



Boston Catholic Journal

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Questions & Answers



about *Authentic Catholic Teaching*

QUESTION:

- **What actually constitutes a Lie and is Lying always sinful under all circumstances?**

Dear Mr. Editor,

I would be so grateful if you could explain to me, what actually constitutes a lie?

Sometimes you know in life one is placed in a situations where you simply cannot state the truth about a situation or person. Someone's asks you for example. "Do you know that Angela is having an affair"?

It is clear that out and out lying is sinful, but there are situations where you can't reveal the truth, what then ?

If I say yes I do, then I am actually confirming for the other what may actually be gossip, if I say no, and there are misgivings in the back of my mind, am I telling lies?

I am so averse to gossiping, it is so destructive, and causes so much pain. When an individual is over inquisitive, or trying subtly or less subtlety to extricate information from me, can I then justifiably tell a lie?

It can happen if I say for instance, I really couldn't say, or I am not prepared to enter into this, that it is misconstrued to mean that I am avoiding answering because the question is true, which it is not! And even if it were its not my place to say.

I feel a bit bad because I would be perfectly able to tell a lie to protect another from exposure ... and I have done that in the past.

So what does the Church say about this kind of situation.

It stands clear that if I were asked by a priest, a policeman or someone in a legitimate position I would answer truthfully.

Can you help on this one.

Thank you for your help beforehand.

Gilbert G.

Dear Gilbert,

We will provide you with two versions of the answer: the one is short, the other a bit longer, but necessary to completely understand what is involved in Lying:

The short answer:

In the instances you adverted to, for example, when someone asks you, “is so-and-so having a relationship with so-and-so?” – and you know in fact that they are --- are you compelled to confirm this?

No. Possessing the truth in no way binds us or compels us to publicly disclose it unless public harm were to follow from our failure to do so. This is clearly not the case with gossip which itself is sinful behavior. In fact, to cooperate in the propagation of gossip is to abet the sin itself -- something you are never compelled to do under any circumstances.

The most appropriate answer would be, “The affairs of so-and-so are none of my business, and I am surprised that you believe it is yours. Her affairs are her own, just as yours are your own, and

whatever her private affairs are they should not be open to public discourse. If you really have a compelling reason to know, why do you not ask her? We should respect her privacy as we hope that she would respect our own.”

A simpler and altogether truthful answer would be, “I do not involve myself in her private affairs. If, for some reason you really must know, I suggest that you ask her.” The fact of the matter is that you not involve yourself in her private affairs, even if certain aspects of them have become known to you inadvertently.

The instance, on the other hand, in which “you tell a lie to protect another from exposure ...”, that is to say, to protect another from deleterious consequences that would follow from your telling the truth appears to be more complex, although it is not. Once again, you are not compelled to tell the truth about what you know explicitly in the terms asked. You are not compelled to make public what is private. But neither must you lie.

On what authority does the asking party have the legitimate power to morally (or legally) compel a truthful answer from you --- explicitly in the terms in which it is asked? You had answered the question correctly: “It stands clear that if I were asked by a priest, a policeman or someone in a legitimate position I would answer truthfully.”

If the inquiring part does not possess any of these credentials, they do not legitimately possess the moral authority to compel an answer from you that would satisfy their question. For example, if you were asked, “Does so-and-so engage in such-and-such activity?”, it would be scandalous of you to confirm a presumed evil of that person (presumed, because, were it not presumed but still in need of authentication, it would not be asked of you in the first place). First of all, your own knowledge of all the circumstances surrounding the sin of another is, at best, deficient. You may know that such and such thing in fact was done by that person, while remaining totally unaware of any circumstances extenuating it, or any of the antecedents that culminated in it. As such, you can genuinely and truthfully assert, “I do not know.” You know “in part” and “deficiently” --- at least in the definitive terms of the one inquiring who is seeking a “yes” or a “no”.

But you can authentically provide neither. You are in possession of certain and very likely *superficial* aspects of what that person had done, but not to the extent that you can say with *full knowledge* and complete certainty: “yes”. Only the person inquired about can make that final statement. You really cannot answer the question in the unqualified context in which it is presented to you. You cannot say, “no”, on the one hand, because that is not true. But neither can you say, “yes” on the other, because it is equally not true that you really “know” all that the person had done, under what circumstances it was done, and what antecedents led up to it.

You can truthfully answer, “*If what you say is true, I suppose that only so-and-so could tell you himself. Ask him.*”

If this is construed by the questioner as “avoidance and therefore likely”, then that is the illicit assumption of the one who asks --- for which you have no responsibility whatever. You are answering his question --- it is not for you to attempt to persuade him to any conclusions. These he makes of himself, in light of, or despite what you say. You have spoken the truth, and should be entirely comfortable with that. The conclusions he reaches are not of your making.

The more complete answer:

A lie is any *defection* from the truth, from what is true, from what knows to be true, or the abrogation of what is true altogether.

A lie is always sinful, for it is a violation of the 9th Commandment, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor” (Ex. 20.16 & Deut. 5.20) --- extrapolated and widely accepted as a proscription against lying, or untruthfulness in general. To underscore the irredeemable evil inherent in lying, we must look not so much to the Old as to the New Testament; not so much to Moses, as to Jesus.

In the way of one of the few actual *descriptions* (not citations) of the devil that occur in the Bible, the one Jesus Himself uses refers to the evil one as, “a liar and the *father of lies*”:

“He was a murderer from the beginning, and he stood not in the truth; because truth is not in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father thereof.” (St. John 8.44)

This is a startling statement coming from an unimpeachable source --- Christ Himself. It is startling because *it completely overthrows the notion that lying can proceed from any benign motive*, that lying can be innocuous, and sometimes even unavoidable and necessary as a means to a good end. Jesus tells us something strikingly different.

Note that he describes the devil as he, “*quia mendax est et pater eius*” --- not just a liar himself, but *the father of lies*, the one who *begets lies* as a father begets children. As it is the nature of a father to beget children, so it is the nature of the devil to beget lies. He is, in a word, the malignant “*pater eius*” from whom *all* lies proceed.

What is more, in another context, Christ tells us that “A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit; neither can an evil tree bring forth good fruit.” (St. Matthew 7.18). So understood, a lie, being evil, cannot possibly be the occasion of a good. Its fruit is evil because it is contrary not just to the 8th Commandment, but to Christ Himself, “*Who is the Truth*”. (St. John 14.16) How then can

a lie, any lie, be construed as good when by its very nature it is contrary to (the nature of) Christ Himself?

This is not to say that all lies are of the same gravity. Very clearly this is not the case. But because some lies appear to facilitate an apparent good perceived as greater than the evil inherent in the lie, does not, even from a benign motive, make the lie not a lie. It remains what it is: a lie.

Most often, despite our greatest efforts, we cannot overcome the sense of guilt that accompanies every lie, no matter how “small”. We instinctively recognize that, regardless of the apparently good ends that had motivated it, we have made a breach and have sinned. Our own consciences (the voice of God within) convict us in spite of the good end achieved. It is a good achieved at the expense of another good: truth. We attempt to put them on a balance in terms of magnitude or proportion: the more the scale tips toward the good, the more “benign” the lie.

The problem with this is that the scale is not balancing two competing goods, such that the preponderance of the one over the other justifies the choice of a greater good over a lesser good. In *either* case, the choice will be a good choice, although one may be “better” --- that is to say, possessed of a greater magnitude of good --- than the other. Literally, such a “balancing act” is justifiable in attempting to determine the preponderance of things alike in nature. One does not place grapes on the one side and apples on the other to determine which is better, or which, by weight (preponderance), yields greater value, still less a diamond on the one side and a bar of lead on the other. This “balancing” is pointless.

It is much the same with evil and good. To attempt to balance evil with good is to presume that they are like in nature, and commensurable in value --- when in fact they are *opposite* both in nature and value since “evil” has no “*being*” at all. In fact, it is precisely a “*privation* of being! Evil is the *absence or deprivation of a good*. What we understand as the evil we call illness, for example, is nothing more than diminished health --- it is a privation of “being healthy”. Were there no such state as “being healthy”, there would be no “illness”. Evil, in a word, has no “existence” of itself. It is a diminution of a good thing, but not a “thing” itself.



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