

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – September 6, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St Paul, B’ham, AL – 5pm Vigil; 7:15, 8:30, & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,170 words

“Am I my brother’s keeper?”¹ Cain’s evasive question to God in the book of Genesis has really haunted us ever since: from our struggles with selfishness, disregard for others, or even contempt and worse toward others, sin introduced disorder and confusion into our relationships. And if there had been any doubt about whether we were our brothers’ keepers, God answered the question definitively by becoming one of us in Christ and dying for us. Yes, we must care for or “keep” each other. And beyond a generic sort of concern or charity, Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves; that is, to care for them to the point of even being concerned for their salvation. We are our brothers’ keepers – the love of neighbor requires it.

The Lord’s teaching in the gospel today comes to us against this backdrop. “If your brother sins against you,” he says, “go and tell him his fault between you and him alone”. Oh, but this is not easy. Have you ever seen someone contemplating or doing something sinful and thought you should say something to correct them? But have you ever decided not to do so, then doubted afterwards, wondering if you yourself had made a mistake? Maybe the decision was driven by a fear of confrontation; maybe you did not want to be seen as “judgmental” – one of the most misunderstood moral concepts of our time. Whatever the case may be, you grappled with the task of fraternal correction, which our Lord teaches us about today.²

Now fraternal correction can be a serious matter, especially considering what God said in the first reading: “[if] you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked from his way, the wicked shall die for his guilt, but I will hold you responsible for his death”. When we see someone erring, we may judge it convenient to say, “well, that’s his problem – I’ll just keep my mouth shut”. Yet we may have a duty to speak, even a serious one. I say “may”, because that duty is not absolute. St. Paul, in the second reading, reminded us of several of the “thou shalt not” commandments. They are negative precepts – telling us what we must never do; and negative precepts are always binding. Whereas positive commands can admit of exceptions.

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.” This is a positive precept, falling under the positive command of charity, and so it does have its exceptions. But given how serious the consequences could be in cases that are not exceptional, we had better learn how to recognize the difference. Here I think it’s important to highlight something: that hesitance that you may have experienced about correcting someone else is not in and of itself wrong. It’s actually a good sign, reinforcing the fact that fraternal correction is not prudent in every circumstance. Our challenge is not to overcome any reluctance entirely, but to understand in which situations it may be misplaced and be able to overcome it then.

Any act of charity depends upon time, place, and circumstances. For example, if a needy person were to walk up to me at the altar while I was reciting the Eucharistic Prayer and ask me to give him money, I would be under no obligation to help him at that moment; it is neither the time nor the place. And then, supposing I saw him after Mass, but I had nothing to give him – no cash, no food – then the circumstances would excuse me. But there is also the question of tact: Do I tell him nicely that I do not have what he seeks, or am I rude about it? And there is also discernment, and even seeking of counsel: Do I consider other ways I could help him, or what his underlying needs might be? Do I consult, if need be?

¹ Genesis 4:9.

² I am grateful to Fr. Etienne Demornex for a sermon on this theme he published, which provided many key insights and inspirations for the present homily.

The charity that is fraternal correction leans on similar considerations. Is it the time or the place? If not now, when? Do the circumstances suggest a good outcome, or might greater problems result? And what about tact: Do I consider carefully how I may offer correction with love and kindness, or do I just start swinging the “truth bat”? Have I discerned what mitigating factors could be at play, or whether the benefit of the doubt may properly be given? And with regard to seeking counsel: Am I certain I have understood correctly what’s at stake? Have I sought advice on how best to handle it, especially if I am unsure? And have I examined myself before the Lord to be sure I am acting from humility and not from pride?

Now sometimes the task of fraternal correction is rather straightforward. You parents tend to understand readily when it applies in all kinds of situations within the parent-child relationship. For example, when Junior is headed toward the dining room wall with his set of markers, you immediately swoop in and foil his artistic ambitions. Or, if you don’t make it in time, you correct him in a way that he understands that he should find a more appropriate canvas in the future. But this points to another important dimension of the fraternal correction dynamic: that of relationship. We may always correct someone who is under our care: parent-child, boss-employee, superior-inferior. But what about other types of relationships?

Here we have to consider before the Lord the nature of the relationship that is in play and the level of mutual trust within it. For it is most certainly not the case that we have to go around correcting everyone we see doing something wrong. Sometimes, it’s not your young child but your adult child; or it’s a colleague, a friend, or a neighbor. Nevertheless, it may be that with sufficient tact, delicacy, respect, and humility, you could offer them some constructive feedback when you see them erring in some way. And we should also reflect upon God’s providence – maybe this or that person came across our path for a reason. Thus the virtue of prudence factors in, which helps us to do things in the right way and measure.

Ask yourself: Have I ever been the recipient of fraternal correction in a way that was key for my growth – especially my growth in Christ? And, knowing that we are our brothers’ keepers – that we have a real responsibility for the spiritual good of others, not just their material good – we can ask whether we have missed opportunities to correct in the past that the Lord may have placed before us. Fraternal correction is often neither easy nor pleasurable; it can be a real participation in the cross. But it is that cross on which our salvation was purchased. And the one who hung on it, shedding every drop of his blood for the salvation of all, will give us every grace we need to love ourselves and our neighbors properly along the path to eternal life.