

1. Introduction

In this essay we will deal with defamation, which we can temporarily describe as a form of injustice consisting in the damaging of the opinion or esteem that a person's social environment has of him or her. A secondary moral importance is often attributed to defamation, inasmuch as it seems linked simply to a superficial and carefree use of language, perhaps in a context of friendly conversation when it is not seen as part of the right to information, of freedom of thought, or the duty to report. However, given its nature and effects, defamation appears as a far more serious problem. Recently Pope Francis said that each time that "we judge our brothers in our hearts – or worse still when we speak ill of them with others, we are Christian murderers: A Christian murderer [. . .] It's not me saying this, it's the Lord. And there is no place for nuances. If you speak ill of your brother, you kill your brother. And every time we do this, we are imitating that gesture of Cain, the first murderer in History".¹ These words are not an exaggeration of Pope Francis. They are based on the words of the Old and New Testaments. In the book of Proverbs, we read, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue".² The tongue has a formidable power, which can be used for good and for evil. If used for evil, it can even bring about death.

In addition to being serious, defamation is a very complex problem. It involves in different ways, depending on the cases and circumstances, goods of primary importance, which are honour and reputation, truth, the common good, and the right to information, which are involved in language and in means of communication. Honour and reputation are based on the truth of man and of each person, and on his or her dignity. However, is it just to praise people whom we know to be harmful and perverse? Is it just to publicly rebuke those who have hidden faults? Should secret faults, and even crimes, be immediately and always public domain? On the other hand, is it not true that, at times, it was only thanks to the complaints made through social

¹ POPE FRANCIS, *Morning Homily at Domus Sanctae Marthae*, 9-13-2013. We cite the text provided by Vatican Radio.

² *Prov* 18: 21.

communication that it was possible to prevent behaviours that were seriously harmful to the common good? Moreover, in the end, is information not an instrument of personal and social freedom? These and other questions that we could formulate emphasize that we stand before an extremely multi-faceted problem.

Defamation is *per se* a problem of justice, both in the personal ambit and in the social and communicative ambit, because honour and reputation, but also information, are the subject of a specific right, whose extent will have to be specified. They are, nonetheless, goods that have deep anthropological roots and a remarkable social projection, and thus our study will take place first on the plane of personal and social ethics and, secondarily, on the juridical one.

This study operates from the perspective of Christian ethics, in which the problems linked to defamation take on great importance. To the fundamental dimension of justice, which allows for a rational foundation, is added that of charity, which is also injured by defamatory behaviour. We will thus make frequent references to Christian moral teaching, which can certainly enrich and better establish the ethical treatment of the problem.

The scope of these reflections is not that of exposing a specialized view of the problem, given that such reflections have been published, and many are very valid. This work instead concerns offering a synthetic vision of its various aspects, and especially eliciting a keener sensibility toward a culture of respect for the person and for his or her irrepressible need to interact with others in a calm, honest, and trustworthy social environment.

The human goods damaged by defamation are honour and reputation, but the means through which such goods are defaced is mainly oral or written language. Thus, we believe that our study would do well to begin from a reflection on the deeper dimension of language and communication.