

23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time “Subsidiarity”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Peace be with you! Again, it is joy to be here with you this weekend. Since the school year is beginning, I thought I would share a fun story. It was the biggest test of the school year, and two classmates did extremely well, only missing one question on the test. However, the first student got an A- but the second student received an F. Well, the second student obviously took issue with the teacher and met with her after class. He objected that both he and the other student only missed one question, why should the other student get an A- and he receive an F? The teacher replied, “It has to do with your answer. The other guy simply wrote ‘I don’t know’, but your answer was ‘neither do I’.” Come on. That’s funny.

Fraternal correction, pointing out another person’s faults to their face, this is never an easy thing to do. We avoid it, we dread having to do it, and we really hate to be on the receiving side of it. However, if we really love the person whom we need to confront, there are times when we simply must do it. And if we know the person who is confronting us loves us as well, or at least has our best interest in mind, we would do well to listen and consider what it is being handed our way, even when it is hard for us to do. As Ezekiel challenges us in the first reading, “warn the wicked, trying to turn him from his way”. We have an obligation to help correct each other along life’s journey. It is the only way we can grow.

And, in case we didn’t hear what the first reading is trying to tell us, Jesus challenges us in our Gospel reading, “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.” The message the Church is trying to tell us is crystal clear and yet very difficult to do. However, I love it when this Gospel reading comes around because, in addition to encouraging us to correct others when it is necessary to do so, Jesus also tells us how we should go about doing it. He tells us that if we cannot win over our brother by talking with him alone, we should bring a couple other people with us to help win him over before we resort to taking him to court over it. What we call this in Catholic Social Teaching is “subsidiarity”.

What is subsidiarity? Subsidiarity is the principle that problems should be worked out at the most local level. When a problem exceeds the most local level's ability to cope with it, we ask the next regional authority to solve the issue, and so forth. For example, when siblings can’t determine for themselves who gets the remote control to the TV set, a parent might step in and solve that problem for them, correct? And since every kid should know a parent might solve that problem by turning off the television set, they should eventually learn how to work this out between themselves.

Essentially, subsidiarity is about putting responsibility where responsibility is due: at the most local level. This has implications, of course, for society as well as we are seeing played out in the news each day. I am not going to get into politics, but I can point out how subsidiarity objectively applies. As a rule, communities should be allowed to handle their own problems, even serious ones, without outside interference. However, when it becomes abundantly clear they cannot solve that problem by themselves, and the problem is deemed serious enough, the

next highest authority not only has a right but also has the moral obligation to step in. If that help is determined to be inadequate, you turn to the next highest authority, and so on. That's the principal of subsidiarity in Catholic Social Teaching and, I think it is a good policy to understand just in case we get ever invaded by Canada. However, and just as an aside, this moral principle is also why we support organizations like St. Vincent de Paul, Catholic Community Services, Catholic Relief Services, and such. As Christians, we are called to help people who can't help themselves. However, sometimes this is best accomplished by supporting non-profits who know what they are doing. That is subsidiarity.

Back to our readings for this Sunday, we have all had the task of correcting someone for his/her actions. Nobody should enjoy doing this. And nobody enjoys being on the receiving end of it. How we go about resolving issues, beginning with the most local level, is very important lest we end up falling into grave sin ourselves, such as going around spreading gossip which is the opposite of handing our problems through subsidiarity. Of course, it is good to define what I mean here by gossip. Confiding in your spouse or a close friend who you trust will keep confidence is not gossip. The word I use for that is therapy. It is good to have confidants to bounce things off because none of us were born without sin. Other perspectives are helpful. On the other hand, and we should all know this, spreading our grievances about someone around the office place or school building is in fact gossip and is a terrible sin, not only against subsidiarity, but against basic fairness and common decency.

And here is where our second reading from St. Paul fits so well. He says, "Brothers and sisters: Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." What he is saying here is very provocative because he is suggesting that the only thing that we owe anyone on this planet is our love. We owe other people our love, even those whom we disagree with or whom we find frustrating. We owe other people our love. What this means is, if we set out to correct someone in our lives from any place other than love, we probably need to keep our mouth shut until we find that place of love inside of us for the person we want to help. Similarly, when it comes to people we are always going to disagree with, and this is good advice as we as the political campaign season draws near, if you can't speak your point of view with love in your heart, you probably should bring it to Lord first. Prayer is the first place we should bring any of our criticisms that we have for other people, or they might have for us. Prayer is the first place we begin because God has a way of helping us through all that and providing us wisdom when it comes to these difficult conversations. Or, as our psalmist this weekend is desperately trying to remind us, "If today you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts".