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JMJ

U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love You, save souls

O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

Volume 3, THE GOOD CHRISTIAN

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Manner in Which Fraternal Correction Should Be Administered

*“And his lord being angry, delivered him to the torturers”* St. Matthew 18:34.

We have hitherto treated of fraternal correction, by which we can help our neighbor to avoid sin and amend his life; and I have shown, in the first place, that it is required of each one by the love of God and the love of our neighbor; while, in the second place, I have proved that we are bound to it under pain of sin: many in justice, all by virtue of a special law of God. Now, the question is, how should one, who is concerned for the divine honor and his neighbor's welfare, act when he has to administer fraternal correction or admonition, so that he may attain his end, and not make matters worse instead of better. We can learn that from the Lord in the Gospel; namely, we must not be too harsh and severe to our neighbor at first, but warn him in a friendly manner, and, if he promises to amend, show a brotherly sympathy for him; but if we see that it is necessary, and that the promised amendment does not follow, we should reprove him with a holy anger. This is what I intend to explain in today's instruction.

*How we should fraternally admonish and correct others.*

If a doctor were to treat all his patients in the same way, and to give them all the same medicine, it would be an evident sign that he knows little of his profession, and we should expect him to kill more of his patients than he would cure. Would you like to trust such a doctor as that? I should think not; for what is good for one kind of illness is bad for another; what will cure one man who has a fever might bring to the grave another who has the very same fever. No, a good doctor must have a clear understanding, prudence, and foresight; he has to take into consideration the symptoms of the disease, the age, constitution strength, and other circumstances of the sick person; so that he may know what sort of medicine he has to administer in different cases, whether it should be strong or weak, sweet or bitter, cooling or heating, how often and in what quantity it has to be given.

What the medicine prescribed by the doctor is to the diseases of the body that is the fraternal correction given by a well-meaning Christian to the spiritual maladies of his neighbor. The one intends to save the body; the other, the soul from death, and to keep it alive. Therefore, the latter, as well as the former, if he hopes to do any good, must use great prudence and caution, and take every circumstance into consideration, lest, by administering the correction in an unskillful manner, he would do more harm to his neighbor than good. These circumstances are generally comprised in the words so well known to theologians: who, what, where, by what means, why, how, when. Remember that I am not speaking of those who are bound in justice to correct others, but only of those whom charity obliges to perform that duty.

I. I must see *who the person is* whom I think to be in need of correction from me; whether he is a stranger or an acquaintance of mine. Private individuals are rarely obliged to administer correction to a stranger whom they are not acquainted with, although they may be well aware that he is not leading a Christian life, unless, indeed, the case is one in which I can be of assistance to others in inducing him to amend, or if he indulges in sinful actions or words in my presence, so that the opportunity is offered me of giving him a friendly warning, or of

showing my displeasure at his conduct. If the person is well known to me, and is a neighbor or friend of mine, then I must consider whether he is of a higher or lower position than I, or whether he is equal to me in worldly standing. In the first case, as for instance, if a son has to admonish his father, or a daughter her mother, or a subject his superior, or a young man one who is advanced in life, a poor man one who is wealthy, an ignorant man one who is learned and well educated; then common sense tells us that we must be very courteous, careful, and modest in what we say; we must give the admonition with all respect, humility and reverence, if we hope to produce any good effect by it. Such is the advice given us by St. Paul: "An ancient man rebuke not, but entreat him as a father" (I. Tim. 5:1). You must not reprove him in harsh terms but rather implore of him, as your father, to take in good part what you have to say. Other acquaintances of ours, who are of lower or equal position, we can, after due examination of the matter, take to task with greater freedom and severity, reminding them of their duty, but always in such a way as to observe all the circumstances of fraternal correction given in a proper manner.

2. The next circumstance is, *what* have we to warn him of; in what am I bound to admonish my neighbor? St. Augustine tells us this: "You must not seek for something reprehensible; but rather reprove what you have seen; otherwise, we should seem to be spies on the actions of others." To go about here and there prying into the affairs of our neighbors through curiosity, to watch or ask how this or that one lives, what he does, what happens in this or that company, and that with the sole object of finding something to criticize and condemn, that is not at all required. Such is, indeed, the duty of superiors, parents, and masters with regard to their subjects; but in a private individual it would be mere curiosity, and the mark of an idle man, who is more inclined to meddle with his neighbor than to attend to his own business; it would be acting like the envious Pharisees of whom the Gospel says: "They watched Him" (St. Luke 14:1), meaning our Lord. No; what you see yourself, that you must correct.

3. The third circumstance is, *where*, in what place, the correction should be given. This question is answered by our divine Master, Christ Himself: "If thy brother shall offend against thee, go and rebuke him between thee and him alone." Fraternal correction, if it is to be profitable, must be administered in secret, and not in the presence of others, for we must not put our erring brother to useless shame, or unjustly lessen his good reputation since that would rather excite his anger than induce him to amend his evil ways. Unless, indeed, he gives public scandal by improper, impure, or blasphemous discourse, or by indecent actions; then charity and zeal for the divine honor require us to show our displeasure at such language or actions, either by some outward sign, if the person is of a higher position than we are, or by interrupting the Conversation. Christ our Saviour had taught us this, not only by word, but also by example. Peter had sinned, and that, too, grievously, when he denied his Master three times in the court of the high priest. Our Lord heard all he said; did He reprove him? Certainly He did. But how? Was it by harsh and severe words? No; for that was not the place for such a reproof; the court was full of servants, and our Lord did not wish to put Peter to shame before them. How did He, then, act? He looked at Peter, but with such compassion and deep meaning that His look pierced the heart of the apostle more profoundly than any words, and brought him to see and repent of his sin with bitter tears. But on another occasion, when Peter wished to deter his Master from undergoing the torments of His Passion and death, and when they were only accompanied by a few well-known disciples, who probably heard nothing of what was going on, our Lord reproved him sharply: "Go behind me, Satan," He exclaimed, "thou art a scandal unto me; because thou savorest not the things that are of God" (St. Matthew 16:23). Even with the hard-hearted and obdurate Judas He employed a wonderful mildness in this respect, for at the Last Supper He did not reprove his treachery openly, lest He should put him to shame before the other disciples; but spoke of it in such a way that Judas alone could understand what He alluded to, while the others could not know anything about it.

Many are the faults committed in this respect by husbands and wives, who, when they have to administer what they think to be a wholesome reproof, wait till the whole family is assembled at table, and then commence upbraiding in sharp and cutting words before servants and children; so that the only likely result of their reproof is mutual recrimination, or cursing and swearing, or even blows. That is not the place for a wholesome Christian admonition. Young wives are sometimes more guilty in this way, when they go after their husbands to the saloons, and reprove their drunkenness before the assembled guests. There can be no possibility of doing good in such a place as that by admonition. Others, again, have not courage enough to administer the reproof to the erring one alone, but wait till there are three or four friends together, when they seem to have more courage, and

speaking hardily of faults they wish to correct. But the place is ill chosen, and, instead of doing good, the correction is far more likely to do harm, by putting the person to shame. "Rebuke him between thee and him alone."

4. With *what means* should the correction be given? With regard to this circumstance I must consider whether, for instance, I have reasonable grounds for hoping that my admonition will do good if administered privately; otherwise, according to the nature of the case, I should ask others to help me. Who should they be, and how must I manage the matter? Can I make known my neighbor's fault to the first I meet? Not by any means! That would be detraction, a fault, that I should be guilty of by complaining, under pretext of being displeased at their sins, of the failings of others to their friends and acquaintances. How can I do it, then! If I have to ask others to help me, I must tell them what I want them for. Certainly, but you must tell only those who are in a position to help you. We read in the Book of Genesis that Joseph accused his brothers of a grievous crime; but to whom? It is not written that he accused them to his neighbors, but to his father (Gen. 37:2), who was able to prevent a repetition of the crime. Now, we know whom we have to appeal to in such a case. If a child commits a fault, I should tell its parents. If servants keep dangerous company, I should tell their employers. The faults of parishioners I should make known to the parish-priest; of penitents to their confessor, or to other superiors, if the case requires it, and there is no other means available. This is the meaning of the words of our Lord: "If he will not hear them, tell the Church." If your brother will not listen to you or to others, and refuses to amend after you have privately admonished him, tell the Church; and if that does not help, commend the matter to God and say no more about it.

5. *Why* what should be the motive and intention in administering fraternal correction? The only motive should be the pure love of God and of our neighbor, and our intention should be to prevent sin. If I have any other motive, the correction is not Christian nor honestly meant, but, a lying rebuke, a hypocritical and false admonition. Ah, how lamentably most people fall in this respect! They appear to have some zeal for the divine honor and their neighbor's salvation, and sometimes persuade themselves that they have it; but when the day comes on which God will examine justice itself with a lantern, then it shall be made evident that it is not always a zeal for God and for souls, but rather self-love and hatred that is the motive of the reproof; nay, it may even be a sort of jealousy excited with regard to the very vices that are reproofed, "There is a lying rebuke in the anger of an injurious man; and there is a judgment that is not allowed to be good" (Ecclus. 19:28).

6. *When* should the correction be given? As soon as ever we hope to do some good thereby; nor should we wait till the vice has become so inveterate that there is little hope of inducing our neighbor to amend. When the unhappy prince Amnon was murdered in broad daylight by the servants of his brother Absalom, Jonadab, one of David's courtiers, knew of the matter long beforehand. But it was not till the foul deed was accomplished and the whole court thrown into the utmost confusion thereby, as if a similar fate was in store for all the princes, that Jonadab stood up and declared that Amnon was the only victim, and that Absalom had been already plotting his destruction for two years. If he had disclosed the plot to the king in time, what great evils would he not have prevented! As it was, Amnon lost his life; Absalom had to fly into exile, and David was forced to shed many a bitter tear. Such is the fault of many who for a long time observe the bad conduct of their neighbors' children, but do not venture to speak to the parents until there is hardly any hope of inducing the children to amend. More especially do parents err in this respect when they spare the rod while their children are young, thinking some allowance must be made for their youth, and that afterwards there will be time enough to bring them back on the right path. But there is little chance of correcting them then; you might as well try to tame a wolf when it is grown old. Punishment, when it is required, should be administered while the children are young; afterwards it will be too late, and the parents will, like David, find in their children a source of bitter sorrow and trouble, nay, of shame and disgrace. Therefore, fraternal correction should be given when there is still reason for hoping that it will do some good. Again, just as every place will not do for this correction, so also should the proper time be chosen, no matter how pure the intention may otherwise be. "All things have their season" (Eccles. 3:1), and it is especially necessary that I should wait till my neighbor is in the proper mood to listen to me, before I proceed to correct him. It is a general rule with doctors never to give medicine to a sick man while he is in the height and delirium of a fever; otherwise he would only be made worse, and would be placed in imminent danger of death; therefore they wait until the fever has somewhat subsided. "Stir not the fire with a sword, else you will cause the flames to burst forth with still greater violence." In the same way when a man is in the heat of a

violent passion, it is not the right time to administer fraternal correction; in such circumstances a word of rebuke would be like stirring the fire with a sword, it would only inflame his passion still more. Jonathan gives us a beautiful example of how we should act in similar circumstances. He was obliged to witness daily the blind fury with which his father persecuted David, hunting him from place to place and seeking his life. He was very willing to protect his innocent friend; but as his father was always in a violent rage, he restrained himself until he found the latter in a good humor at table. Then he profited by the opportunity, and represented to Saul the innocence and fidelity of David, and the injustice of persecuting such a man; and on one occasion his remonstrance made such an impression that Saul swore that he would never again do the least thing to harm David, but rather make him his friend. So much depends on selecting the proper time for administering fraternal correction. Great is the mistake, therefore, of those women who, when their husbands come home drunk at night, abuse them and the vice of drunkenness in all the moods and tenses. Oh, my good women, that is not the time for you to correct your husbands! The only result you could hope for under such circumstances is a severe beating. You should keep quite still, or if you say anything, let your words be only those of praise and encouragement, and wait with your correction until the drunken fit is over; then you will have reason for hoping that a few modest words of reproof will not fail to do good.

7. *In what manner* should the correction be given? If the love of our neighbor and the desire of his good should be the only motives for correcting him, if the most suitable time and place should be selected for administering the correction, it follows that it should be given in the manner most likely to move our neighbor's heart and mind to amend his ways. Amongst private individuals (it is otherwise with regard to parents and other superiors) the best means of doing that is to observe the utmost friendliness and mildness of manner and language, so that the person corrected may see that we act out of pure desire for his spiritual welfare. A harsh, domineering manner, or a sarcastic reproof, or words that would cause him to feel shame, would make matters worse, and fill the person with a desire of revenge for the insult we offer him. No, that is not the way in which the almighty God has told us to correct our neighbor. "The just man shall correct me in mercy" (Ps. 140:5), says David. "The servant of the Lord must not wrangle, but be mild towards all men, apt to teach, patient, with modesty admonishing them that resist the truth" (2 Tim. 2:24, 25). "Brethren, and if a man be overtaken in any fault, instruct such a one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself lest thou also be tempted" (Gal. 6:1). Each one should remember that he too, is a sinful mortal, subject to many faults and imperfections; and therefore, when he has to correct his brother, he should do so in the spirit of Jesus Christ, who never harshly reproved any sinner but always encouraged them by gentle words to amend; such as, "Be not unfaithful; go and sin no more." Such were the words He used to Thomas, to the paralytic man, to the adulteress, to Magdalene, and to other public sinners. Even before the written law, when Lot wished to deter his fellow-citizens from the commission of an abominable crime, He did not address them in violent terms, or curse them, or swear at them; but with the greatest mildness begged of them not to be guilty of such a sin: "Do not so, I beseech you, my brethren, do not commit this evil."

So, too, should we correct each other. And that our neighbor may have still less reason to feel ashamed, it would often be advisable for us not to speak too bluntly of his fault, but rather to hint at it in a general way, and at the same time to excuse his intention. For instance; this is a matter in which you are wont to act so and so, and you seem to attach no importance to it; I can, of course, easily believe that you have no bad intention therein but I wish you would ask your confessor about it and see what he has to say; at all events, I should feel myself troubled in conscience if I were to act as you do. Often we might speak of the matter as if it concerned others in general: Alas, how common such and such a vice is in the world! People act as if they were allowed to do as they please; what a pity that men should be so blind, and expose their souls to the risk of eternal damnation! Such was the manner in which Nathan reproved David for the crimes of murder and adultery; he began with a parable and laid the blame on an imaginary person. There was a rich man, he said, who took away a poor man's sheep and ate it; and when David grew angry, and said that the man should die, Nathan spoke more clearly, and said to him: "Thou art the man."

Ah, my dear brethren, if we only had a zealous love of God and of our neighbor, that alone, since love is acute, would teach us how to act so as to help each other to repent and to amend. Amen.

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