

Fraternal Correction

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Mt 18:15-20

Ave Maria Catholic Church. Sunday, September 10, 2023. Fr. David M Vidal

The readings of this Sunday's liturgy direct our attention to the love of neighbor. Saint Paul says: *“Love does no evil to the neighbor,”* (Rom 13:10). True love only wishes and looks for what is good, true, and beautiful in other’s lives. We can also remember that Saint Paul declares: *“Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth,”* (1 Cor 13: 4-6).

Within the context of true love, we can raise this question: “What should we do if our brother or sister sins against us?”

First, we must try to detach ourselves from that situation and look at it from a higher perspective. Why should we do that? Because sometimes we look at a situation from a partial view. We just consider our broken feelings. She or he did this to me! It hurts me! It offended me!

How not to feel that pain? However, we must lift ourselves up to see the situation from a higher view. If that act is an act of sin, first and foremost, that person offended God and hurt himself. When we look at the situation in this way, we cannot but feel pity for that person. That should bring sentiments of compassion that can be expressed with these words: “I am so sorry for you!”

After considering the whole situation from a higher perspective, we must look at ourselves and understand that we were not exempt from hurting others.

How many times did we have to say “I am sorry”? And if we did not say it, how many times should we have said it?

Then, we should remember the Sermon on the Mount: *“Why do you notice the splinter in your brother’s eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove that splinter from your eye,’ while the wooden beam is in your eye? You hypocrite, remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother’s eye,”* (Mt 7: 3-5).

This is one of the fundamental temptations in our lives. We judge others' lives and others' works, but we remain ignorant of our lives and own doings. However, God will not judge us for what other people did, but for what we did!

Saint Ephrem's prayer is illuminating: *"O Lord and Master of my life, keep from me the spirit of indifference and discouragement, lust of power, and idle chatter. Instead, grant to me Your servant, the spirit of purity, humility, patience, and love. O Lord and King, grant me the grace to be aware of my sins and not to judge my brother; for You are blessed, now and forever."*

After placing the situation into context and looking carefully into our own lives, we are now ready to consider our brother's and sister's fault against us.

What should we do? We need to love the person. What does it mean to love the person? Does it mean to let the person keep offending God and hurting himself? That does not sound very loving!

We must love the person and hate the sin, and for that very reason, we must help our brother or sister in need with the gift of *"fraternal correction."*

Let us first say what fraternal correction is not. Fraternal correction is not the discharge of one's conscience to feel good about it. Fraternal correction is not meant to win an argument, but to win a brother or a sister. True love is not self-interest, but true love looks for the good of the other person, even if the other person is an enemy!

For this reason, fraternal correction must be guided by the virtue of prudence. If the person is not receptive now, we should wait for a better moment. If words cannot be said now, at least we can give a good example. However, sometimes, we must speak (especially when other people could be hurt or scandalized). And if we speak, that should be done with humility (being aware of our own faults), with love (trying to gain a brother and not an argument), and with order. And the order is presented by the gospel.

"If your brother sins [against you],

1. Go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.
2. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.'
3. If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church," (Mt 18: 15-17).

The actions are progressive. First, we need to have that personal conversation. If the conversation fails, we should bring good friends, people the other person respects and loves, so that they can bring him back. If that is unsuccessful, we have the recourse of the Church. The Catholic Church, by the apostolic mandate of Jesus and commission to Peter, has the duty and responsibility of leading us on faith and morals.

And the Church, out of love, will keep repeating the apostles' message. She will keep asking together with Saint Paul: *“Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit the kingdom of God?”* And She will keep answering: *“Do not be deceived; neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers nor boy prostitutes nor sodomites nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God,”* (1 Cor 6: 9-10). And for that reason, the Church will keep calling for conversion and spiritual renewal.

Christian fraternal correction is born of love. Fraternal correction is not the outcome of irritation at another's faults, offended pride, or wounded vanity. And when fraternal correction is exercised with charity, humility, and prudence, it produces much fruit.

With discernment, humility, and love, let us encourage one another to live a virtuous life. Amen.