

23rd (QA&SJ) Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

“If your brother sins go and tell him his fault...” This Sunday’s readings explore the bounds of individual responsibility in the context of the human community. Jesus speaks of a three-step process for acting responsibly toward a brother or sister who sins. He speaks of fraternal correction, which is not an easy task to do. Our first reading, from Ezekiel, clarifies the personal responsibility of the prophet, who is appointed Israel’s watchman, for those to whom God has sent to the community. His task is to inform the wicked, who themselves must choose to turn from their wicked ways. According to St. Paul our only responsibility is *“to love one another.”* But the love required may be *tough love*. The ideal community is one in which believers have all things in common and are devoted to the teaching of the apostles, to the Eucharistic celebration, and to prayers. Their love is sincere. They hate what is evil and hold on to affection, anticipating one another in showing honor. St. Paul’s message is of vital importance for this Sunday’s theme. *Love is the standard of all Christian conduct.* Law, instructions, and procedures must reflect love. Canon law, for example, has validity to the extent that it regulates conduct in the church by respecting clearly the dignity and value of each person.

Admonition is at times necessary in the interest of our neighbors’ wellbeing. Many of us would rather not correct or remind a loved one or a friend for fear of hurting them or being misunderstood. But fraternal

correction is part of Christian life. It has to be done. The bottom line is that it has to be done with love. *“Love is the only debt which a Christian has to pay,”* as St. Paul figuratively said. That is the only reason we do this “unpleasant” task of pointing out the mistake of a brother or a sister. *Are there people who correct you? Are there people who point out what is wrong or what can still be improved?* Usually these are the people we would rather avoid because they make us uncomfortable. Correction is never easy and can be embarrassing as it may carry with it the risk of losing a long established friendship. Normally keeping our mouth shut is better but there are occasions when failure to speak out is to condone an evil practice. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, *“One who condones evil is just as guilty as the one who perpetuates it!”* Like it or not situations arise where failure to get involved is not an act of love but heartlessness. Consider yourself blessed if you have people who *risk your ire or rejection, just because they care for you.*

In contrast there are persons who will praise you. They will say or do anything to make you feel you are OK, they will say *no problem* and *there’s nothing to worry about.* These are the persons who will tell you *what you want to hear, not what you need to hear.* The problem with them is—they only will stand with you as long as you are *“Up there.”* When misfortune comes, *they are gone.* A true brother or sister is the one that *would walk with you through thick or thin, in good times and bad.* On the personal level all of us have a certain responsibility.

When confronting a person we need to be honest with our motivation. As Pope Benedict XVI advised, “*Fraternal correction is not a reaction to injury suffered, but is moved by love for one’s brother.*” So what drives you to confront that person? Some problems are overlooked for years and never addressed. Heavy drinking, drug addiction, marital infidelity, laziness, neglect of family, lack of social responsibility and so on. All too often failure to address a person’s weakness leads to moral and/or physical deterioration. It is worth remembering that none of us is perfect, so when we point out the faults of others we should be prepared to hear about our own. The truth is—conflicts are unavoidable in the life of a group or a community.

*How do you handle differences in the family, community or parish? If your brother sins, then what? **First**, tell him. Do not make him guess. Do not tell his best friend or his pastor. Go to him alone. Do not go out spreading word about him. **Second**, talk to him a second time accompanied by one or two trusted companions who can be a go-between. Ask a common friend to convince the other. In some cultures they say if the husband goes nuts and takes a hostage, the police resort to an easy solution to break the standoff: they call the wife or the mother to plead with the suspect, and it usually succeeds. **Third**, go to the Church. This may be a scary procedure, but the good news is in nine cases out of ten, we may never need to go beyond the first stage. Jesus gives the assurance that where two or three gather in his name—to pray,*

discuss, disagree, decide, or correct—he is with them. Ask for prayers.

The fourth way and so on, never give up on your brother or sister.

There will always be a way to win them back. A wayward or an errant member approached in a personal and courteous manner is happy to

come back without much argument. **Today and everyday let us allow these clear and practical instructions from the scriptures guide us in our dealings with one another. May we always remain sensitive and work for a better relationship in our family and community. Amen!**