

# **Archbishop Lori's Homily: 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time; Saint Philip Neri Parish**

*23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time*

*Saint Philip Neri Parish*

*Linthicum, Maryland*

*September 10, 2017*

In the late 1960's, as a high school seminarian, I had a summer job as a cashier in a relatively small grocery store. One day, I was waiting on a customer when two distinguished ladies entered the store. They came over to the checkout lane and addressed themselves to my customer. "We haven't seen you and your husband in church for over a month," they said. "Is anything the matter? Are you still a member of our church?"

Clearly embarrassed, the woman replied softly, "Everything's o.k." When the two ladies left she said to me, "That's the 'church busy-body committee'. And, as a matter of fact, my husband and I don't go to church anymore." She then added, "Do they come after people like that in your church?"

"Oh, no ma'am," I answered, in my best "Leave It to Beaver" manner, and with that I placed her packages in the back of her car and gratefully accepted a tip!

Thinking back on that little encounter in light of today's Scripture readings, I now realize that all three parties were in the wrong. The two ladies were wrong to confront this woman publicly and pompously. The woman and her husband were wrong for absenting themselves from church. And I was wrong in saying that the Catholic Church has no form of fraternal correction. In today's Gospel Jesus speaks about fraternal correction and actually gives us some detailed rules for conducting such correction. So at long last I now have an opportunity to redeem myself!

Fraternal correction means a brother admonishing a brother - or more broadly, a

follower of Jesus reproving, correcting, a fellow disciple. Another definition is “[the] admonishing [of] one’s neighbor by a private individual for the purpose of reforming him or her, and if possible, preventing his or her sinful indulgence” (Old Catholic Encyclopedia, courtesy of New Advent). This is a very delicate matter, I think you’d agree, so it is important that we pay close attention to what the Lord is teaching us through his Church this morning. Let’s see if we can’t summarize this teaching in four handy points.

The first thing to remember about fraternal correction from today’s readings is that we are brothers and sisters in the Lord. In Baptism, by water and the Spirit, we all became adopted sons and daughters of God and that makes us brother and sister to one another in Christ. Just as brothers and sisters in a family should love one another and look out for one another’s welfare, so too in the Church we need to help one another, accompany one another, along the path of discipleship and salvation. If a fellow Christian has endangered his or her eternal salvation by living in ways that are truly contrary to the Gospel, we are called to help that person to find their way back to the Lord and the Church. Failure to do so, Ezekiel reminds us, is fraught with consequences for ourselves. When, through indifference or fear, we fail to reach out to someone straying from the path, we in fact endanger our own salvation. Whereas, if we sincerely and lovingly reach out to encourage another to repentance, our efforts may succeed or they may meet with a resolute No. In latter case, we have done our best & the Lord looks kindly even on our failed effort. The point is that while the faith is deeply personal it is not private. When one person’s life of faith fails, the faith of all is negatively impacted.

The second thing to remember about fraternal correction is that none of us is perfect. In many places throughout the Gospels, Jesus condemns the self-righteous Pharisees and no doubt he is displeased when we, his followers, behave like them. When Ezekiel calls us to be watchful, he is not calling us to be vigilantes, a self-appointed judge and jury all in one that metes out harsh justice. No, we are all called to walk humbly before our God, to repent of our sins and in the midst of mourning for our sins to hear and answer the Lord’s call to discipleship. Thus, when we approach a brother or sister who is seriously in the wrong, we do so as those who also stand in need of the Lord’s mercy and forgiveness. Only because the Lord looks at us through the eyes of mercy are we chosen to serve.

This leads to the third thing we need to remember about fraternal correction – namely, that its gold-standard is always love – both in method and content. All forms of self-righteous pomposity are ruled out by the Lord who came to call sinners and bring them to salvation. So too, fraternal correction is not about imposing our private preferences on others nor is it about haranguing them with regard to our pet peeves, nor still less is it about humiliating or embarrassing in any form or fashion. On the contrary, it St. Paul who describes for us the standard we should set for ourselves and foster in the life of the Church: “Owe nothing to anyone,” he says, “except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” St. Paul goes on to show us how all the commandments are summed up in the maxim, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Fraternal correction is all about loving our neighbor so much that, just as we do not want to depart from the path of salvation, so too we do not want our neighbor to depart from it – either by having too narrow a definition of love or by in fact behaving in ways that violate the love God has poured into our hearts. This kind of love should be especially evident in families as husbands and wives help one another along the path of salvation – helping one another to be better persons, better Catholics, more prayerful, more attentive to the Mass and the Sacraments; helping one another to be wiser and more loving parents, to be persons of integrity at home and at work, persons of charity toward those who are in need, those who are vulnerable.

The fourth thing to know is that Jesus has left us a way of doing fraternal correction. First is to do so in a private, charitable, manner with the goal of opening the person’s mind and heart to the Lord’s truth and mercy. And often, when someone helps us see ourselves as we truly are, we are grateful, we are in fact relieved, and gain a new sense of direction in our lives. But that’s not always the case, so the Lord left us a second directive, namely, to come back with one or two others – not a committee of busy bodies – but a few other fellow disciples able to witness to the Lord’s love in their own lives, because they have prayed for their own salvation and for that of others to the Lord who is present in their midst. So the goal here is not to corner or embarrass but to gently admonish and encourage, to deal patiently with the individual because God is always patient with us. And if a person persists in separating himself from the Church, in the third stage, the Church may in some official way have to recognize this – to come to terms with it – not to condemn the

person – but to call this person back the Lord and to the communion of the Church.

And finally, let's ask ourselves why all of this is important. It's important because, in these days, many people have indeed separated themselves from the Church. When Pope Francis talks about going out to those on the peripheries, he surely means the poor and the vulnerable but he also means those who are far from the heart of the Church, for whatever reason. When we speak of evangelization, we mean helping people one by one to open their hearts to the Lord, to repent, and to return to the faith as those who are truly renewed, even transformed, in mind and heart. We are called, each of us, to be the Lord's co-workers in helping those on the margins to return to the heart and center of the Church, namely, the Eucharist.

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!