

**23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A**  
**September 7, 2008**

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

**Admonish the Sinner**

When you have a problem with something someone is doing, the appropriate thing to do is to approach that person directly and share your concerns. A couple of incidents at work come to mind where this didn't happen.

Once I had a large picture of Jesus hanging in my cubicle. It was a copy of a work done by an artist from Rochester. From a distance you see a black and white picture of Jesus, but as you get closer, it becomes evident that all the detail of the image is composed of scripture verses and biblical images. Well, one morning I came into my office and noticed a post-it note stuck to the picture that read: "I find this objectionable. Please remove." There was no name or signature. In reply, I affixed another post-it note next to the original which read: "I do not understand why you find this objectionable. Please stop by so we can discuss." After a week without any further response from my anonymous objector, I removed both notes and never heard anything more. The person who objected may not have been comfortable with discussing his issue with me face-to-face, but at least he, or she, brought the issue to me first.

On another occasion, I had some pro-life information posted on my wall in the same cubicle; and some of it dealt with the realities of partial-birth abortion. It wasn't in the aisle; you had to come into my cube to read the information. One day my boss stopped by to let me know that there had been some complaints about my pro-life wall, and he wanted to let me know that the directors would be discussing it at their management meeting that afternoon. I told him that all the information was factual and that I couldn't see how someone could objectively have a problem with what was posted. I asked who had complained, but he said that those objecting didn't want to be identified. Well, the directors had their meeting that afternoon, but I never heard anything more and the information continued to hang on my wall. God is good!

I was disappointed that the people who had a problem didn't come to me directly, but then I realized how often I acted in the same way. I thought about all the times when I disagreed or objected with the behavior of a boss or coworker, but never approached them and confronted them directly. Instead I would talk about them, or their behavior, behind their backs. I would participate in sessions where we would spread rumors and make someone else the brunt of jokes and criticism. Most of us do it; it is only when we catch ourselves on the other side, when we overhear rumors and criticisms of ourselves, that we realize how unfair it is.

I've seen this behavior in churches quite often when people disapprove of how a priest, deacon, or someone else in ministry, is doing their job. People disagree with the actions of a priest, for example, and talk behind his back and even send off letters to the bishop; all without ever approaching the priest and giving him a chance to respond. Maybe the minister is wrong and needs correction, or maybe they have some legitimate reason for their behavior. Either way, the courteous and constructive thing to do is to bring up the subject with them directly.

Of course, there are times when the behavior of a fellow Christian, especially a fellow Catholic Christian is clearly against the teachings of Christ and His Church. In our gospel Jesus gives us direction on how we should handle these situations. He says that first we should ***“go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.”*** In fact, in our first reading from Ezekiel, it is implied that it is our duty to try to correct someone who is going astray; that if we don't, then we share in his guilt. It is difficult to do, but we need to do it out of love and concern, not out of judgment. We have all been faced with situations where someone we know is not following Church teaching in some serious matter. Maybe it's the niece or nephew or grandchild who is living with their boyfriend or girlfriend without being married. Maybe it's your own married children that you know are using contraceptives. For the younger people, maybe it's a good friend who is misusing their sexuality or who is hooked on pornography. Maybe it's a relative who openly brags about cheating on his taxes, or a classmate cheating on a test. In these cases, are you willing to sit down with that person and share your Christian beliefs? It's very difficult to do. It's especially difficult to do without sounding judgmental. It's important to point out the sinfulness of their behavior without accusing them of being sinners. We are all sinners because we are weak and do not always live up to what we know God wants us to do. Our goal is to simply help the other person know what God expects, and then to pray for them so that they will have the strength to follow that path.

And Jesus says that if the person we approach still does not see the error of their ways we may want to bring others with us for support. We might call it an intervention in today's terminology. In serious cases, the authority of the Church may have to be brought to bear.

In our gospel, Jesus extends the power to bind and to loose to the authority of the Church, to his disciples, not just to Peter. In serious cases, where someone persists in their sinful beliefs and, in doing so, threatens the faith of fellow Christians, that person may have to be removed from the Church. We call it excommunication. In our current times we see our bishops who have to consider how to deal with pro-abortion Catholic politicians. Usually they start off with personal letters and face-to-face meetings, but when these do not have the desired effect, they may have to forbid them from receiving communion, or ultimately have to consider excommunication.

But those are problems for our bishops, and our bishops need our prayers and support and encouragement. We need to deal with what we can deal with directly, even though it will be uncomfortable. And that is to admonish the sinner. It is one of the spiritual works of mercy, and something that our scripture readings tell us today that we are obligated to do.

**Deacon Joe Hulway**