

+ Maria

### **Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time**

My dear Sisters in Christ and Our Lady of Mount Carmel – My old friend Father Mc Ginnis used to speak to us about what he called, “the discipline of the Lectionary”. When you would complain about such and such a passage that you had to preach about, or why it seemed each year in late August during the pre-school retreat every gospel for a week was: “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites!” he would answer it was part of the discipline of the lectionary – that is, the Church selects and presents to us for various reasons, many parts of the Bible that we might by nature avoid reading, listening to, or preaching about. The discipline of the lectionary would be the opposite of selective hearing, or in this case, selective reading. I want to hear that the Lord is my shepherd who leads me to cool waters and feeds me, but I don’t want to hear “If you brother offends you forgive him, even seventy times seven times.” The words are too much of a challenge.

Ah – the discipline of the lectionary. Today, we hear about what we used to commonly call fraternal correction. Did you use this term? Or did you say sisterly correction, or sororial correction? God knows we’ve all be corrected and challenged, and in turn corrected others and challenged others. Perhaps we wouldn’t have chosen this topic for this Sunday Mass. Maybe we would have preferred to hear about the mercy of God, or divine providence – but that is not to be. Fraternal correction. My mother had a doctorate, summa cum laude, in correction. No filters, no qualms, no detective work necessary. And no negotiation. There is was. Just recently, one of my first cousins said to me that what her 25 year old son really needed was two weeks with my mother.

Only when we get older, or get out of a situation, or have a different experience, or when we are on the other side of a problem or situation or responsibility, do we realize the difficulty of correcting someone and yet the necessity of doing so. To hear a correction, one needs two things: intelligence and humility. We have to be able to admit intellectually, the truth of what is being said. “You’re right, if I had shut the door as I was supposed to, the thief wouldn’t have entered.” Humility – I was wrong. I am sorry. It won’t happen again. And, to give a correction also requires two things: love and peace. A correction offered peacefully and lovingly, without condescension, anger, or mocking, can be heard.

Sisters – as clear as day, I can remember walking home from school with my friends, arguing about something that the Sister taught us in religion class that day. The topic was the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment: Thou shalt not kill. Sister said, “You must love everyone boys and girls, but you don’t have to like them.” Well, we fifth grade experts in life, theology and psychology, all knew Sister was wrong. How can you love somebody you don’t like? It’s ridiculous. She doesn’t know what she’s saying.

She doesn't live in the real world. She's a nun! What if those commie pinkos (it was around 1961) attack New York. We're gonna kill them! We don't love them. How can we love them? She's crazy!

Ah – who was crazy? “Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” This is the love that allows us to hear and give a correction. I don't think St. Paul was crazy, nor Jesus who said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

With what we listen to and hear about on the nightly news, this message of love couldn't be further from the operating principles of our world. Forgiveness? Where does forgiveness fit when you are dealing with people who practice genocide in the name of religion? “Love your neighbor as yourself.” How do you do that with people who make their living aborting babies, selling drugs that kill people, terrorists who behead others, etc.? How do you do this?

And, let us not even mention the difficulties of communal living. I invited one of our older priests to speak to the pre-novices some years ago. What should I talk about, he asked? I said, “Draw some lessons from your experience.” He told them: before I entered the religious life, I thought about the vows and wondered if I could live them. For sure, he said, I knew chastity would be the hardest, because I really liked girls. After a few weeks, I changed my mind. I thought, poverty will be the hardest vow for me, because I really like having some change in my pocket, and being able to buy whatever I want. Well, after a few weeks, I changed my mind again. I decided obedience would be the hardest vow to live. ‘I don't like people telling me what I can and can't do. Well, I entered and now after 50 years, I can tell you that the hardest of the three vows is living in community. That's the hardest, and to do it, you have to live the three other vows.’”

Living with others, living with ourselves, living with love, accepting and giving correction, forgiving, trying to understand – these are the hardest tasks of our religious life, and indeed of married and family life as well. These are the tasks, though, that lead us on the ascent of Mt. Carmel, to holiness and union with God. Love one another. Wow! Love her, him? I don't even like them! Love her, him as myself? Half the time, I can't stand myself! Forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Oh, I'll forgive them, but I'll get even. “Who do they think they are?”

Sisters, we are full of contradictions. John Newton, after his conversion to Christ, wrote Amazing Grace when he finally woke up to his true nature of being a wretch, a wretch loved and forgiven by God! The problem is when we talk, we use all these words imprecisely. When we think of love, we hear “This magic moment” in our ears. That’s not what Jesus is talking about, nor St. Paul nor St. John. They are not talking “Top Ten Hits” love that is in the feelings. They are talking about will love, love that is in our will, supernatural love that is a gift from God that we need to pray for. Made in His image and likeness, God has made us capable of loving one another, in our will. That is the love that enables us to receive and give correction – and encouragement to one another, but also to be real. When Jesus says, “love your enemies” he is not pretending that they are not his enemies. They are. There are people who want to hurt and destroy others. There are people who are lost in the world of evil. To deny that, is a lie which leads to idiocy. Everybody does not look at the world as we do, and we have to accept that. They don’t value love, or life, or justice, or purity, or faithfulness, as believers do. But no matter how they flaunt the moral law, or even human decency, we still must love them in our souls. The world, the flesh and the devil, as St. John tells us, answer to a different god. But we answer to the living God, who tells us, “Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” The world, the flesh and the devil want payback, false justice, and revenge. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit want love, forgiveness and mercy.

Ultimately, to be able to receive and give fraternal correction, and to be loving, and to have the strength to live as Jesus asks, requires prayer and the help of others. Christ died for the Church, and Christ called us to live our religious vocation in community. Therefore, our support and our help will come very often from those challenging place of the Church and the community, a church and a community made up of saints and sinners. And, if we have true self-knowledge, we realize that personally, can be both saint and sinner within five minutes’ time. God love us, and God hears our prayers. God hears our prayers even more forcefully, Jesus teaches us, when we pray together in a union in charity. God never gets tired or worn out, helping us as we strive to follow Him. Therefore, deep within us, in our wills and our hearts, let us give ourselves to love as God means love, for God who is love cannot fail us.

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