

In our Gospel today, we receive some sound advice on how to deal with conflict, a fact of life with which we must deal. This advice applies to our workplace, school even within our families. First, we are advised to keep things to ourselves. – to deal with conflict at its source. In truth, this may require that we admit our failures. We ought to consider if we may in fact be in the wrong. No one likes to do this, but it is necessary to be honest with ourselves.

Secondly, to sit down with someone who has wronged you, this may imply to some a certain weakness on your part. We may wonder why should enter into discussion at all.

Jesus is teaching us today that there are times in which we must make the first move towards reconciliation. The only thing that can be hurt if we take this approach is that our own pride may be damaged a bit. But unless we set aside our pride, we may never have the opportunity for reconciliation. We are invited today to make the first move in this direction.

More than twenty years ago, while serving as a religion teacher in a Catholic High School, I was struggling with a student who obviously did not like me. I was not sure why, but it was obvious. I decided to put out an olive branch one afternoon when I saw him walking down a hallway after school. Very few were around, and as he passed by, I clearly said “Hello, how are you this afternoon?” He responded by ignoring me completely. I called him to come back, and was prepared to give quite a dressing down about his disrespectful attitude, especially since he could not claim he did not hear my greeting.

But in a moment of grace, I changed tactics. I told him that it was clear to me that I must have done something that deeply offended him for him to respond this way. “I do not know what I did,” I said, “but whatever it was, would you forgive me?” He was taken back, shrugged and walked away. But the next day in class, his entire demeanor changed; in an instant, and the rest of the year was just fine. Truthfully, I could not believe it.

We are also told that there are times in which people will not listen to us. The disciples were told to refer those cases to the Church. If the person will not listen to you, perhaps they will listen to the Church, so goes the plan.

Sadly, most people do not approach the Church in times of difficulty early enough. Too often, it is a last resort. Not always, but typically, it is late in the game of conflict. People may hesitate for all kinds of reasons, and it is not for me to judge those reasons. However, they may be missing a real source of potential healing.

Sometimes what is needed is a neutral third party to mediate. The Vatican was called upon to mediate a border dispute between Chile and Argentina. Since both were predominantly Catholic countries, the Church acted as a neutral third party during five year-long negotiations. But in the end, it was successful.

More recently, the Vatican was called in to mediate between dueling sides in the Venezuelan government crisis. While it does not always succeed, the mission of the Church certainly includes reconciliation as a fundamental constituent, it is worth all efforts to achieve.

Catholic tradition has spoken of *Works of Mercy*, both spiritual and corporal. The *works of mercy* are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our **neighbor** in his spiritual and bodily necessities.

Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently.¹

The passage from this today's Gospel is a clear example of one of the spiritual works of mercy, that of admonishing the sinner. For understandable and varied reasons, many find it difficult to admonish the sinner. Some feel hypocritical, knowing too well their own sinfulness.

Our faith never demands perfection before calling out the fault of another. Properly understood, our approach is predicated upon our fundamental belief that each of us is flawed, mindful of the words of Jesus: "Remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother's eye."²

In all humility, we must strive to create a culture that refuses to accept sin, while acknowledging that we are all in need of God's loving correction. We ourselves can be instruments of this for another, just as others have helped us grow in virtue.

Jesus admonished sinners, but first developed a relationship and this is what is often missing when we seek to admonish others. Sometimes we do not have time to have a relationship.

The spiritual works of mercy, especially "Admonish the sinner," is a tough but sorely needed lesson for every one of us. It is not at all clear how best to carry it out, both for parents and pastors! We pray for the grace to properly discern, knowing what might backfire, thereby making it worse, and what will best accomplish to goal of returning another to the right path. We struggle in this together, trusting that the Lord will lead us the way.

¹ Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph # 2447

² cf. Matthew 7:5