

TWENTY THIRD SUNDAY/A 2005

We live in the world in which people feel the need of gathering together and sharing their ideas or their project of society through social associations, political parties or circles of friends. As a church we too are a community of people who gather together. But what does make the difference between the church as community of believers and the other associations? Where does lie the specificity of the church?

What makes the church to be church is not our family tie or the fact that we speak a same language, but the presence of God himself in our midst through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. It is in his name we gather as a community. This means that the community of the believers is strengthened by the presence of its Lord who stands in its midst. And this what Jesus means when he says : *"Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them"*.

So, humanly speaking the church is made of different people, from various races and nations, speaking different languages, but spiritually she is guided and carried by the invisible presence of God who sustains her. Although the church is formed by human persons with all their tensions and weaknesses, the secret hand of God is behind this apparent human community. If it were not so, we could not understand how it could be possible that *whatever we bind on earth is bound in heaven, and whatever we loose on earth could be loosed in heaven*.

What is the rule of guidance of this community? At the heart of this community, - as Saint Paul attests it in the 2nd reading - there is a rule: to love one another; to love our neighbor as ourselves. The love for the other is then the fundamental rule that must guide all the actions of Christian community. Whenever Christian community acts outside this precept something is missing in its action. One of the consequences of this rule in the life of Christians is to care of one another and to be responsible for our brothers and sisters. This is our duty as Christians.

This duty becomes clear when we refer to the first reading. The prophet Ezekiel compares his mission and thus that of all of us to the task of a watchman or a sentry. A sentry is the soldier who guards the barracks, the one who watches so that his group may not be attacked by surprise by enemy soldiers. The prophet like a watchman watches over his brothers and sisters. He is the first one who has to realize how badly things are going, and how soon the change of life is necessary. It is his duty to intervene, speak out frankly, make the people understand that they have moved away from God and are ruining their lives. If he doesn't do it, he will be held responsible for the ruin of his brothers and sisters. If instead he warns the wicked, but this one does not heed his warning the prophet is not guilty. In other words, each of us is responsible, in part of course, for what happens to our brothers and sisters. Whoever sees somebody misbehaving cannot repeat Cain's words: "Am I my brother's guardian"? or to say *"this is not my problem"*. As a community we have a collective responsibility towards each other.

This is the reason why there is no individual salvation without salvation of our brothers and sisters. As a community we move together; we are accountable for what happens to our brothers and sisters, be it good or bad. I know that this is a very difficult matter especially when it is about a wrong act in the side of a brother or a sister, but because also of the respect of privacy and that

of the freedom of choice which forbid us to interfering in other's life. But the seriousness of our communitarian commitment as Christian urges us to do something in order to help a brother or sister who is getting lost and doesn't know where to put his/her head.

This is the sense of the insistence we find in today's Gospel about fraternal correction. The Gospel proposes three stages in the way of correction. First, an approach by individual and personal contact; then an approach by a small group of two or three persons, and finally the large community. In all the cases, however, the respect of privacy must be observed. We should always keep in mind that even by saying the truth under the pretext of helping a brother or a sister, we can easily kill him/her, or ruin his/her family, or to destroy a marriage... and all these are serious mistakes. Moreover, the good of the brother/sister and his/her recovery must always be set as the main purpose of this process, so as not to give the impression that he/she is forced into tight corner or is facing the witnesses. He must understand that he/she is in front of friends who have his/her good at heart, who love him/her and put themselves in his/her shoes.

Finally, the recourse to the community should take place only in case when the sin committed or the bad act may risk to upset all the brothers/sisters especially those who are weaker in faith. The assumption all along is that the matter is serious, - we cannot go making complaints about someone to the church authorities on any thing trivial. Yet it seems that the only sanction is that the person be excluded from the community of the church. That is surely the meaning of the words; "treat him like a pagan or a tax collector". But in considering such matters we must be careful; for getting all worked up about the behavior of another can frequently be a sign of something else, something much closer to home. It can often be a projection on to others of our own very real but hard-to-face problems.

My conclusion is this: because the reality is so complex and cannot be reduced to the mere principles as set above, each case has to be examined properly so that an appropriate way of dealing with it may be found. The precept of doing to other what we would like to be done to us should be the rule of conduct for those who engage in the process of correction. It is very easy to be conscious of the sins of others and to find in oneself a great zeal to see that these are brought to light and corrected; but this not the act of the true disciple of Christ. Rather, we who aim to follow Jesus should call to mind the occasion when the woman caught in adultery and be too ashamed of our own sins to cast the first stone. Let us pray for one another so that God help us to remain faithful to the vows of our baptism as priests, married people and Christians. Let us call God's healing upon all those who bear interior wounds because of our mistakes and misconducts. Let us open our hearts to the word of God so that we may be able to change and to build up a community where reign peace, love and faithfulness.



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