

Twenty Third Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2011

The readings of this Sunday talk about human responsibility and Christian fraternal correction. The first reading describes the mission that the prophet Ezekiel had received from God to become a watchman to the house of Israel. In the ancient time, the role of a watchman was to take guard in vigil at the wall of the city in order to warn its inhabitants when an imminent danger from the enemies was about to come.

Ezekiel uses this image of a watchman to describe the task of the prophet. Like a watchman, the prophet has to warn the wicked so that he stops his bad ways and turns to God. Accordingly, if the wicked refuses to listen and to abandon his bad behavior, he will die for his guilt, while the prophet will save his life for having fulfilled his duty. On the contrary, if the prophet does not assume his role and the wicked dies in his sins, the prophet will be accountable for his death.

What is behind this text is the idea that there is a shared responsibility in the salvation and the perdition of our fellows. Such a responsibility, however, does not diminish in any way the personal accountability and responsibility. Therefore, we are like the guardians of one another so that we have to help each other in order to come to our eternal salvation.

It is that vision which is at the center of today's Gospel as Jesus is speaking about fraternal correction. In fact, Jesus gives different scenarios on how the fraternal correction has to be administered. Far from being the only way of resolving the conflict cases, Jesus' proposal goes from one to one approach, through two to one approach, to the community approach, and even to the exclusion from the community.

This procedure is based on two convictions of faith which play the role of guiding principles in Christian ethics. The first principle is relative to the unanimity of the community. This principle implies that if the community decides on earth about something to be done; its voice will be heard even in heaven. The second principle is relative to the strength of the community-prayer. This principle implies that the ever presence of Jesus offers a guarantee that the prayer of the community will always be answered.

What do we learn from this text? The first thing we learn is about the importance of discretion and the respect of privacy. When Jesus says that when a brother or a sister has sinned, it is better to talk to him/her on a "one to one approach", he is inviting us to the respect we have to owe to anyone even if he/she is guilty of faults.

Why shall we do so? Well, it is because as human beings, we all are inclined to sin. Therefore we have to be compassionate and humble enough with regard to the faults of our fellows. Perhaps, today it is those people who are in such a situation, but who knows what will happen to us tomorrow. It is also important to put ourselves in the shoes of those people. If it were us, how would we react? Would we like the gossips to kill us for the things we have done and we deeply regret?

The second thing we learn is about the value of the joined effort and the third party. In fact, when Jesus says that in case of the failure of the first approach, it is better to bring in one or two other people, he is inviting us to take into account the collective approach. As experience has taught us, it can happen that, because of personal antagonism and

distrust, people come to talk to one another only in the presence of a third party and resolve their matter. However, all this has to be done with gentleness and kindness in respect of the dignity of the one involved.

The third thing we learn is about the importance of the community of the Church. In fact, when Jesus asks to refer to the Church in case the two first approaches fail, he is inviting us to pay attention to the community dimension in the resolution of conflicts.

This approach is based on the fact that, as a community, we bear some spiritual responsibility toward our fellows. As we commune in the same faith, we move together as a community. We are accountable for the help we can bring to one another in case of problems, even if it is true that the one in trouble has to show more openness and awareness of his/her mistakes for which he/she has to repent.

Outside these three approaches, Jesus proposes the exclusion from the Church as a way of getting rid of someone who does not want to repent and reconcile. This is a very tough proposal and which comes only if the other attempts have failed. In the history of the Church, it has been called excommunication and applied only on rare occasions.

From whom does the Church have authority to act so? The Church has acted in this way, first of all, in basing its decision on the power it has received from Christ to bind and to loose. That power makes that in an invisible way, the hand of God is behind what the Church does so that what it decides on earth is accepted in heaven. Second, because of the permanent presence of Jesus in its midst, the Church has the assurance of the right prayer and action.

However, it is not any prayer that is pleasing to God, but that which is unselfish and made in agreement with one another. We have to beware of the escape prayer. Because of our human nature, our feelings and sentiments, indeed, we do our prayers in order to escape some situations like sorrows, disappointments, hurts, harms, etc. In truth, God is not there in order to allow us to escape unpleasant situations, but rather in order to face them with his grace and his strength.

Whatever might be the problems we go through as individuals or as community, we should do everything with love and gentleness. To love one another and to love our neighbors as ourselves is the fulfillment of the law and what we should do as Christians. Because of the same love, we have to care for one another and to be responsible for our fellows.

Let us pray, then, that God may help us to have the courage of fraternal correction. Let us implore his healing on those who have been wounded in life. Let us ask him to open our eyes to recognize him in the fellows who strive to reconcile us with him. God bless you all!

Ezekiel 33: 7-9; Romans 13: 8-10; Matthew 18: 15-20



Homily Date: September 4, 2011
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Contact: www.mbala.org
Document Name: 20110904homily.pdf