

Fr. Roger J. Landry
Pontifical Josephinum Seminary, Columbus, Ohio
40 Hours Retreat on “Living the Mystery Placed in a Priest’s Hands”
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A
September 6, 2020
Ezek 33:7-9, Ps 95, Rom 13:8-10, Mt 18:15-20

LOVING OTHERS ENOUGH TO CORRECT THEM CHARITABLY

- Today St. Paul tells the Christians in Rome and all of us, “Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” Basing himself on Jesus’ words that the law and the prophets all flow from the two-fold commandment to love God with all of our mind, heart, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mt 22:40), St. Paul describes how the second tablet of the Decalogue can all be summed up in the phrase, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love is our duty. We owe it others. We owe it precisely God commanded us to love one another as Jesus himself has loved us.
- One of the most challenging aspects of that love Jesus gives us in today’s Gospel, his teaching on fraternal correction. Jesus directs us: “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault.” He tells us to do so first one-on-one, out of respect for the person. But if that doesn’t work, he tells us not to give up, but out of love to return with a couple of others who have observed the same fault, in the hope that the collective concern might help the person get over his or her denial or stubbornness to change. If that doesn’t work, Jesus tells us to persevere and go to the leaders of the Church, to pray for the person and to intervene with greater authority. And if that, too, is unsuccessful, Jesus tells us to treat the person as we would a tax collector or sinner, which doesn’t mean to write the person off — after all, Jesus was a “friend of tax collectors and sinners,” who drew near to them and ate with them — but to recognize that the person is not in communion and to pray for that person with the same passion with which we pray for the conversion of tax collectors and sinners. It’s all part of the duty of love we owe our brothers and sisters.
- It’s helpful to remember that in Matthew’s Gospel, this passage is immediately preceded by Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep, that just as a shepherd will leave the ninety-nine and go in search of the stray and rejoice more over its recovery than the docility of the other ninety-nine, so God the Father’s will is that not one sheep be lost. We’re supposed to love our erring spiritual siblings the way God the Father loves lost sheep and fraternal correction is part of that love. It’s also useful to remember that right after this passage, St. Matthew tells us that St. Peter came to Jesus to ask how many times we must forgive a brother who sins against us, and Jesus replies, “not seven times, but [literally] seventy sevens,” and whether that means giving a 78th chance or a 491st chance, the point is clear: Fraternal correction isn’t about winning an argument but reconciling with a brother or sister, so that, as Jesus suggests in the Gospel, we may gather again, as two or more in his name, to pray and to live in true communion, with him in our midst.
- Jesus’ words on the duty of fraternal correction are very challenging today. We live in a culture that thinks the greatest value is to be “nice.” Many believe that we really should never correct anyone else, because that would make us seem “judgmental” or “offensive” or “harsh.” They say it’s important to be civil, to agree to disagree, to live and let live, to mind our business, and to be tolerant of everything except the traditional values that the woke culture considers intolerable. But this mentality comes from a lack of love, a lack of fortitude, and a lack of seriousness about the harm sin really does. If we really care for a person, we will have the guts, love and maturity to intervene, because we know that sin wounds the individual, wounds others, and wounds the love of God. Some people try to justify a failure to live this teaching on fraternal correction by pretending that “love of neighbor” means precisely not admonishing, but accepting the person and all of his or her choices. When we look at Jesus’ example in the Gospel, however, we see that, even though he was “kind and merciful” (Ex 34:6; Ps 103:8; Ps 145:8) and “meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29), he was certainly not “nice” and “tolerant” as the world uses these terms today. In last Sunday’s Gospel, we see he called Peter “Satan” and reproved him for thinking not as God does but as human beings do. He corrected James and John when they were ambitiously seeking the choicest seats in his Messianic administration, telling them that in order to be great, they needed to become the servants, rather than the

overseers, of all, all the way to the point of drinking his chalice of suffering. He regularly corrected the apostles, like when they were jealous of others' casting out demons in his name. He fiercely corrected the moneychangers in the temple, whose tables he overturned and whom he whipped out of the temple for turning his Father's house into a den of thieves. And more than anyone else, he often corrected the Scribes and the Pharisees, whom he called "hypocrites," "blind guides," "fools," "whitewashed sepulchers," and a "brood of vipers." None of these actions was "civil" or "nice." Jesus, however, had come to save the money changers, the Scribes and the Pharisees, and Peter and the apostles; and to do that, he had to first let them know that and how they were veering from the Gospel, veering from love, veering from Him. In the same way, we have to have the courage to risk being considered uncivil or no longer nice if a brother or sister needs our help.

- When St. Paul lists the fruits of the Spirit in his letter to the Galatians, he uses two words right after each other that most of us consider synonyms. He says that when we're living according to the Holy Spirit we are both "kind" and "good," which are translations of the Greek words *chrestotes* and *agathosune*. *Chrestotes* means a goodness that is always seeking to help positively, but *agathosune* is a goodness that includes rebuke and discipline. Jesus showed *chrestotes* or kindness when he cared for the sinning woman who anointed his feet; he showed *agathosune* when he cleansed the Temple. The Holy Spirit seeks to bring about in us the same, Christ-like *chrestotes* and *agathosune*, the same kindness and courageous, loving goodness.
- That helps us to understand a second reason why Jesus' teaching on fraternal correction is often not followed: because some who misunderstand what it really means have given it a bad name. They look at this teaching as a divine mandate for putting others down. We've all suffered from people who are chronic complainers, incessant naggers, who really can't say anything nice about others, who try to use the faith as a weapon to tearing others apart. There are some Catholic media sites today that ooze this type of battery acid, with one negative commentary after another, almost incapable of saying anything good about anyone except those who share not just their opinions but their negativity. Jesus words in the Sermon on the Mount are an important fraternal correction here: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Mt 7:3-5). Too often in life, the clearest sign that a person is a mess inside is when he or she starts criticizing everyone else; a common, unconscious psychological diversion is to try to forget about our own problems is by focusing on everyone else's issues. But Jesus says to all of us who have fallen into this trap that first we must take the logs out of our own eyes so that we can see clearly to help others take the specks out of theirs. Notice that Jesus does not say, "If you've got your own issues, don't give fraternal correction to others, don't help them remove whatever is blinding them." But he wants us to be doing so exclusively out of love, which is why we have to notice our own failings and be working on them first. It's when we start to see ourselves clearly that we can give effective fraternal correction, not as a hypocrite who doesn't practice what he preaches, but as a humble fellow sinner trying to help a brother or a sister do better, uniting with him in the name of the Lord to battle sin together.
- This duty of love Jesus gives us as his disciples is a most serious obligation. What if we don't do it? What if we don't correct our brother or sister when we see him or her erring? What if we just wait ... and wait ... and wait to see if someone else intervenes? God is clear to the prophet Ezekiel in today's first reading: "If I tell the wicked man that he shall surely die, and you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked man from his way, he shall die for his guilt, but I will hold you responsible for his death. But if you warn the wicked man, trying to turn him from his way, and he refuses to turn from his way, he shall die for his guilt, but you shall save yourself." In other words, giving fraternal correction to a brother or sister who needs it is not an optional thing we may or may not do depending upon whether we feel up to it; rather it is a *mission* God gives us — and our salvation and others' salvation depend on it. God calls Ezekiel a "watchman" for the house of Israel, someone who was tasked with keeping an eye out to protect the sheep from thieves or from wolves. We're all called to be such watchmen. Today a better term would be a "lifeguard." We're called to be lifeguards for the human race. When we see others swimming in shark infested waters with those who are drawing them into evil, when we see others drowning in their own bad habits, God wants us to spring to action. To do so is to try to save lives, to be a hero, even if, at first, the person might not want to be helped.

The clergy in a particular way is meant to such sentinels. St. Gregory the Great, one of the saints in the beautiful mural in front of us, use to preach often on this passage from Ezekiel, both admitting how often he needed to reproach himself for not keeping it as well as trying to help bishops and priests do better than he was. He said, “What kind of a watchman am I? Far from the heights to which I aspire. I am constrained by my weakness. And yet, the one who created me and redeemed me and all humanity can give me, even in my unworthiness, some grace to glimpse the whole of life, and the skill and ability to speak of what I see. So it is for the love of God that I do not spare myself in preaching.” Despite our weaknesses our Creator and Redeemer can give us what we need as we seek to carry out this duty for the love of God and others.

- This time in seminary is a very important one to learn how to give and to receive well fraternal correction. We are our brothers’ keepers and if we see one of them erring, if we see one of them forming a bad habit, we’re called to act. Sometimes it may be good to consult your spiritual director before approaching the person discreetly. But fraternal correction is a sign of a thriving seminary. I was talking to Father Brannen yesterday about some memories of Mt. St. Mary’s, where I did my pre-theology, and I told him that I’d always be particularly grateful for two things there. First, it was a profoundly Marian place, built at the base of the National Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes. And second, the “horizontal” or peer formation, was the best I ever encountered in any seminary. Sems didn’t wait until faculty members saw what they were observing with their fellow seminarians; they intervened to nip things in the bud. In doing so, they had a real care not only for the brothers and for the overall morale of the house but also for the Church later, lest any bad habits negatively impact God’s people. When St. Josemaria Escriva used to visit different centers of Opus Dei in the world, one of the questions he would ask those living in the respective centers would be about the practice of fraternal correction. He always took it as a sign of a healthy house when it was done routinely, according to Jesus’ instructions in the Gospel, because we all need each other’s help to become the saints God calls us to be. Our real friends are not those who flatter us, or who continue to “enable” us to do things we know we shouldn’t do, but those who tell us, in love, that we’re heading down the wrong track. We should see Jesus in them, patiently forming us into the person he calls us to be, and be grateful.
- I remain grateful decades later for fraternal corrections I’ve received. When I was in seminary, I used to get together with five or six other guys each night at the end of the day to wind down. I enjoyed it a lot. We had lots of laughs. One afternoon, however, one of my friends came to my room and proceeded to tell me point, “Rog, listen. We love you, man, but when all of us come together, do you realize that you do half the talking? You have to let other guys speak and not feel the need to make commentary on everything everyone else is saying.” It was great advice. I hadn’t even realized that that’s what I had been doing. On another occasion, in a get together with priests, one of my friends was describing what his new book was about. He said something about CS Lewis from his book that I recognized he had taken out of context. So I called attention to it, I thought nicely, just for the sake of “accuracy.” A couple of days later, a brother priest came to me and said, “Rog, you were right in your point about CS Lewis, but you were wrong to correct Phil in the middle of a get together. At a time in which we were all praising him for his accomplishment, your comment embarrassed him and you should apologize.” He was right and I did. I remember a third correction when a spiritual director I had told me I needed a new pair of shoes, because my shoes were so worn that they were a distraction. Again he was right. We all need friends like that who care about us enough, in little things and big, to help us. And we all need to become those types of friends, those types of Christ-like disciples.
- As we near the conclusion of our Forty Hours, it’s important to recall that Christ’s teaching on fraternal correction has a Eucharistic key. Jesus’ incarnation, hidden life, public ministry, passion, death and resurrection, establishment of the sacraments and institution of the Eucharist in particular, were all meant to bring about *koinonia* with God and with each other, true communion. He reminds us that if we come to bring our *logike latreia*, the sacrifice of ourselves, to the altar, but recognize that there’s a lack of communion with our brother, he wants us to prioritize the reestablishment of that communion before we come to offer our gift. Fraternal correction is an application of that principle. It prepares us for the communion Jesus seeks to build by our becoming one with him through the reception of his Body and Blood. But the Mass also strengthens us from within with the *agathosune* of Christ, so that, together with him, we may more courageously and faithfully fulfill the duty of love we owe our neighbor. As we gather together in the Lord’s name and midst, conscious of his promise that whenever two or more of us agree on earth about anything

for which we are to pray, it will be granted by the Father, let us ask him to send forth anew the Holy Spirit and fill us with all we need to become sentinels, lifeguards, brothers and true Christians, capable of living in a communion of loving fraternal correction, so that one day all of us may be reunited in that eternal kingdom where communion with God and with each other will know no end.