

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

We are all familiar with the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, or we should be. They represent the externalization of our faith, where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. These works of mercy are how we make our faith real and tangible. While the corporal works have been highlighted in the Church since Vatican II, we cannot fail to emphasize the equally important spiritual works of mercy.

The spiritual works of mercy:

admonishing the sinner
instructing the ignorant
counseling the doubtful
comforting the sorrowful
bearing wrongs patiently
forgiving all injuries
praying for the living and the dead

Our readings today speak to us about the difficult topic of fraternal correction, also known as admonishing the sinner. We begin with that wonderful passage from St. Paul's letter to the Romans in which he says: ***Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.*** This must be our guiding precept in the practice of fraternal correction.

Love does no evil; hence love is the fulfillment of the law. Christ's coming did not negate the law, it fulfilled it. Christ in His own person was the law. This means that in the person of Jesus there was to be found a meeting of Faithful Yahweh and faithful Israel.

And so then, what **is** love? First and foremost, it is **not** a mere feeling and it is **not** a sentiment. As one of my seminary professors would say: *It is not a gooey candy bar affair.* It is not the stuff of soap operas and melodramas. Love is an act of the will. **It is willing the good of the other, as other, and then doing something about it.** In this act of the will we fulfill the whole Law of God.

True love, Christlike love, is before all else life-giving and life-enhancing. We should never see love as some terrible demand placed upon us. It's an invitation to deeper life. And with this in mind, we have the perfect standard for examining our consciences. And may I recommend the practice of examining your consciences as a nightly spiritual exercise? It keeps us humble.

In light of this, let's turn to our first reading and gospel. These readings are specifically about the particularly difficult subject of ***fraternal correction***. Something we all wrestle with at one time or another. When, how, and to what extent, do we correct those who are in a morally reprehensible or spiritually dangerous situation? It is easy to recognize and appropriately react to those situations in which someone is in physical danger. We must be just as vigilant when we see someone in spiritual danger.

One of our favorite indoor pastimes is critiquing others. We are not in the least bit reticent about that. We are pretty eager to criticize others. There's a very good reason for it: it makes us feel better about ourselves. Perhaps there are times we feel afraid, unworthy, or unappreciated. What's one of the best and quickest ways to fix this problem? It's to drag someone else down. The lower they go, the higher we appear and feel by comparison. And so we gossip, backstab, insinuate, spread rumors, scapegoat, and we listen with eagerness to other people doing the same thing. Let's face it, my fellow sinners; we get a kick out of this more than almost anything else. There are entire industries based upon this dynamic. You simply need to turn on the television and count the number of celebrity gossip programs.

What we do **not** do is confront people directly. We all know people who do things that really bother us; or who are morally in the wrong; or who are in spiritual danger. And our response is to talk about them and drag them down to others. Yet, we rarely use direct confrontation. That is too emotionally threatening. We might get critiqued in return. After all we have been asked to take the plank out of our own eye. We might lose a friend. We might be accused of not being politically correct. Whatever value we get out of putting someone down, it is more than offset by the negatives of direct confrontation. And that's why we don't do it.

We must look at this issue with St. Paul's criterion of love and remember to will the good of the other as the fulfillment of the Law of God. In doing so, we would see first that fraternal correction **is so very necessary**. If somebody is in a bad way; doing something dangerous; is on a negative or self-destructive path; is in spiritual danger of losing their soul; the call of love would be to correct them. Rescuing someone from spiritual danger is ultimately far more important than rescuing someone from physical danger. This is truly willing the good of the other. To remain silent and merely talk about the person behind their back in a non-constructive way is not an act of love.

Think of a parent whose child is on a self-destructive path. The parent who never speaks, never acts, and never corrects is a truly irresponsible parent.

So both the first reading and the gospel remind us that we have to overcome our reticence about fraternal correction; even though it remains a very difficult thing to do.

We hear from the prophet Ezekiel in very strong language: if a brother is on a destructive path and you don't warn him, he will go to his death because of his sin, but **you** will be held responsible. If a brother or sister is doing something morally reprehensible and you **do** warn them, they too will die because of their sins, but you will be saved because you warned them, according to Ezekiel.

In our cultural framework, our framework of rugged individualism and political correctness, we can so often retreat rather easily into our own private worlds. "Oh, that's none of my business." But it doesn't work that way in the community of the

Church. We are interdependent members of the Body of Christ. It is therefore ultimately self-destructive if we do not correct others out of love.

And so we find the advice of Jesus in Matthew's gospel to be so very important. He says: When you have a quarrel with somebody; someone is on the wrong path; someone is doing some self-destructive, then you should talk to him or her. Hard to do—yes! But we must do it.

And should they not respond—then what do we do? We bring it to one other person or a few. See how restrained Jesus is. He doesn't want fraternal correction to turn into something mean-spirited or to gang-up on the person. He wants it to remain an act of love. Bring just one other person or a few into it who may also be aware of the problem.

And if that doesn't work, only then do we bring to the church. We bring the individual to the church and not to the gossiping community; not to everybody and their brother. We bring him or her to that community of people who are committed to helping and loving. This is so very powerful and important advice for all of us. We face this moral question all the time. The Lord gives us a method of handling the correction of our brothers and sisters who are in moral danger by bringing to bear a true spirit of love and other-directed concern. This is our duty to one another as members of Christ's body, the Church.

The other side of this equation is learning to receive correction, and the key is humility and a sincere desire to grow in the Lord and His ways. We are all sinners and we need each other's help.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella