

Twelfth Sunday after Trinity
September 7, 2014
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA Matthew 18:15-20

On those few occasions that I have had to be admonished by my parishioners, I have been grateful. First, I'm grateful that those I love have had the courage to point out to me my fault. And, second, I have been grateful that they have had an objective standard to which they could point in explaining to me why I have been wrong. We are men and women under authority, and our Gospel today makes that authority explicit.

Therefore, when Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you", the assumption we can make is that there exists an objective standard by which to define sin. One characteristic of the age of relativism in which we live is that the definition of sin seems fluid. Our nation's elites, even sanctimonious neighbors, want to redefine what is sinful and what is not, putting moral questions in a constant state of flux. What they're really telling us is that they don't recognize any moral authority other than themselves. To do this, though, makes Jesus' words meaningless. If we can't know what is sinful, or if the definition of what is sinful is constantly changing, we can't very well reprove our brother for sinful conduct.

Rest assured, however, that the definition of sin is not fluid, and the definition of sin does not reside in the individual. That is, Jesus' words from the Gospel today point to the objective authority we require when we must point out to our brother that he has sinned against us. Jesus says to admonish first privately and then in the presence of two or three witnesses. The final resort, he says, is to take the dispute to the Church. Here we know he is speaking specifically of the apostles and their successors, because he immediately discusses the authority to bind and loose. In other words, in the teaching authority of the Church we find an objective authority to which all are accountable and by which we can define what is sinful and what is not.

The Church in her wisdom has compiled a summary of those teachings, and they can be found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. And what we find there, in this book that was written by the world's bishops, is that wherever sin is defined, the virtue that we should be practicing is also named. So, for example, I once had to be rebuked for losing my temper, and we find in the Catechism that one of the cardinal virtues is temperance, what I should have practiced.

What we find, also, is that this requirement to admonish the sinner resides within the context of several other works of mercy to which we are likewise obligated. So, yes, admonishing the sinner is one of the corporal works of mercy, but so is the requirement that we forgive others readily and willingly. Indeed, this necessity, that we forgive our brother, is implied in the Gospel today. Jesus says to reprove him, and if he listens, you have won your brother. This victory for righteousness can only be true, however, if the one who was wronged forgives the sin committed against him.

Our Gospel implies yet another spiritual work of mercy, also. Jesus tells us to bring one or two witnesses with us if our brother does not repent after private reproof. In bringing along one or two witnesses, we have employed intercessors, those who will intercede for us to plead the rightness of our

cause. For the good of our brother's soul we ask our neighbors to plead our case. This, of course, is the essence of intercessory prayer, that for the good of our brother's soul we plead his case before the throne of grace; we pray for the good of others. This, then, is a third spiritual act of mercy that we find implied in today's Gospel and listed explicitly in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

This objective authority stands as a great comfort to us, for it isn't always easy to convince our brother that he has actually done something wrong. When we can point to it in black and white, we remind our loved ones who have wronged us that our complaint has a basis in eternal truth. It is not our whim, it is not our personal and potentially flawed judgment; it is rather the mind of Christ as He has revealed it through the Catholic Church. And even more encouraging, the Church provides us with pastors, successors to the apostles who can tell us as we read the Catechism, "This is the correct interpretation; that is incorrect." Even where ambiguities exist, our Lord has given us the resource to resolve disputes in providing us with pastors and finally in giving us the Holy Father, the Pope, who holds the Keys to the Kingdom and continues even today to exercise this Petrine ministry.

Accountability and deference to proper and lawful authority indicate the manner by which we are to live, the orientation we are to assume in our relations with others. In the Church we see that there are no lone rangers, no independent agents tasked with taking matters into their own hands. We have in the Church a society of persons who are intentionally and consciously dependent upon one another. We don't place ourselves above others, but willingly submit to the authority of our Mother, the Church, trusting that her judgments, whatever they may be, are for the good of our souls and the salvation of our neighbors.

We are tasked, in other words, not only with relating to others the Gospel by which their souls will be saved. We are tasked also with proclaiming how that Gospel is to be lived out and on those occasions that our fellow men fall short of the Gospel's demands, we are tasked with recalling our neighbors to holiness of life. Moreover, we expect that those who love us will call us back from the brink when we are imperiling our souls, and we will thank them when they do.

And herein is the final question I will address today. The requirement that we reprove our brothers, forgive them, and pray for them in no way fails to respect their free will. Jesus is clear that our fellow believers will not always be reformed, that those we love will continue to sin against us, even as they reject the authority of the Church that Jesus, the Son of God, founded. In telling us that we are to let such people be as Gentiles and tax collectors to us, we are thus to call them to repentance. But the Lord here is also giving us the freedom to protect ourselves. The requirement that we love our neighbors as we love ourselves, that we admonish, forgive, and pray, does not mean we need to be doormats. On occasion, it will be necessary to separate ourselves from those who seem to have no compunction about harming us, who will not repent, and who will not reform. But as in everything else given for our good, we have a standard by which to judge when this is the case: Our Mother, the Church, will help us discern what is best.