

Fraternal Correction

Called to “Judge” (?!)

23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year A

Ezekiel 33:7-9
Psalms 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9

Romans 13:8-10
Matthew 18:15-20

It would seem that the worst sin one could commit nowadays (socially speaking) is “judging.” Even something as simple as asking a frequently late co-worker to arrive on time for meetings can result in accusations of being “judgmental”; at which point the person making the request instantly backs off, expressing copious regret for committing such a vile transgression.

Culturally we have become so wary of “judging” or of being labeled “judgmental” that we have become a society in which there is great moral confusion and little clarity, even among fellow Christians, as to right and wrong. All we know is “judge not, and you will not be judged.” Therefore, we are loath to criticize anyone or express disapproval of anything. In the midst of this, we hear the Gospel Reading for the twenty-third Sunday. Traditionally referred to as the Doctrine of Fraternal Correction, Jesus gives explicit instructions, outlining specific steps for correcting a fellow Christian.

Taken in light of the Reading from Paul, placed in the context of acting out of love, Fraternal Correction is nothing less than fellow Christians looking out for one another, calling one another to task, bringing one another back from sin; in short, helping

one another to better live the standards Christ has given us. Such a practice, as prescribed by Christ Himself – complete with His comprehensive instructions – becomes an exercise to build up the community of faith in which all of us, with an eye toward living the Gospel, walk together along the path Christ has given us, pulling back those who go astray, and occasionally being pulled back ourselves.

As a basic practice within a Christian Community, and apparently practiced by the people of the early Church, how would Fraternal Correction be understood and responded to in today’s moral climate? Alas, the “corrector” would be left vulnerable to extreme hostility. More often than not, he or she would be met with accusations of being “judgmental,” of being unaccepting of other people’s differences, of being closed-minded, politically incorrect, and perhaps be made to feel that, in lovingly carrying out Christ’s instructions, he or she had in fact committed a sin. As a result of our fear of being labeled “judgmental,” our tendency is to neglect one of Jesus’ most fundamental instructions for building up the Body of Christ.

What if, however, we look at Fraternal Correction from the standpoint of

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the First Reading? Read by itself or alongside the Doctrine outlined in the Gospel, God sternly asserts to Ezekiel – and therefore to us who hear it in the Mass – that if he fails to warn the wicked, God will hold him responsible for the wicked man's death. This puts Fraternal Correction in a much more ominous light. We must Fraternal Correct, not only because Jesus instructs us to, but also because the very salvation of our souls depends upon it! Indeed the Letter of James reminds us “the person who brings a sinner back from his way will save his soul from death and cancel a multitude of sins” (James 5:20).

Are we therefore called to “judge”? Is it part of our mission as followers of Christ to be “judgmental”? Have we allowed popular morality and political correctness to shame us away from exercising a fundamental duty given to us by Christ? Or are we simply confused because our definitions have been mixed up by a morally permissive culture that has equated correction with “judgmentalism”? In failing to correct out of love, are we, in fact, acting out of egotistical self-interest so as to avoid being labeled as bigoted, arrogant, closed-minded or “judgmental”? In our avoidance to call the sinner back, are we, in fact, writing our own judgment?

This fundamental doctrine does not mean that we become a Church of sanctimonious busybodies. Jesus still reminds us to “remove the plank from your own eye first, then you will see clearly to take the speck from your brother's eye” (Matthew 7:5). In taking on the task of

Fraternal Correction we must humbly be open to receive correction from others, without resorting to calling them “judgmental”. Hence, we must be aware of the need for discernment when called to act as corrector so as to avoid acting as hypocrite.

We also must be aware that Fraternal Correction will often be received with extreme hostility. After all, when one reminds people of their Sunday obligation, guess who objects to the reminder. In telling people of the importance of arriving on time for Mass and not leaving at Communion, guess who is usually offended, and why. In affirming Christian social and moral values in a society hostile to Christianity, guess what the reaction might be.

We are called to tread a fine line. We must ourselves endeavor to avoid sin and avoid giving offense. We are not called to give condemnatory judgment toward others. We are, however, called to look after one another as we work together to live the Gospel. In a society extremely hostile to anything that hints of being “judgmental,” we are called to correct one another out of humility and a fraternal love. In doing so we save our own souls, take greater care and responsibility for one another, and ultimately act out of obedience to Christ.

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