

Fr. Curtis Miller Sept. 5-6, 2020 Homily for the 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

To prepare for teaching at St. Paul's this year, I've had to complete some trainings. This included a class in first aid and CPR that I took last week. One of the first things you do in any first aid situation is to ask the person in need if you can help. You don't just run at someone and start doing chest compressions. You have to take the time to evaluate the situation and talk with the afflicted person. (Now, if they are unconscious and in distress, then you can reasonably assume that they want help, but even then, you should first try to speak to the person.)

This could be good advice for approaching people to offer a correction or address a problem, like we hear about in today's Gospel reading. We must approach people gently. As Christians, living in a Church community is an essential part of our spiritual lives. We can't live as Christians in isolation. Even nuns and monks, who live apart from the world, still live in a religious community. In any community, made up of imperfect human beings, there will be conflicts and disagreements. The question is: What do we do when we're confronted with such conflicts?

Jesus gives us some advice in today's Gospel reading. Before I get to that, it can be helpful to consider a few initial points. First, there are two bad extremes that we can be tempted to drift towards: either completely avoiding conflicts or picking fights because we enjoy them too much. Both extremes are wrong, and it's helpful to have the self-awareness to know which one we tend toward. Personally, I tend to avoid conflict. (Please don't use that knowledge against me). But I've met people who really enjoy arguments or criticizing others. Let's identify where we fall on this spectrum, and then strive for the virtue between these extremes, namely, loving someone enough that you are willing to gently correct them when they are doing something that is harmful to themselves or someone else, or they have hurt us.

Before we even talk to this person, it helps to start with prayer. Pray for the person, pray for wisdom to know what to say, pray for humility to recognize our own sinfulness, that we are no better than the person we're correcting. We're not trying to make ourselves feel bigger by putting someone else down; we're humbly helping a sister or brother in need. We must be as ready to accept correction as we are to give it.

It is also helpful to offer up spiritual sacrifices for the person you are about to correct. Maybe you could fast for them, offer a Mass for their intentions, or offer up some unpleasant chore as a sacrifice for them. Don't tell them you did this; leave it between you and God.

Next, pick the right time to talk. Ask them, "Is now a good time? Do you have a few minutes to chat? Could we meet to talk after work?" Give them the opportunity to be as comfortable as they can, otherwise they could feel cornered or attacked.

Pope St. John XXIII gives some good advice about offering correction, especially when you are in a position of leadership or authority, like a parent in a family or a supervisor at work: “See everything, overlook a lot, and correct little.” In other words, be aware of everything that is going on, but limit your corrections to things that are important; don’t nitpick every little mistake or flaw that someone has. That breeds resentment, and when you do have an important correction to make, it will just get lost in the sea of your endless criticism over small or petty things.

There are different levels of seriousness of actions that need to be corrected. If it’s something small, generally just let it go. But if someone is doing something seriously wrong, you must treat that seriously. It’s important that we are patient and merciful with people, but if they are doing something that causes serious harm to themselves or others, that has to be dealt with right away.

Now, let’s turn to Jesus’ advice in today’s Gospel. We should first approach people individually, not telling a bunch of other people first or gossiping about them. Instead, just go to talk to them one-on-one, so they don’t feel outnumbered. Only if that doesn’t work should you bring along one or two other people. If that still doesn’t work, then tell the Church community and try to have a stronger intervention.

Like in first aid, we must be gentle. Be prepared for people to be defensive or to lash out with criticisms of you. Don’t take it personally. It hurts to be corrected and it’s natural for people to try to strike back. Don’t get drawn into a back and forth argument. Be gentle, but firm. Always act with humility and love.

Be encouraging. Affirm what the person is doing right, and tell them that you’re confident that they will be able to make the necessary changes. Then, keep praying for them. Check back in as necessary, but don’t harp on it.

Why go through all this trouble to live at peace with each other? Because, as today’s Gospel reading teaches us, wherever two or more are gathered in the name of Jesus, there is He in our midst. If we want to have Jesus present in our midst, then we have to be able to get along with our fellow Christians. We see this very clearly at Mass. Jesus commands us to gather together regularly around this altar, to pray together, to listen to His Word together, and to receive Him in the Eucharist together. When we come to Mass, one of the first things we do is confess that we are sinners and ask for God’s mercy. Later in the Mass, (at least before the pandemic and hopefully again soon) we turn and offer each other peace. As Jesus teaches, before we present an offering to God, we must first make peace with our sisters and brothers. Only then can we receive Jesus in the Eucharist, in Whom we have perfect communion with Him and each other.