

23rd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (September 10, 2023)

For those of us who are football fans, you know that we are in one of the very best times of the year—the new season is upon us at all levels—high school, college, and the pros as well. As we cheer on our favorite teams, we also have to deal with those guys in the black-and-white striped shirts who throw those yellow penalty flags. The players' reactions to being called for penalties is often along the lines of "I didn't do it! It's not fair!"...even when the replay clearly shows they did do it.

How do we react when we are told that something is wrong or that we have done something wrong? Your parent or spouse or friend expresses their hurt or concern about something you have said or done..or your teacher hands back your test or homework with a whole lot of red marks indicating wrong answers...or your supervisor reprimands you for too many mistakes in your work. Do we get defensive—"it's not fair; why are you picking on me?" Or do we admit that they are right and that I need to do something about it?

Our readings today from the prophet Ezekiel and Matthew's gospel are all about these questions in the moral and spiritual realm. The bottom line: sometimes there is a need to correct or challenge others, or we ourselves may need some such correction or challenge. God is rather blunt in telling Ezekiel that if he, as watchman for Israel, does not warn the sinner to change his ways, then both will end up in a bad way—the sinner because of his sin, but also the watchman for failing to warn the sinner.

In the gospel Jesus gives the other apostles what we heard Jesus give Peter two weeks ago: 'whatever you bind or loose on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven'. He also gave them a process with which to confront a wrongdoer. First, confront the person privately. If that doesn't work, then take one or two others with you to support your concerns. If that doesn't work, bring the matter more formally to the Church. And if the person still refuses to acknowledge the wrong or change his ways, then the Church may have to resort to excluding him from the community and the sacraments. This is a very serious consequence, to be sure, but such a 'shock-treatment' consequence may well be the only way to wake the person up to the seriousness of his wrongdoing.

The Church takes very seriously this responsibility of challenging or correcting the sinner, because the Church's first and foremost concern—like that of Jesus himself—is for the salvation of souls. Jesus' great desire is our growth in holiness, and therefore also for our ongoing conversion and turning away from sin, so that we can know the real joy of knowing him in this life and sharing the eternal joy of his kingdom. Jesus at times needed to correct his followers, to show them what they needed to change about themselves and he gave his Church the authority to engage in that same work of correction.

Of course, the Church doesn't win any popularity contests when engaging in that work of challenge and correction, and that seems especially the case regarding those issues regarding the sanctity of human life and sexual morality. We are so often accused of being 'intolerant' when affirming our faith in these areas, a faith based on the very clear teachings of Jesus and the Church in handing on his teaching. 'Tolerance' is a favored idea these days; we are told we must be tolerant—we must accept—not only every person, but also what that person does. That is a major misuse of the word. Regarding persons, we are called not simply to 'tolerate' them (or merely 'put up with them'); rather, we are called to love them as St. Paul reminds us in our second reading from Romans. Love goes far beyond and way deeper than mere 'tolerance'. But as for the wrong or sin that we or others do, we must condemn it and challenge ourselves and others to turn away from it. To 'tolerate' sin is to say that sin is no big deal, and that was certainly not Jesus' approach. The old cliché remains as true as ever: we must hate the sin, and we must love the sinner.

This also applies regarding the accusations we hear of the Church being ‘judgmental’ when teaching or correcting. Again we must distinguish the person from the wrongful acts of that person. Of course it is true that only God can judge the state of a person’s soul and of his relationship with God. And we know that Jesus had some very strong words for those who presumed to judge others. But this does not and cannot absolve us of the duty to ‘judge’ or declare that certain actions are wrong or harmful. Our criminal laws are the result of our collective judgment that acts like murder, theft, and assault are wrong and are not to be tolerated. Parents sometimes need to discipline their children because they ‘judge’ or decide—and rightly so--that things like fighting, name-calling, or hitting are wrong and therefore not to be done. And if they are done, then there will need to be consequences.

A year ago this past spring, in May of 2022, we witnessed an example of a major leader in the Church engaging in this process of what is often called ‘fraternal correction’—trying to urge someone to change the error of his/her ways. Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone is the leader and chief shepherd of the Archdiocese of San Francisco. One of the members of his flock is Nancy Pelosi, former Speaker of the House of Representatives and still a member of that body. She has often described herself as a ‘devout Catholic’, and at the same time has been very firm in declaring her full support for legalized abortion. This, of course, is in direct contradiction to the clear, ancient, and unchangeable teaching of the Church. Archbishop Cordileone engaged in a prolonged attempt to connect privately with Pelosi and to urge her to live in accord with the faith she professes in this area. He also warned her that her refusal to cease her public advocacy in this area would lead to her not being able to receive Holy Communion. Sadly, Pelosi has persisted in her advocacy, and the archbishop therefore told her formally that she is not to receive Communion until she repents of her advocacy of abortion.

Archbishop Cordileone, good shepherd that he is, assured her of his continued prayers and fasting offered for her. But he also recognized and acted on his responsibility to warn a powerful and influential member of his flock that she was seriously wrong on a serious matter. In doing so, the archbishop was simply following the counsel given both through the prophet Ezekiel and the clear words of Jesus himself on the need for calling on wrongdoers to change their ways. We are all in need of change and ongoing conversion; the Church sometimes needs to correct us as parents sometimes need to correct their children. Thanks be to God for loving us enough to challenge us when needed so we can come to the heavenly home he so desires for us.