

**Preserving Peace**  
**23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time (A)**  
**(Ez 33:7-9; Mt 18:15-20)**

Jesus says that wherever two or three are able to gather in his name, whatever they ask will be granted. When we are in harmony with one another, we are in harmony with God. Jesus tells us the exact procedures to follow in order to overcome conflicts and problems, and achieve this harmony. It applies firstly to the Church, but the same steps can be followed in any situation: marriage, the family, school, or workplace.

*“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone”* (Mt 18:15).

If your brother *sins*. Whenever someone does something to upset another, before retaliating or escalating the problem, ask whether it was a *sin*. Was it in fact something harmful, hurtful, or unjust? In many cases, it was not. A good deal of the time, we are being disturbed not injured, inconvenienced not attacked, we are experiencing something we dislike but not an injustice. An ordinary example of this is the problem newly married couples experience when living together for the first time, and their organizing habits clash with each other. If there is not a *sin* involved – i.e., if my brother is not deliberately intending to offend me, the real issue to be confronted is likely *me*, not him. Harmony will be achieved when I learn how to accommodate, sacrifice, adjust, and “offer it up.” Jesus warned elsewhere not to try remove a splinter from my brother’s eye, when there is a log in my own (Mt 7:5).

If your brother sins against *you*. On the other hand, if your brother is doing something wrong, Jesus then says to examine whether it pertains to you. Is this particular offence *your* responsibility to address, or someone else’s? Each individual has a direct responsibility for his own life, and to some degree he is entrusted with the care and well-being of others (family members for instance). In addition, all have a basic responsibility toward protecting the “common good” (cf. Gn 4:9, Lk 10:25-37). Nevertheless, within each sphere are particular individuals entrusted with specific authority (parents, pastors, administrators, civil authorities). It destroys harmony when the self-righteous set themselves up as everyone’s moral police, inserting themselves into everybody’s business, whom the bible condemns as “busy-bodies” (cf. 1Tm 5:13, 2Th 3:11, 1Pt 4:15). But it also destroys harmony when those who are the “watchmen” duly appointed by the Lord fail to address sins that are their responsibility to address (Ez 33:7). Bishops and priests have oftentimes done great damage to the Church by sweeping problems under the rug, allowing abuses to continue, and failing to confront and exhort sinners.

*Go and tell him his fault.* When a real injustice or injury has been committed, and when it has occurred within one's purview and domain, then it must certainly be addressed, and not avoided. No harmony is found in the "false peace" which avoids difficulties and "keeps everyone happy," by not "rocking the boat." Laziness, denial, and fear can all be reasons we avoid confrontation. Again and again, whether in families or Church or workplace, the biggest problems are actually caused not by the ones doing wrong things, but by the watchmen (bishops, parents, managers) lacking the courage to do their job. Once again, Jesus challenges us to look within ourselves to find the larger obstacle to peace.

*Between you and him alone.* This is the divine precept against the sin of gossip. Gossip means speaking uncharitably and negatively about someone. It means "telling my brother's fault" to everyone but my brother. Gossip is diametrically opposed to the procedures being laid out by Jesus, and it has the diametrically opposite effect of the peace and harmony which Jesus requires of his disciples. Instead of solving problems, it makes matters much worse. Gossip destroys communities, and creates hell on earth instead of heaven. Gossip always includes the element of malice and is a sin in its own right, regardless of the purported offence committed by one's brother. Again, Jesus challenges us to look within: far from solving human problems, gossip is a sign of personal weakness, a lack of humility, and a complete failure in charity. On the other hand, talking to your brother when he has done something to hurt you or the community for whom you are responsible, is a sign of strength, respect, and charity.

More often than not, this simple procedure set forth by Jesus will achieve its desired outcome. Most people *want* to be good, and are grateful for the opportunity to correct their mistakes, and explain misunderstandings. Most human situations require nothing more than this one verse (Mt 18:15). However, some situations are more difficult, and require a different method. Either my brother refuses to stop causing harm, or the circumstances are beyond one's competence as an individual to address.

*If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you.* It is not gossip to talk about another's fault with a personal confidant or trusted advisor, when seeking help to address a difficult situation. But more than just seeking advice, bringing a third party into the situation helps to "equalize" any power differential, as for instance when dealing with a bully or a superior. If a young child is being bullied by an older child, the child should get his own older brother – the bully's peer – to step in. Evil does not like to be exposed or have an even playing field (cf. Jn 3:20). This step accomplishes just that. In addition, by introducing a witness to the offense, it provides the corroboration necessary for the third stage. This serves as a deterrent to the evildoer, and an incentive to reform.

*If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church.* The final step is the formal, administrative level of addressing human problems, sometimes necessary in a community to preserve peace. It is at the administrative level that laws are promulgated for the community, and punishments meted out to lawbreakers. Punishment (or as they like to say today, “consequences”) is a necessary part of the third step. In the community of the family, the authority to do this resides with the parents. In the Church, which Jesus specifically deals with, it is the pastors and bishops who administrate. In a civil society it is the duly elected or appointed civil authorities. It should be noted, that at this stage the authority being exercised is that of God (cf. Mt 18:18). This is the basis for the fourth commandment. Failing to respect this authority requires excommunication in the case of the Church (Mt 18:17), and even capital punishment when necessary in civil society (Rm 13:1-4). In any “formal” proceeding of this third stage, there must be a careful investigation to ascertain facts, so that impartial judgment can be rendered. Accusations must be backed up by corroborated testimony: “He said, she said” won’t work.

It should be emphasized that for Christians this stage should be rare. St. Paul, for instance, says it is a sad day when believers sue each other in civil courts (1 Cor 6:1-7). All too often, this level is resorted to as a way of bypassing the hard work of relationships at the informal peer-levels. “Passing the buck” or “bureaucratizing” the community (as has happened both in civil and ecclesial society) is a sure way to eliminate any possibility of the true communion Jesus seeks for his people. How easy it is, through gossip and other ways, to manipulate the authorities via the bureaucratic system into rendering incorrect judgments, throwing good people “under the bus,” enabling the evil-doers, and making a bad situation much worse. Administrators best serve the harmony of the community not when they constantly intervene or insert themselves or get drawn into local conflicts, but when they reinforce and strengthen the peer-level, even allowing for the leeway of the local individuals to “fight it out” and figure it out for themselves.

When I was a child and my brother would take one of my toys without my permission, I would run to my mom and demand she tell him to give it back. Her response was typically, “Let him have it, now leave me alone.”

Now I know why.