

The Others Are Ours (II)

“Caring for someone is not only healing a small wound, but looking at the person in their entirety, seeking their good both in this world and the next.” The second article on fraternal correction.

08/09/2021

So he came to a city of Samaria, called Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph (Jn 4:5). That trip and that particular encounter had been carefully planned by Jesus. He

wanted his own thirst and that of the Samaritan woman to meet at the well. It is a setting suited for a gift, with the well and the water. But Jesus is seeking the greatest gift: He wants the joy and peace of a soul chosen from all eternity, although during recent times perhaps distancing itself somewhat from God's heart.

Closeness is God's way

Saint Josemaría used to say that “charity does not consist so much in ‘giving’ as in ‘understanding,’”[1] in taking upon oneself the problems and difficulties of others. When we strive to do so, people and their difficulties are not something alien to us, but become part of ourselves. Christ gave no thought to the effort it cost Him to meet with the Samaritan woman. Whoever takes responsibility for another person recognizes the gift that each one is,

seeing the image of God there and our Lord's infinite love for each soul. Each person is a gift for those close to them – a discovery that is the first step to being able to help each other. Jesus recognizes the gift of the Samaritan woman's life. That is why He asks her to give Him a drink. He thirsts for her love.

Christ goes out to meet others in order to accompany them closely. To stress this point, the Pope points to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, when He chose to be baptized as one more like the others, despite not needing it. "Jesus goes down into the river to immerse himself in the same condition we are in. Indeed, baptism actually means 'immersion.' On the first day of his ministry, Jesus thus offers us his 'programmatic manifesto.' He tells us that He does not save us from on high, with a sovereign decision or act of force, a decree, no: He saves us by

coming to meet us and taking our sins upon himself. This is how God conquers the world's evil: by humbling himself, taking charge of it. It is also the way that we can lift up others: not by judging, not by suggesting what to do, but by drawing near, empathizing, sharing God's love. Closeness is God's way of acting with us.”[2]

The founder of Opus Dei said that “fraternal correction is part of God's way of looking at us, of his loving Providence.”[3] Whoever takes responsibility for his brother or sister does not judge others: we try to look at them as God does, and therefore they all seem to us to be a treasure. We try to guard them as something precious. “Fraternal correction is born of affection; it shows that we want the others to be ever happier.”[4] This eagerness to seek their happiness leads us to become involved in their life with

the greatest respect for their freedom, because only then is love true. Helping a brother or sister of ours on the path to holiness means watching over them, waiting for God to act in their soul, rather than a cold “supervision.” “Supervising refers more to the care of doctrine and customs, while watching over implies the concern that the other persons’ heart possesses salt and light. Being vigilant speaks of being alert to avert an imminent danger, while watching over speaks of assisting, with patience, the processes by which the Lord is bringing about the salvation of his people.”[5]

People’s hearts matter

“While you are making a fraternal correction, you have to love the defects of your brothers,”[6] Saint Josemaría said. Caring for someone is not only healing a small wound,

but looking at the person in their entirety, seeking their good both in this world and the next. For it is in a person's heart where good or bad actions are forged (cf. *Mt 15:19*). Our main concern should be a person's heart, rather than small details that are often part of each one's way of being. Whoever wishes to help others does not remain trapped only in external aspects, viewed in isolation from the whole person. Rather we need to evaluate events in light of the other person's desire for holiness, "taking the sandals off our feet" because we are "standing on holy ground" (cf. *Ex 3:5*). A fraternal correction expresses, in some way, the attitude of someone who wants to help others discover the gifts that God wants to give us amid the thousand and one daily battles in each one's life: *If you knew the gift of God (Jn 4:10)*. All fraternal help should be presented in this way, as a lens to discover the gift that is

contained in each struggle. In fraternal correction we should be someone who tenderly watches over the sanctity of others, not someone who is vigilant that others are “fulfilling the task of meeting certain criteria we have set ourselves.”[7]

Jesus, for example, does not focus on the peripheral issue of the Samaritan woman's life. He goes right to the heart of the pain of that beloved soul. Through his conversation, He leads her toward a truth that no longer shames her. And she returns to the village and tells everyone how she has felt liberated: *Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?* (Jn 4:29).

Jesus teaches us that God's look is all inclusive, embracing both the apparently insignificant and the spiritually great and relevant. He is patient, and sees everything as part of a person's entire life. “In a world

pervaded by individualism, it is essential to rediscover the importance of fraternal correction, so that together we may journey towards holiness ... It is a great service, then, to help others and allow them to help us, so that we can be open to the whole truth about ourselves, improve our lives and walk more uprightly in the Lord's ways. There will always be a need for a look which loves and admonishes, which knows and understands, which discerns and forgives (cf. *Lk* 22:61), as God has done and continues to do with each of us.”[8]

This look does not focus on small points of little importance, magnifying them. Rather it is a look filled with hope, focused on great horizons. And since we are fulfilling an express wish of Jesus, we try to act as He would: *go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother* (*Mt* 18:15).

Through fraternal correction we support a brother or sister in their sincere struggle for holiness each day. It is not an effort to correct everything, since God is working in each person's soul, but precisely the opposite: a confirmation that holiness is compatible with each one's weaknesses. Saint John Chrysostom's words can be of help here: "Our Lord does not say: accuse, upbraid, seek revenge, but correct." [9] We show others our appreciation for their struggle; we respect their feelings and support their efforts. With our help we remind them that we are also counting on their help for us. All fraternal correction contains a discreet admiration for a brother or sister, and for the work of grace in their soul.

Fruit of friendship

To create a context in which such support is possible requires closeness, sincere interest, real concern for the life of the other person. Whoever does fraternal favors for others and tries to get to know them well can establish a relationship of mutual and true friendship. Fraternal correction is a natural fruit of this terrain cultivated with patience. Moreover, to be able to enter the hearts of others, empathy is needed. This help cannot be given from the outside, or from afar. Nowadays, high precision surgical operations are carried out with instruments capable of working inside patients without the need for invasive surgeries. Similarly, a brother or sister who takes responsibility for others seeks to enter into the sacred place that is their heart, doing so delicately, without invading their intimacy.

We also need to know very well the person we are going to correct. We each have our own temperament that makes us very different from one another. Saint Josemaría saw this as a central part of the “very diverse numerator”^[10] of people in Opus Dei and in the Church. But we shouldn’t think that this diversity of reactions is only related to the humility of the one who receives a fraternal correction or to their sensitivity. For some, even the most delicate words can easily sound like a reproach. When speaking with persons like this, Jesus makes the truth known with gentleness and even praise. He does so, for example, with the woman who anointed his feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee (cf. *Lk* 7:36-50). Other persons, in contrast, if the words are not completely clear, sense a lack of interest and true affection. Martha needed to hear her name pronounced twice in order to

discover that she too could choose “the best part” in her work (cf. *Lk* 10:38-42). Thomas needed the physical closeness of our Lord to once again be the faithful apostle who would give his life for his Master (cf. *Jn* 20:26-29). The good thief, when he was corrected, received an unexpected gift: that same afternoon he would be with Jesus in paradise (cf. *Lk* 23:39-43). The Samaritan woman herself needed time, a slow and calm conversation, in a secluded place alone with Jesus. No two persons are alike in the Gospel, and no two reactions are the same, not even in those around us.

“When something in us isn’t right, the others help us with that marvelous practice of fraternal correction, which requires a deeply supernatural affection and great strength, since sometimes it is very hard to make a fraternal correction.

They loyally point out to us what isn't going well and give us the reasons. But behind your back they are saying what a great saint you are, what a marvelous person. Isn't this wonderful, my children? We spoke of being loyal, and this is human loyalty. We don't lie; we don't say the others have great human qualities that they lack. But we never tolerate criticism behind their backs. And we say unpleasant things in this way, affectionately, so they can correct them.”[11]

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Saint Josemaría stated forcefully, as someone who has experienced it in his own flesh, both passively and actively: “Be convinced that when you make a fraternal correction, you are helping your brother with Christ to carry the Cross. It is a completely supernatural help, since fraternal

correction is preceded, accompanied and followed by your prayer.”[12]

In Cana of Galilee, Mary sees that the wine has run out, and that the joy of the newlyweds might be harmed. As a good observer, she undertakes to make a “maternal correction.” Mary looks for a solution; she speaks with Jesus and with the servants. Helping a brother or sister in this way means obtaining from Christ the best wine for them. And this is achieved only by putting souls next to Him, talking to Jesus about them, since the one who loves them the most is the one who has undertaken the mission of saving them.

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[1] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 463.

[2] Francis, Angelus, 10 January 2021.

[3] Bishop Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Rialp, Madrid 2000, p. 127.

[4] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 1 November 2019, no. 16.

[5] Francis-Cardinal Bergoglio, 10th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2 October 2001.

[6] Saint Josemaría, Notes from a family get-together, 18 October 1972.

[7] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 28 October 2020, no. 6.

[8] Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2012, no. 1.

[9] Saint John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Matthaeum*, no. 60, 1.

[10] Saint Josemaria said that those in Opus Dei can have a great variety of ways of being. Although the “common denominator” is the search for holiness, there are “very different

numerators (autonomy) corresponding to the variety of their characters and temperaments, and even to the diverse paths by which Jesus will lead their souls” (*Intimate Notes*, no. 511).

[11] Saint Josemaría, Notes from a family get-together, 21 May 1970.

[12] Bishop Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Rialp, Madrid 2000, p. 128.