

# 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time Letter

Jesus said to his disciples:

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.

If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.

If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you,

so that 'every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.'

If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church.

If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.

Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven,

and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Again, amen, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth

about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father.

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Mt 18:15-20

If you saw a guy pouring diesel into his brand-new Ferrari, would you try to stop him? Of course you would, even though that Ferrari was not yours and even if the guy persisted that he knew what he was doing. If you saw a gal in your cooking class trying to pour a pound of salt into the soup, would you try to stop her? Of course you would, especially if you are invited to that dinner. Or would you rather take away the car keys and drive away in the Ferrari? Or kick the wannabe cook out of the class? I am not a great mechanic, but I know enough; I might not be the best cook, but come on.

Evil is personal and humiliating; it leaves us helpless. It also affects others: it weakens relationships, destroys families, and breaks trust. When we talk about our sins, they are private, secret, and intimate. When we talk about other people's sins, they, all of a sudden, become public. More than that, they demand our action. On the other hand, why is it that so many attempts to fix other people's sins end in disaster? Why is it that the cure so often is worse than the disease? We mean well but it doesn't seem to suffice. Should we do nothing?

What would Jesus do? What he proposes to his disciples is surprising. It seems too weak. It seems like it doesn't have any real consequences for the sinner. And the worst of all, it seems to leave the result open-ended; it allows the sinner to go freely with his sins, if only he is stubborn enough. Why is that? When I am honest with myself, I must admit that my first intuition in dealing with sin would be to attack the sinner. Somehow publicly compromise him, humiliate him, destroy his reputation until he begs for forgiveness. I would also like to prevent him from any action in the future, to get him fired from his job for incompetence, to warn all his present and future superiors about the dangers of connecting to such an evil man. Only then, I might be ready to teach him my "better" ways if he recognizes his mistake. And here is the difference between God's action and mine. I am a sinner, and I know that I am helpless in my dealings

with sin, so I want to destroy the sinner. God loves the sinner; that's why he wants to heal him, liberate him from sin. He wants to destroy evil, not the person.

What Jesus' words very clearly show the disciples is that God's first care is for the well-being of the sinner. He wants to make sure that the sin doesn't overwhelm the man. In the same time, he wants to make sure that under the camouflage of fighting with sin we don't throw each other into a deeper slavery. "Go to your brother." If that doesn't work, "find a witness." If that doesn't work, "go to the church", which means, stand before God. The strategy he is taking is to allow the sinner to see that the problem is not simply some sort of personal misunderstanding, a difference of personalities, or a petty vendetta. Jesus leads the sinner and myself (the one who witnessed the sin) before the face of God, because only God's holiness can heal the sin. Following the steps offered in today's Gospel forces both of us, sinner and myself, to kneel humbly before the faith of the Church and to allow that faith to reveal the way to conversion and deepening of community for both of us. If the sinner persists and rejects all possibilities, he would be like a Gentile or a tax-collector. (Gentile: no blood relation, no common culture, no common history, no common perception of reality. Tax-collector: someone of my own blood, who shares my culture and history, but who betrayed all of this to serve a radically different description of the world.) These two images both describe someone who is endlessly distant, no matter what the appearances might be, that I hope, one day, would discover the freedom of God's promise. The community might be broken, but the love of God doesn't stop. The distance is enormous, but the hope does not die.

All human sins, even the smallest ones, break the community with God and man. Restoration of that very community, first with God then with others, defines the process of healing. None of my political manipulations, none of my social violence, none of my screaming and crying can bring real peace. I must learn to value my brothers and sisters, when they come to me as the messengers of the love of God, as my true friends in the moments of my deepest humiliation, who remind me about the never-ending work of God's mercy. I will be able to recognize them because they will speak from the depth of the unity of the Church rather than from their individual convictions or tastes. They will worry about my eternal unity with God and with them. On the other hand, I must also learn to speak to brothers and sisters in sin, seeking only their holiness, not my own. Only a humble prayer before the Creator of all of us re-establishes the unity. This is exactly the reason why, in the Catholic Church, sin and justice are not dealt with in the court of law or the court of the public opinion. We do not trust any single individual or any group of people, even the most wonderful ones, to be able to restore life after sin. In the Catholic Church, the restoration of life after the tragedy of sin happens in sacraments, which means in humble prayer of the community of the Church, community of sinners, at the foot of the crucified Redeemer.