

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2014

The readings of this Sunday talk about accountability and fraternal correction. They show that we are all responsible for one another's salvation or perdition. They invite us to the practice of love of our fellows in order to deserve God's salvation.

The first reading describes the mission of the prophet Ezekiel as a watchman over the house of Israel. It shows that he was appointed to be the mouth of God in the midst of his fellows. It highlights, in particular, his mission as that of warning so that his fellows change and turn away from sins. It equally highlights his responsibility and that of his listeners.

What is behind this text is the idea that a prophet is like instrument acting on behalf of God. There is also the idea that there is a shared responsibility in the salvation and the perdition of our fellows. The last idea is relative to the accountability that each one bears with regard to his salvation.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus is talking to his disciples about fraternal correction. First of all, Jesus states that if a brother has sinned against another, it is better to treat the matter one-on-one. Then, he proposes that if the first process does not work, the matter can be handled in conjunction with one or two people as witnesses.

After that, Jesus proposes that if the second process fails, the whole church has to be involved and he even envisages the possibility of separation from the sinner. Finally, Jesus states the principle of unanimity by saying that whatever his disciples bind on earth is bound in heaven and whatever they loose on earth is loosed in heaven. The Gospel ends with Jesus giving the assurance of his presence by saying that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there.

What do we learn from today's readings? Today I want to talk about the necessity of fraternal correction. Let me start with two observations from sociology. First, the sociologists define Humans as social animals. What they mean by it is that human beings do not live in isolation, but rather in community and they interact continually with one another. Second, Humans are different from one another so that their ways of being, thinking or acting differ from one another.

If people live together but are different from one another, it means also that a possibility of friction, conflict, hurt or harm among them is big. Hence, the question: if conflicts happen as stated, how shall they handle them? What can they do in case of harm or hurt to one of the members of the community?

For Jesus, that can be done in three approaches. The first approach consists in settling the matter on a one-on-one process, where the individuals try to find a solution to their conflict by talking to each other. The second approach consists in involving one or two other people who can help resolve the matter. The last approach consists in involving the whole Church to tackle the issue in case the two first processes have failed.

From Jesus' proposal, we have to assume two things, namely that people hurt each other and for that reason, the correction is necessary. The problem would be how to do it

without hurting people's feelings or causing more damage than we stop it. And it is here that the problem becomes complicated.

Without necessarily offering an ideal solution, I believe that whatever might be the process we envisage, it should agree on some principles. First, there is the principle of accountability. We are all accountable for the bad things we do. We are also accountable for the salvation and the perdition of our fellows. Nobody can see a fellow sinning without warning him. If we do not do so, we bear some responsibility before God and our conscience.

That is why God tells Ezekiel that he has established him as a watchman to the house of Israel. This role belongs to each one of us. We have to help each other for the sake of our eternal salvation. To argue that it is not my problem is just an expression of selfishness and indifference that has no room in Christian ethics.

Second, there is the principle of humility. This principle presupposes the acceptance of the wrong done, for the sinner, and the awareness from the corrector that he is not God who is there in order to pronounce a judgment. After all, we are all human beings and, as such, we are inclined to sin. For that reason, we have to be compassionate and humble about the faults of others. We should not forget that today it is about them, but tomorrow, it might be about us. That is why it is important to put ourselves in the shoes of people and feel what condemnation means.

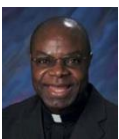
Third, there is the principle of right manner. Any correction must be done lovingly and wisely. That is why it is important to think about the way of doing it, the timing of doing it and the content of what it is brought to correct the fellow. We have always to ask ourselves if we correct like a friend and a fellow sinner or like an enemy. We have to ask ourselves if our correction is intended to heal or to do more harm. We have always to remember that love wins over better than a quantity of condemnation.

Fourth, there is the principle of right prayer. To condemn people for their wrong doing or to talk about them behind their back is very easy. However, we do not correct them because we criticize them. That is why I always think that it is better to pray for people and their conversion of heart when we see them sinning than to simply criticize them. We have always to remember that there is no more efficient action than a sincere prayer before the Lord. Prayer is a silent, but efficient action before God.

If prayer is done in the spirit of Jesus with humility, sincerity and surrendering to God's will, it obtains the result for which it has been presented to God. Such prayer finds its foundation in the perpetual presence in our midst of our Lord Jesus according to the promise he has given us.

Let us pray that God may help us accept fraternal correction from one another. May he help us understand that we are watchmen for one another! May God bless you all!

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



Homily Date: September 7, 2014
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Contact: www.mbala.org
Document Name: 20140907homily.pdf