



WORDS OF

Wisdom

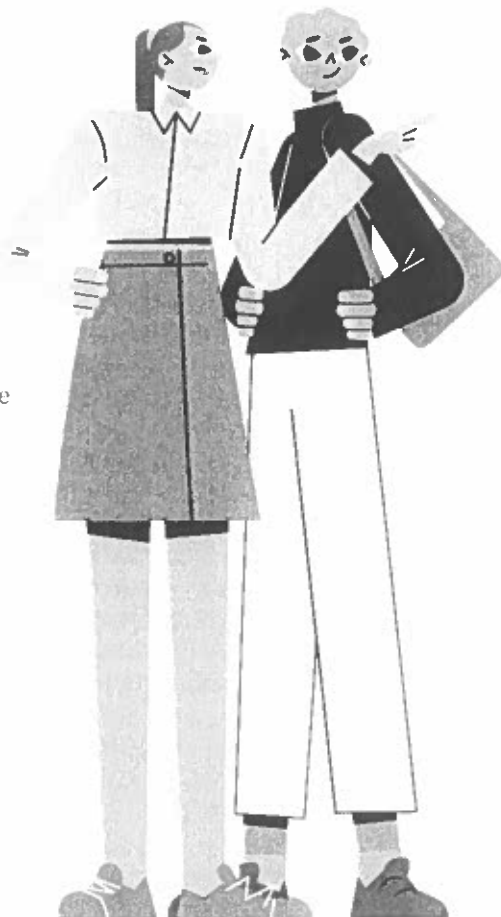
BY Bishop Robert Barron



I was at St. Joseph Abbey in Covington, LA, not far from New Orleans. I was there to address about thirty Benedictine abbots from around the country who had gathered for some days of reflection and retreat. Covering the walls of the abbey church and the refectory of the St. Joseph monastery are marvelous paintings executed by Fr. Gregory de Wit, a monk of Mont César in Belgium, who worked for many years in our country at both St. Meinrad in

Indiana and at St. Joseph's before he passed away in 1978. I have long admired his very distinctive, quirky, and theologically informed art. In the apse of the abbey church, de Wit depicted a series of magnificent winged angels who hover over images of the seven deadly sins, conveying the profound truth that the right worship of God overcomes our spiritual dysfunction. But a novelty of de Wit's painted program is that he added an eighth deadly sin that he felt was particularly destructive within a monastery—namely, gossiping.

He was right about monasteries, of course, but I would say he would have been right about pretty much any type of human community: family, school, workplace, parish, etc. Gossip is poison. Period. De Wit's painting prophetically anticipated the magisterium of our present pope, who has often made gossip the object of particular opprobrium. Listen to this from a recent discourse of Francis: "Please, brothers and sisters, let's try not to gossip. Gossip is a plague worse than COVID. Worse! Let's make a big effort. No gossiping!" And lest we somehow missed the point, he continued, "The Devil is the biggest gossiper." This last remark is not just colorful rhetoric, for the pope well knows that the devil's two principal names in the New Testament are diabolos (the scatterer) and Satanas (the accuser). I cannot think of a better characterization of what gossip does and what it essentially is.



Please, brothers and sisters, let's try not to gossip. Gossip is a plague worse than COVID. Worse! Let's make a big effort. No gossiping! Pope Francis

Not long ago, a friend sent me a YouTube video of a talk by Dave Ramsey, a business and finance consultant. With the vehemence of Pope Francis, Ramsey spoke out against gossip in the workplace, specifying that he has a no tolerance policy in regard to the practice. Helpfully, he defined gossip as follows: discussing anything negative with someone who can't solve the problem. To make things a bit more concrete, a person in your organization would be gossiping if he were grousing about IT issues with a colleague who had no competence or authority to resolve IT matters. Or someone would be gossiping if she expressed anger at her boss to people down the chain of command who were in absolutely no position to respond constructively to her criticism.

Ramsey provides a pointed example from his own experience. He recounts that he had a meeting with his entire administrative team, outlining a new approach that he wanted them to adopt. He left the gathering, but then realized he had forgotten his keys and so made his way back to the room. There he discovered that "a meeting after the meeting" was taking place, led by one of his staffers who, with her back to door, was loudly and vociferously denouncing the boss to the others. Without hesitation, Ramsey summoned the woman to his office and, in accord with his zero-tolerance for gossiping policy, fired her.

Mind you, none of this is to say that problems never arise within human societies, still less that complaints should never be voiced. But it is indeed to say that they should be expressed nonbelligerently and up the chain of command, precisely to those who can deal constructively with them. If that method is followed, gossip is not in play. I might supplement Ramsey's insight with one from John Shea, a former teacher of mine. Years ago, Shea told us that we should feel utterly free to criticize another person precisely in the measure and to the degree that we are willing to help the person deal with the problem that we've identified. If we are utterly committed to help, we should criticize as vigorously as we like. If we have a moderate willingness to help, our critique should be mitigated. If, as is typically the case, we haven't the slightest inclination to help, we should keep our mouths shut.

To direct a complaint nonbelligerently up the chain of command is to be helpful; to direct it down the chain of command and in meanness of spirit is to gossip—and that's the devil's work.

Might I make a friendly suggestion? We are on the cusp of Lent, the Church's great season of penitence and self-discipline. Instead of giving up desserts or smoking this Lent, give up gossiping. For forty days, try not to comment negatively to those who have no ability to deal with the

problem. And if you feel tempted to break this resolution, think of de Wit's angels hovering over you. Trust me, you and everyone around you will be a lot happier.

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