

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Ezekiel 33:7–9 | Romans 13:8–10 | Matthew 18:15–20

There's a powerful story often told about two altar boys who made the same mistake, but their lives were shaped differently by the way they were corrected.

In a small village church, an altar boy serving Sunday Mass accidentally dropped the cruet of wine. The parish priest, reacting in anger, struck the boy on the cheek and shouted, "Leave the altar and don't come back!" That boy grew up to become Tito, the Communist leader of Yugoslavia.

In a large city cathedral, another altar boy serving the bishop dropped the cruet of wine. The bishop looked at him, smiled warmly, and whispered, "Someday, you will be a priest." That boy became Archbishop Fulton Sheen.

Two boys made the same mistake. But two adults responded very differently. One response wounded a life; the other encouraged a vocation.

The way we correct others matters. Our words can hurt, or they can heal.

Today's readings speak to us about fraternal correction—something that is necessary, but not always easy. None of us likes to correct others, and none of us likes to be corrected. Yet sometimes love requires us to speak the truth.

In the First Reading, God tells Ezekiel that he has a responsibility to warn someone who is going in the wrong direction. Remaining silent is not always kindness. Sometimes, if we truly care about someone, we have to speak.

But St. Paul gives us the most important principle in the Second Reading: "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another." Correction must always come from love.

Years ago, during my time as a school principal, a concerned father came to see me about a problem with his teenage son.

This father discovered a half-empty bottle of wine in his son's bedroom and quickly reacted, "How did this get here?" The son mumbled, "I don't know."

The father got angrier. "I'll give you one minute to come up with a better answer than that."

The son said, "It belongs to a friend of mine."

The father asked, "Do you expect me to believe that?" And with that, the son walked out of the house and slammed the door.

Things got worse, and eventually the father came to see me. I first asked the father why he was so concerned about the wine, and he replied, "I don't want him to get into trouble."

I asked him why he didn't want his son to get into trouble. He said, "I don't want him to get into legal trouble or become addicted to alcohol and ruin his future."

Again, I asked him why he was so concerned.

Finally, he said, "I love my son and I want the best for him."

I looked at him gently and asked, "Do you think your son got that message?"

After a moment of silence, he sadly replied, "I guess not."

The father had the right intention, but his anger had hidden his love. Sometimes we may have the right message, but if we communicate it with anger, criticism, or frustration, the other person may never hear the love behind our words.

This is especially important in marriage and family life.

A husband may say something with good intentions, but his wife hears it as criticism. A wife may try to correct something, but her husband hears it as disrespect. One word leads to another, and suddenly a small disagreement becomes a major quarrel.

Jesus gives us a better way: "Go and tell him his fault between you and him alone."

Notice those words: between you and him alone.

Jesus does not say, "Tell everybody else first."

When someone hurts us, how often do we tell our spouse, our friends, our neighbors, or somebody else before we speak to the person who hurt us? A small problem can quickly become a much bigger problem.

Jesus says: Talk to the person. Listen. Try to understand. Seek reconciliation.

Sometimes in a family, instead of asking, “Who is right?” we should ask, “How can we make our relationship right again?”

That is the goal of Christian correction. The goal is not to win the argument; the goal is to win the person.

Jesus gives us a simple path. First, speak privately to the person. If that does not work, involve one or two others who can help. And if necessary, bring the matter to the community.

In other words: dialogue, patience, understanding, and reconciliation.

And before we correct someone else, we should ask ourselves, “Am I willing to be corrected?” None of us is perfect. We all have weaknesses and blind spots. We all need forgiveness and guidance.

Finally, Jesus gives us a beautiful promise:

“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

This is why prayer is so important. When we gather in the name of Jesus, He helps us to listen, to forgive, and to seek God’s will rather than simply our own.

We saw a beautiful example of this at World Youth Day in Lisbon in 2023. About 1.5 million young people gathered for the final celebration. There was singing, talking, laughter, and great excitement. But when the Blessed Sacrament was exposed, the enormous crowd became silent. Many knelt in adoration.

Why? Because it seemed so clear that the One who was in their midst was more important than the million people around them.

And that is also why Sunday Mass and the Eucharist are so important. We gather here not simply as individuals, but as the family and Body of Christ. He is in our midst, and He teaches us how to love, forgive, and reconcile.

So let us ask the Lord to be at the center of our marriages, our families, and our parish.

When Christ is at the center, there can be forgiveness, healing, peace, and reconciliation.

Amen.