition will be. Second, direct confrontation plausibly carries with it a greater risk of solidifying a wrongdoer in their errant ways when a community

places a premium on non-interference or privacy than in other contexts. Third, the obligation to fraternally correct might be canceled if others who are more closely related bear the primary responsibility to correct, and one has reason to believe that they will undertake it. If the subject of gossip is a member of a church, their rector would be obligated to pursue fraternal correction--potentially absolving one from the task of doing the same. Finally, the obligation to fraternally correct might be absolved if there is a significant asymmetry in power between the parties. While Thomas is explicit that those who are 'not equal' with the offender must undertake fraternal correction, the success-constraint significantly limits fraternal correction in asymmetrical relationships. Additionally, Thomas emphasizes that such correction must happen privately, rather than in public, unless some matter of the faith is endangered.³² Such a restraint would, in many contexts, place the corrector at significant risk of being further harmed. Moreover, those who lack social power likely risk their own marginalization if they fraternally correct. This asymmetry does not dissolve the obligation to speak charitably toward an offender; but insofar as fraternal correction is a type of 'spiritual almsgiving,' the norms of prudence apply. Thomas argues that in ordinary almsgiving one is not required to give alms to such an extent that one loses one's own status or station.³³ As such, it seems unreasonable to demand that those with a lower station should risk it in order to fraternally correct others. While one might have an obligation, then, to ensure that the offender is aware of the accusations against them, fraternal correction is not always required. In cases when it has been undertaken and failed, or when success seems improbable, other means of social control would be preferable.

IV. Does the 'Principle of Credulity' permit defamation?

While Thomas' account of fraternal correction leaves some room for just gossip, his defense of what I will call the 'principle of credulity' helps establish the epistemic conditions just gossip must satisfy. In his discussion of justice, Thomas defends an extremely high epistemic threshold for making negative judgments about a person. On his view, judgment denotes a "right decision about what is just," which belongs to reason and which manifests the virtue of justice.³⁴ Such a judgment goes awry when "the reason lacks certainty." Forming judgments on the basis of 'loose conjectures' would manifest either rashness or suspicion.³⁵ Thomas is clear that such suspicion is wrong for both agent-centric and other-centric reasons. On the one side, suspicion arises because a person's own sin makes them think ill of others, because they are ill-disposed toward the other, or because they are cynical after a lifetime of experience. In any of those cases, the more intense the suspicion, the more vicious it is.³⁶ On the other side, if we suspect someone "without sufficient cause," we injure them.³⁷ Thomas's worry seems to be that in wrongly judging a person, we risk depriving them of the honor their goodness would merit.³⁸ Consequently, if the evidence is inconclusive or doubtful, we should interpret it in a manner favorable to the other person. Thomas thinks the stakes of harming an innocent person even by our thoughts about them are so high that we should be willing to risk repeated mistakes: it is better, he writes, to "err frequently through thinking well of a wicked man, than to err less frequently through having an evil opinion of a good man."³⁹

Still, the 'principle of credulity' is a moral norm, rather than an epistemic norm. Thomas affirms that our judgment about persons should be proportionate to our evidence about their conduct, which has a kind of 'certainty' that can be proved through multiple witnesses.⁴⁰ As such, we ought think well of others only "unless there is evident proof to the contrary."⁴¹ Thomas's concern that we avoid presumption in passing negative judgments on others is

wrapped up with an affirmation of epistemic forbearance. He cites a gloss on 1 Corinthians 4:5 to argue that we should not judge others on the basis of ‘slight indications’ of their character, as doing so would be judging “before the time.”⁴² In other words, he seems to think that the ‘indications’ of a person’s character should become fully manifest in explicitly wrongful acts that are attested to by multiple individuals before we downgrade our assessment of their character.

Like his account of fraternal correction, Thomas’s approach to sins of suspicion is underdeveloped in ways that make it a more restrictive standard than might always be warranted. For instance, the way Thomas sets up the problem implies that thinking well or ill of others is a zero-sum proposition rather than a matter of degrees. Thomas leaves little room for ambivalence in how we assess the ‘slight indications’ of a person’s character. While we are obligated to avoid premature negative conclusions about them, one has other alternatives besides affirmative judgments. Epistemic forbearance seems commensurate with a prudential wariness that is proportionate to the evidence one has about a person. Yet Thomas leaves the impression that such wariness is itself harmful to the individual.

Additionally, Thomas’s concern that we not harm the subject of our judgment by depriving them of honor precludes any concern for third parties. In his discussion of fraternal correction, Thomas acknowledges that our responsibilities to publicize sin are affected by whether third parties are in danger. Yet because his primary model for judgment is the courtroom, he does not consider how in extra-legal contexts the obligation to be credulous about someone might be affected by third parties. If the ‘slight indications’ of a person’s character are of a kind that others would be vulnerable to their bad behavior, a skeptical posture might be warranted. If charity toward the other makes suspicion illegitimate, charity toward third parties would require it.⁴³ This would not on its own sanction gossip: there may be other ways to protect third parties when

we have slight indications of a person's character. Yet it does help us clarify the criteria for just gossip, namely, that it be founded upon sufficient evidence of a person's badness and have some substantive benefit to a third party.

V. Just Defamation and the Duty to Protect

The crack that Thomas's treatments of fraternal correction and judgment leave for legitimate gossip widen into a fissure in his discussion of sins of speech, which he also locates in his treatise on justice.⁴⁴ Thomas's analysis of gossip retains the bilateral frame that he employs in his discussion of judgment. Yet he permits defamatory speech about third parties behind their back, if the intention behind such defamation is toward some sufficiently valuable end and the circumstances are such that the act is warranted. Thomas lays down two conditions for just defamation: one must say "what is true, . . . as when a man reveals another's sin, while observing the right order of so doing."⁴⁵ As Thomas is unsparing about our obligation to speak only the truth, permissibly defaming a person behind their back must satisfy the 'right order' condition. For Thomas, 'backbiting' happens when we defame another in their absence through sharing falsehoods about them, exaggerating their sins, or by "revealing something unknown about them."⁴⁶ As the severity of a sin is measured by the injury inflicted, backbiting is especially grievous--so much so that Thomas devotes an entire question to whether it is "gravest of all sins committed against one's neighbor?"⁴⁷ The harms of backbiting are twofold. First, it injures a person's reputation, which is "more akin to spiritual goods" than wealth and so the most valuable of the 'external goods.'⁴⁸ And second, it severs friendship between gossip's recipient and its subject. In that way, the backbiter is a "murderer occasionally," since they give someone else an

“occasion for hating or despising his neighbor.”⁴⁹

Yet matters are more complicated than such a forceful denunciation of backbiting would imply. For Thomas, words are *signs*, rather than mere sounds, which means their significance “depends on the speaker’s inward intention.”⁵⁰ The intention with which a person engages in backbiting, or gossip, makes a difference for our evaluation of the act.⁵¹ Because backbiting always involves defamation, it is an especially grave matter for Thomas. This is especially the case if we undertake it intentionally, rather than accidentally: we sin “more grievously” if we speak “deliberately than if [we sin] through weakness or carelessness.”⁵² Yet intentions can also exonerate: when one defames a third party behind their back “for the sake of some necessary good, and with attention to the due circumstances, it is not a sin and cannot be called backbiting.”⁵³ Importantly, though, such defamatory speech is not ‘value-neutral’ for Thomas: just ‘gossip’ is still material and accidental participation in backbiting, even if it is not so “strictly and formally speaking.”⁵⁴

Though Thomas does not specify what goods would be important enough to warrant gossip, one path toward justifying it would be to adapt the responsibility to protect others that Thomas employs in his account of fraternal correction. If we have reason to believe that a person would harm some third party, we are obligated to try to prevent it. Yet if fraternal correction is unnecessary because it would backfire or others would be scandalized by the sin’s disclosure, gossip might be warranted. The intention to protect others would need to be tethered to the norms of judgment Thomas sets out. The strength of the warning should not exceed one’s evidence, nor can it be premature. Yet if those conditions are met, then it seems as though one could have a meaningful responsibility to inform a person that they are at risk of a person’s malfeasance. This obligation could be especially weighty if there is a difference in status between the two parties.

Affirming the legitimacy of acts of gossip beneath an intention to protect others constrains its scope in ways that might limit other putative benefits. While gossip might be conducive to “moral inquiry and reflection, as well as social bonding, the exchange of information, and decision-making,” these ends have less hazardous ways of being fulfilled than gossip.⁵⁵ The fact that just gossip remains formal and material participation in ‘backbiting’ means there is a strong, though defeasible, presumption against it. Whatever ancillary social benefits gossip might bring a community, sharing defamatory information about a person without their knowledge is a *pro tanto* wrong: it ought not be done *unless* there are sufficiently weighty exculpatory reasons for doing so. The intention to protect vulnerable individuals constitutes such a reason, whereas moral edification or social bonding do not.

Thomas’s account of speech not only establishes a strong presumption against the disclosure of wrongs to third parties, then, but identifies a variety of conditions that could obtain for such gossip to be licit.⁵⁶ To that extent, the ethics of gossip are analogous to discussions of killing and double-effect: while defamation is in principle illicit, intending a valuable end can make it permissible. Yet a worthwhile intention is insufficient to make gossip legitimate.⁵⁷ For one, the agent must have the appropriate disposition toward the damage they cause. As with killing, there should be nothing easy or pleasurable about undertaking our responsibility to protect vulnerable people through gossip.⁵⁸ And second, they must judiciously attend to the circumstances to determine whether gossip is a fitting means of protecting a vulnerable person. In many cases, those circumstances will include what institutions do (or fail to do) to protect potential victims from harm. Paradoxically, for gossip to be effective as a means of protecting vulnerable individuals, institutions need both effective formal mechanisms of accountability *and* robust norms against idle gossip. Yet while many Christian communities have the latter, they lack the

former. How the responsibility to gossip can be specified inside Christian institutions, especially those that have weak systems of formal accountability, is the question to which I now turn.

VI. Specifying the Responsibility to Gossip inside Christian Institutions

Those who would protect vulnerable individuals by gossiping must overcome a number of epistemic challenges. For instance, protective gossip relies upon a judgment about an offender's character that the 'principle of credulity' would seem to prohibit. This is especially problematic inside of institutions with weak formal accountability. Without the publication of formal judgments, the community will often rely on second or third-hand information about a person's conduct. Even if the information conveyed is true, listeners will reasonably discount its reliability as it gets farther from the original source. In that case, gossip becomes a 'slight indication' of a person's character, which on Thomas's terms would require its hearers to disregard it and so render it an ineffective means of protecting others.⁵⁹ Moreover, the 'principle of credulity' would seem to require one to treat isolated incidents as departures from a person's character, rather than indications of it. This especially limits gossip's usefulness, as it is difficult to compile an accurate history of allegations or offenses through informal channels, which is necessary to show that the judgment about a person's character is warranted.

These epistemic challenges are mitigated when communities have robust means of formal accountability and publicize their decisions about offenders. Formal institutional judgments will invariably be viewed as more reliable than informal communications: a decision by a jury is a weightier assessment of a person's behavior, and thus of their character, than the informal allegation by a putative victim. Even though such judgments are rarely published with sufficient

detail to allow a community to assess the gravity of the offense, they lend credence to those who informally convey further details. One feature of public trials and judgments is that they reduce the need for gossip: by laying bare details of the case, they enable a community to assess the evidence without risking exaggeration or slander. Such publicity, though, is peculiarly burdensome to victims. As institutions opt to convey fewer details to protect victims, gossip becomes a necessary supplement to their otherwise ambiguous public determinations of misconduct. Even if victims accept those burdens and institutions publish more details, though, gossip might still be necessary to ensure news of the judgment reaches vulnerable individuals. Just gossip can extend an institution's formal judgments throughout the community, in ways that avoid the collateral damage that is likely to arise if institutions attempt to bear the whole weight of enacting justice on their own.⁶⁰

As a means of social control, though gossipers often react to either failed institutions or to situations that lie beyond formal authorities. In the face of such failures, it might be tempting to weaken the presumption against gossip to ensure gossipers can protect others without fear. However, prohibitions on gossip make it easier to regard it as a reliable source of information, in two ways. First, the gossiper risks their own reputational capital by appearing to violate the community's norms. The heightened stakes for gossiping incentivize judiciousness from gossipers, making it more reasonable for their audience to assume they are credible.⁶¹ For this reason, I think it best to speak of 'just gossip' or 'just defamation,' which accepts the negative connotations attached to 'gossip', rather than finding some other descriptor for speech acts that licitly impugn the reputation of others. As Thomas notes, just defamation is still formal and material participation in backbiting. Second, imposing burdens on gossip invariably decreases the overall supply of gossip in a community. That frees listeners from the task of sorting through

mounds of allegations to assess their respective reliability. In economic terms, an over-supply of gossip devalues intentional efforts to defame offenders, and so diminishes the protective value such efforts might have. Pedagogically, Aquinas is right to bury the possibility of licit defamation beneath an avalanche of criticisms of gossip. If defamatory gossip is permissible, it may only be done *in extremis*.

It is also tempting in light of institutional failures to use gossip to punish offenders, instead of protecting future victims. Such an approach is dubious, though, for both normative and practical reasons. For one, the primary Christian responsibility in speaking is to convey blessing and bring life. Such a responsibility makes pursuing informal punishment dubious, whereas gossiping to protect vulnerable third parties is a means of preserving and sustaining their well-being. Additionally, punishment plausibly needs authorization, as it is carried out on behalf of the whole community and not only the victim.⁶² By contrast, the responsibility to protect the vulnerable falls on all alike: it is more transparent for every individual and weightier than any putative obligation to punish. Finally, punishing someone through gossip is incommensurate with the prudential cautiousness required by protection, and (ironically) creates an environment that is self-defeating.⁶³ Those who punish through gossip are motivated to share defamatory information with anyone in the community. In that way, ‘punishment’ sanctions idle gossip. But increasing the supply of gossip makes it harder to assume that it is a reliable source of information, which intensifies the risks of harming innocent individuals and gives more people the occasion to revel in the dubious pleasures of being in the ‘inner ring.’ Justifying gossip in terms of punishment for gossip undermines the presumptions against gossip and the circumspection they engender.

Tethering gossip to the responsibility to protect, though, is both more obviously compatible

with the norm to bestow blessings and avoids these hazards. The responsibility to protect applies to a narrower set of practical contexts than any putative responsibility to punish. The one who gossips must have some definite reason to think the recipient is in danger of suffering some harm, such that they are uniquely positioned to try to prevent it by conveying defamatory information. The nature of the ‘harm’ in question might be construed broadly. For instance, a graduate student might associate with a professor who sexually harasses students, but not be in danger themselves of such treatment. If the affiliation imperils their reputation within the broader professional community, it would be warranted to warn them of the risks they are (unwittingly) running. Yet even on such a broad construal, the threat must be both real and imminent for protective gossip to be warranted. Unlike gossip for punishment, such a judgment invariably limits one’s audience in ways that minimize risks and engender caution.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The Christian responsibility to gossip is hazardous, and should be undertaken only ‘discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God,’ as the Book of Common Prayer puts it in a very different context.⁶⁵ Yet however high the stakes surrounding just defamation are, institutions should preserve it as a possible means of social control by appropriately qualifying their denunciations of gossip. Overly broad prohibitions risk dissuading conscientious people from sharing information that would be relevant to other people’s safety, leaving individuals vulnerable to further harm by bad actors. The need to carefully qualify the prohibition on gossip is especially acute as institutions struggle to navigate the many pressures surrounding the investigation and punishment of abusers. Even if institutions have thorough and swift means of

holding offenders accountable, concerns about defamation lawsuits and the interests of victims' privacy often prevent them from disclosing enough detail about allegations or offenses for members of the community to make decisions about their relationships to the offender. To that extent, protective gossip can function as a necessary supplement to formal means of accountability, rather than a compensatory one for these measures' failures.

It is possible that qualifying prohibitions on gossip this way would contribute to an atmosphere of fear and suspicion, as false accusations would potentially be magnified throughout the community. Accusations themselves are a scarlet letter, and sanctioning gossip in light of them could have a chilling effect on relationships. If universities wish to preserve the free commerce of ideas between students and faculty outside the classroom, they should prioritize formal, institutional means of accountability: effective formal controls on offenders increases the community's confidence in the integrity of their neighbor, and allows for more open and trusting relationships. Yet those concerned about false accusations have no reason to reject the qualification on gossip's licitness I have offered here. Protective gossip is no substitute for fraternal correction: offenders must be given the occasion for confession and repentance. Protective gossipers fail in charity if the subject remains unaware of accusations against them. And they violate justice and destroy the conditions of trust that protective gossip depends upon, if they spread false allegations or indulge in idle gossip. The Christian responsibility to gossip is not an exception to the prohibition on gossip: it depends upon it, even while demonstrating its limits.

Rehabilitating gossip within Christian communities, though, depends upon Christian ethics re-embracing casuistry as a mode of Christian reasoning. Scrupulosity about participating in the evils of gossip creates fertile soil for bad actors to take advantage of their reputational capital by

abusing others. Norms that prohibit too much are as dangerous as norms that fail to prohibit enough. Only the careful parsing of casuistical reasoning can help identify the boundary between invidious and legitimate gossip, and so preserve the latter as a form of social control when other options have been expended. Describing the norms of Christian speech requires articulating when defamation is not only licit, but required. In the final analysis, if we say no to gossip done badly, it must be for the sake of gossip done well.⁶⁶

¹ Pope Francis, "General Audience of 14 November 2018," accessed November 30, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20181114_udienza-generale.html.

² "Nuns Watching Soap Operas and the 'terrorism' of Gossip: Pope Francis and Naples' Religious," accessed November 30, 2020, <https://www.dcdiocese.org/catholic-news/8168-nuns-watching-soap-operas-and-the-terrorism-of-gossip-pope-francis-and-naples-religious-8168-8168-8168>.

³ "2018 Catholic Church Sex Abuse Crisis: What You Need to Know," *America Magazine*, accessed November 30, 2020, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/09/06/2018-catholic-church-sex-abuse-crisis-what-you-need-know>.

⁴ In defending an obligation to praise God, John Webster writes that "praise and thanksgiving are the first realisations or principal performances of our nature as those who have and are sustained in life and movement by limitless divine goodness." John Webster, "Sins of Speech," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 28, no. 1 (February 2015): 35–48. The New Testament invariably frames gossip as negative. Cf. Romans 1:29, 2 Corinthians 12:20, 1 Timothy 5:13. My thanks to Justin Hawkins for reminding me of this.

⁵ This paper has been shaped by experiences across a range of Christian institutions, including at Baylor. Norms against gossip in Christian institutions are often sweeping. For instance, one evangelical church requires employees to disclose to the subject of gossip their action within twenty four hours. See Harris Creek Baptist Church, "Becoming Something with Jonathan Pokluda: Episode 62: How To Not Gossip on Apple Podcasts." *Apple Podcasts*, 15 June 2020, podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/becoming-something-with-jonathan-pokluda/id1454045768?i=1000478009252. My thanks to Beth Butler for alerting me to this discussion.

⁶ Julia Fleming, "The Right to Reputation and the Preferential Option for the Poor.," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24, no. 1 (2004): 73–87.

⁷ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, First edition, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2019), 676.

⁸ Gossip as an informal form of speech distinguishes it from other institutionalized checks on a person's reputation, like letters of reference.

⁹ Linda Radzik, "Gossip and Social Punishment," *Res Philosophica* 93, no. 1 (2016): 187. See also: Sharlene Fernandes, Hansika Kapoor, and Sampada Karandikar, "Do We Gossip for Moral Reasons? The Intersection of Moral Foundations and Gossip," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 39, no. 4 (July 4, 2017): 218–30. Mark Alfano and Brian Robinson, "Gossip as a Burdened Virtue," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20, no. 3 (June 2017): 474; Margaret G Holland, "What's Wrong with Telling the Truth? An Analysis of Gossip," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (April 1996): 197–209. Brian Robinson, "Character, Caricature, and Gossip," *The Monist* 99, no. 2 (April 2016): 199.

¹⁰ Alfano and Robinson frame gossip as primarily conveying negative information. See Alfano and Robinson, "Gossip as a Burdened Virtue." Radzik frames it as neutral. See Radzik, "Gossip and Social Punishment." On the relationship between 'gossip' as a term and slander, see Jason van Niekerk, "The Virtue of Gossip," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27, no. 4 (January 2008): 400–412. While formally speaking, gossip might convey praiseworthy news, for purposes of this paper I will regard gossip as defamatory in intent.

¹¹ Alfano and Robinson, "Gossip as a Burdened Virtue." See also Robinson, "Character, Caricature, and Gossip."

¹² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 677. Note that 'gossip' as I have analyzed it here includes neither a motivational condition

(malice, disrespect) nor a falsehood condition (gossip might be true). While those often occur when people gossip, and are largely why gossip has earned such a poor reputation, the form of speech that I regard as ‘gossip’ need not include either.

¹³ Max Gluckman, “Papers in Honor of Melville J. Herskovits: Gossip and Scandal,” *Current Anthropology* 4, no. 3 (June 1963): 311ff.

¹⁴ I have not taken up the gendered dimensions of gossip, as my interest has been more in specifying the normative conditions for when gossip is licit than understanding its social dynamics. However, the associations have been often noted and discussed. See, for instance, Adkins, Karen C. “The Real Dirt: Gossip and Feminist Epistemology.” *Social Epistemology* 16, no. 3 (July 2002): 215–32.

¹⁵ As the literature from social psychology on gossip is considerable, I take my cues here from Sally Farley’s helpful distillation of the literature. Farley suggests that much of the empirical literature confirms Gluckman’s early theorizing. See Sally Farley, “On the Nature of Gossip, Reputation, and Power Inequality,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Gossip and Reputation*, ed. Francesca Giardini and Rafael Wittek (Oxford University Press, 2019), 342–58.

¹⁶ Gluckman, “Papers in Honor of Melville J. Herskovits.” Whether this is salutary depends, in part, upon what sort of social or moral norms are being upheld. See Robinson, “Character, Caricature, and Gossip.”

¹⁷ Farley, “On the Nature of Gossip, Reputation, and Power Inequality,” 348.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.* For Lewis, see C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

²⁰ Brian Robinson describes (and dismisses) idle gossip as “scintillating for some reason other than a norm violation by the person in question.” On my view, ‘idleness’ is best determined by the practical purpose one has in mind while gossiping. Robinson uses the example of sharing how much money someone makes—but it is easy to imagine a situation where there are unjust inequalities in pay where it would be valuable for members of a community to know a certain person’s salaries. See Robinson, “Character, Caricature, and Gossip,” 199. On *curiositas* as a vice, see W. Bradford Littlejohn, “Addicted to Novelty: The Vice of Curiosity in a Digital Age,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 37, no. 1 (2017): 179–96.

²¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²² This knowledge is its own form of objectification of the subject of gossip, which supplies significant gratification to the gossipers. In this respect, it is similar to pornography. I owe this point to Fr. Micah Snell, in private conversation.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Lander, Wyoming: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), II-II, Q33, a1.

²⁴ Aquinas, II-II, Q33, a2, r3. See also II-II, Q33, a6. Note that Thomas argues that fraternal correction by authorities cannot be omitted, since authorities are responsible to preserve the common good through punishment.

²⁵ Aquinas, II-II, Q33, a2. Thomas here affirms an asymmetry between positive and negative precepts: the latter always obtain, but the former do not. As such, the duty to engage in fraternal correction is qualified by circumstances, unless one has spiritual authority over a person (for this final qualification, see the reply to objection 4).

²⁶ Aquinas, II-II, Q33, a7. “Just as the physician of the body restores the sick man to health, if possible, without cutting off a limb, but, if this be unavoidable, cuts off a limb which is least indispensable, in order to preserve the life of the whole body, so too he who desires his brother’s amendment should, if possible, so amend him as regards his conscience, that he keep his good name.”

²⁷ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

²⁸ Aquinas, II-II, Q43, a1.

²⁹ Aquinas, II-II, Q43, a7, r3. Thomas subtly rejects Augustine’s position that fraternal correction might be omitted if third parties were scandalized, which he states in the objection. Instead, he suggests that fraternal correction can be omitted if “the brother” who is the recipient would be scandalized by it. It is unclear what sort of case this narrower account could apply to, though. Given Thomas’s account of the primacy of protecting third parties from harm in denouncing a wrongdoer, it seems plausibly that there might be cases where it would be better to omit fraternal correction on the same grounds (with Augustine).

³⁰ Aquinas, II-II, Q33, a7.

³¹ This omission is curious, and unfortunate. In his treatment of almsgiving, Thomas argues that we ought prioritize those who have greater holiness or social standing than those nearest us, especially when those near to us are not in great need or have a very special claim on us. The direction of almsgiving reaches *away* from partial moral bonds. Yet the imagery of ‘fraternal’ correction seems to work in the contrary direction, making such ‘spiritual alms’ *more*

important within partial moral bonds. See Aquinas, II-II, Q.32, a9.

³² Aquinas, II-II, Q33, a4.

³³ Aquinas, II-II, Q32, a6. Thomas notes three exceptions to this rule: a monk might give everything away, the property might be easily recoverable so that he does not suffer extreme inconvenience, or when extreme indigence or great need requires it. Such constraints could plausibly have analogues to fraternal correction and its limits.

³⁴ Aquinas, II-II, Q60, a1.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Aquinas, II-II, Q60, a3.

³⁷ Aquinas, II-II, Q60, a4. “Now no man ought to despise or in any way injure another man without evident cause: and, consequently, unless we have evident indications of a person’s wickedness, we ought to deem him good, by interpreting for the best whatever is doubtful about him.”

³⁸ See Aquinas, II-II, Q60, a5, r2.

³⁹ Aquinas, II-II, Q60, a5.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, II-II, Q60, a3. “Reply Obj. 1: Some kind of certainty is found in human acts, not indeed the certainty of a demonstration, but such as is befitting the matter in point, for instance when a thing is proved by suitable witnesses.”

⁴¹ Aquinas, II-II Q60, a5.

⁴² Aquinas, II-II Q60, a3.

⁴³ The absence of ambivalence also means Thomas says nothing about our responsibilities to gather *more* evidence in light of the ‘slight indications.’ One might approach the other to ascertain more evidence about their reasoning behind the acts in question and, indirectly, about their character. At the same time, this seems compatible with conveying what one does know to vulnerable third parties.

⁴⁴ The view I advance here has much in common with the idea that gossip is what Lisa Tessman has called a ‘burdened virtue,’ or a virtue employed by individuals who face oppression or disempowerment. See Alfano, Mark, and Brian Robinson. “Gossip as a Burdened Virtue.” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20, no. 3 (June 2017): 473–87. For Tessman’s view, see Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁴⁵ Aquinas, II-II Q62, a2.

⁴⁶ Aquinas, II-II, Q73, a1, r2.

⁴⁷ Aquinas, II-II, Q73, a1.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Aquinas, II-II, Q72, a2. While I follow the English translation here, it is important to note that Thomas uses ‘affectu’ several times in describing the “inward intention” that gives signs meaning. However, Thomas is clear that the intention (intentio) of the speaker governs the moral assessment of what is said.

⁵¹ Ibid. Aquinas writes, “nevertheless, it happens sometimes that a man utters words, whereby someone’s good name is tarnished, and yet he does not intend this [*non hoc intendens*], but something else.”

⁵² Aquinas, II-II, Q73, a3.

⁵³ Aquinas, II-II, Q73, a2.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Thomas adopts a similar structure here to that which he developed in his treatment of contumely, where he suggests that if one undertakes such a direct form of speech with the intent of “correcting him or with some like purpose, he utters a railing or reviling not formally and essentially, but accidentally and materially.” See II-II, Q72, a2.

⁵⁵ Radzik, “Gossip and Social Punishment,” 200.

⁵⁶ These conditions are narrow, and could be specified further. For instance, one might set a threshold for how grave the potential harms one is seeking to protect another from must be in order to justify hazarding gossip. Additionally, one might expand the interest in ‘protecting’ individuals to include searching for additional instances of known malfeasance.

⁵⁷ Though the passage is disputed and has generated a vast literature analyzing the doctrine, see Aquinas, II-II, Q64, a7. It is telling that Thomas develops the idea of ‘double-effect’ in his discussion of murder, which he also describes backbiting as a form of.

⁵⁸ Such a bifurcated emotional state is possible for Thomas: elsewhere, he argues that *clementia* is a virtue of mitigating punishment out of an aversion to harming another. See Aquinas, II-II, Q157.

⁵⁹ Vaidyanathan et al. suggest that gossip’s effectiveness as a means of social control is limited when “gossip is inaccurate [or *suspected* to be inaccurate], or when people abuse gossip channels.” They also contend that gossip is more effective when it is undertaken by those who are at the same status-level as the offender, and that the size of the community seems to make a difference. In one case they encountered of a scientist with a reputation of abusing

students, they found protective gossip to be ineffective, which one participant speculated was because the incoming students thought that “maybe they are special in a way” and that “they will be able to handle [the professor].” Protective gossip might be licit, but it is not a panacea. See Brandon Vaidyanathan, Simranjit Khalsa, and Elaine Howard Ecklund, “Gossip as Social Control: Informal Sanctions on Ethical Violations in Scientific Workplaces,” *Social Problems* 63, no. 4 (November 2016): 556-557.

⁶⁰ This necessity is conditional in two ways. First, it responds to bad actors who stand in need of formal and informal restraints--and as such only arises under conditions of sin. Second, it arises from institutions’ inability to protect potential victims to the fullest extent possible without causing additional harms. As such, its necessity is weakly grounded: if an institution could permanently eliminate bad actors, gossip would not be necessary.

⁶¹ Vaidyanathan et al. point out that reputational concerns hindered some scientists from gossiping, as they did not want to be “labeled as someone who spreads gossip to others.” As they put it, reputational motivations “cut both ways: they might inhibit potential transgressors who fear a loss of reputation, but they may also inhibit potential gossipers who fear the personal consequences of spreading gossip.” Vaidyanathan, Khalsa, and Ecklund, “Gossip as Social Control,” 566-567.

⁶² This is certainly the case for Thomas. See Peter Karl Koritansky, *Thomas Aquinas and the Philosophy of Punishment* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

⁶³ Linda Radzik contends that ‘social punishment’ is not an appropriate justification for gossip, in part because it fails the proportionality test for punishment. See Radzik, “Gossip and Social Punishment,” 200.

⁶⁴ Further specifications of the conditions under which there might be a duty to gossip are doubtlessly needed. Space constraints prevent me from considering the crucial subject of gossip’s relationship to the internet.

⁶⁵ Brian Cummings, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013).

⁶⁶ This paper is much improved thanks feedback from Elizabeth Kincaid, Dallas Gingles, Justin Hawkins, Jonathan Tran, Beth Butler, the editors of this Journal, and especially from those who contributed to the vigorous discussion at the Society’s annual conference it provoked and the anonymous reviewers.