

Soap Out That Mouth!

"What did you just say? You come here right this second! Now, march yourself off to the bathroom, take that bar of soap, and wash your mouth out until it's good and clean. And don't let me ever hear words like that coming out of your mouth again!"

So little Ralphie—in modern classic holiday movie "A Christmas Story"—is sent off to contemplate the mysteries of life over a mouthful of Ivory. Meanwhile, we sit downstairs wondering where in the world he could have managed to pick up words like that. And, just as in the movie, the culprit is often staring back at us grownups from the mirror. The same words that shock us coming from children seem to flow with hardly a second thought from our own lips. It may be time for us to get some soap of our own.

Bad language, or swearing, can be divided into three categories. First, there is profanity—language that serves to debase or defile the sacred. Using God's name in vain, damning people and things to hell, reviling heaven, and blaspheming fall into this category. While frequently abused, this is also the easiest category to address. The Second Commandment—"Thou shalt not use the name of the Lord thy God in vain"—prohibits such misuse.

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, "The second commandment forbids the abuse of God's name, i.e. every improper use of the names of God, Jesus Christ, but also of the Virgin Mary and all the saints" (CCC 2146). And again, "Blasphemy is directly opposed to the Second Commandment. . . . The prohibition of blasphemy extends to language against Christ's Church, the saints, and sacred things. . . . [Blasphemy] is in itself a grave sin" (CCC 2148). "Do not accustom your mouth to oaths, and do not habitually utter the name of the Holy One," warns the book of Sirach. "The man who always swears and utters the name will not be cleansed from sin" (23:9–10).

Second, there is vulgarity—morally crude words that typically refer to the excretory functions of the body. In common usage, they are rarely spoken for their underlying meaning. When was the last time you walked down the street and heard somebody yell, "Excrement!"? Instead, they are used as derogatory expletives to insult and show contempt or merely as conversational filler. As insults, they are forbidden by Christ's commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). As verbal filler they are divorced from their meaning and fail to comport with a Christian standard of language.

"Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer every one" (Col. 4:6).