

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD
IN
THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
SEPTEMBER 10, 2023
23rd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

SCRIPTURES:

Ezekiel 33:7-9	You are responsible for warning the wicked.
Romans 13:8-10	Love is the fulfillment of the law.
Matthew 18:15-20	You are responsible for warning your brother and sister!

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

Matthew:

All of Chapter 18 in Matthew has been called Jesus' Discourse on the Church. Matthew was particularly concerned with the instruction of the leaders in his community. They would be responsible for the good order and for the development of that community. Their style of government had to be patterned on the teachings of Jesus in a most significant manner. Our Church leaders today need to read this chapter again and again.

In Chapter 16, Peter is the one made responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of the Church community; in Chapter 18, each member of the community shares in that responsibility. All have to do what is necessary for the community to remain faithful to the Lord. The defection of one will have an impact on all.

The procedures given by Matthew here have their resonance in other manuals of procedure given in parallel communities at the time. The *Manual of Discipline* that guided the Essene community at Qumran provided for the rebuking of one another by the members: only in truth, humility, and charity, never in anger or ill temper. Warnings were to be given on the same day as the offense. One was not to bring the matter before the congregation without first having sought the intercession of witnesses. Rabbinical literature also would have similar procedures outlined for the reprimanding of wayward members.

If the offender refuses to listen even to the Church, let the offender be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector. Church leaders have appealed to this passage especially to justify the practice of excommunication. *Let them be excluded from the community as you would exclude a Gentile or a tax collector.*

But, there is an alternative interpretation of this passage. It has been suggested that we should read this passage to mean: *Christians ought to treat offending members the way Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors!* Jesus did not shut these people out; rather, he went out to them in a special way, even when religious law said that they should be avoided. He reached out to sinners. He ate with tax collectors. He touched lepers. He forgave sinners rather than condemn them.

The Church today will be more faithful to the Gospel when it stops condemning and starts reaching out to all who have transgressed God's law and Church laws. Individual Christians and Catholics will be more obedient to the Gospel when they do what Jesus did with sinners.

Ezekiel:

The Lord has made Ezekiel responsible for the people who are disregarding the terms of the holy Covenant. It is up to him to speak God's word of warning to them. We would say that it is already too late: Jerusalem has fallen; the people are being taken into exile; Ezekiel himself is being deported to Babylon. But God's Covenant is binding even in the Exile. So, Ezekiel must speak. He speaks to the people of their responsibility for one another. He is not the only one charged by God to warn of infidelity; the members of the community are responsible for warning one another. Those who do not exercise this responsibility will be held accountable for the sins of those they do not warn!

Romans:

Paul speaks about *debts* and about *owing*. He has just finished teaching the Romans about their duty to obey lawful authority. He carries this sense of duty and obligation right into the realm of love! Not that he would have us love one another out of a sense of obligation; rather, love has its own inner dynamism that far surpasses the power of the law to make us do something. But Paul, nevertheless, has a healthy respect for the power of contracts and of laws to make us do what we have promised to do. Just as we would not be able to neglect doing what we have been obliged by law to do, so we should not neglect to love because that is the supreme law of the Lord Jesus Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you remember when pastors told their parishioners that they could not attend the wedding of their son or daughter who "got married *outside* the Church?" That they should not welcome such to sleep overnight in their homes because they were "living in sin?" What good was accomplished by such policies? What harm came to family life and to the Church community as a result of these policies?
2. How are we to deal with those who flaunt God's law and are scornful of the Church's laws? Is there a remedy suggested by these Scriptures? How should your parish deal with those who have married outside the Church? Can they be excluded from parish organizations? What about the issue of *scandal*? Are we speaking out of both sides of the mouth if we practice charity and compassion toward those who are violating Church laws?
3. A few bishops in the USA and in Italy have denied Church burial to some notorious members of the Mafia when they died. What do you think of this policy? Are sanctions ever justified in the Church?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Make a resolution today to reach out to a person who has up to now been excluded from your circle of friends. Invite the members of your family or of your prayer group to do the same.

PRAYER

**Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God,
have mercy on me, a sinner!**

CATHOLIC PASTORAL PRACTICES

The Church will always be responsible for the deeds of its members. We answer to public opinion for the behaviors of all who call themselves Catholic. The world holds us responsible, whether or not we want to be held responsible. We are blamed for the evil that our brothers and sisters do in this world.

When I was younger, we used to recite the *Marks of the Church: one, holy, catholic and apostolic*. The Church was *holy* because it possessed the means to make us holy (word and sacraments), and because it was possessed of *holy people*, the saints. We were proud of the saints: the Blessed Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, Saint Peter and Saint Paul, our patron saints, etc. We were glad to be identified with them. We sort of basked in their glory! We thought that the world would consider us holy because we were part of a community in which there were saints!

Now, all of that has changed. We are charged with the sins, crimes, and misdemeanors of priests who have been unfaithful. We are tainted with the somber colors of collective guilt and of community mediocrity. Catholics are no better than the rest. Catholics, too, practice abortion. Catholics get divorced at the same rate as everyone else. Catholics commit murders. Christians hate their neighbor like everyone else. We, too, scream for vengeance in capital punishments.

Some bishops proclaim excommunications against those who disagree with them on matters of doctrine and of Church policy. They believe that it is better to *cleanse* the Church community of those who bring us a bad name. We try to rid ourselves of the bad apples among us in this way. (Some have suggested that these same bishops should also excommunicate those who discriminate against women and other minorities, those who support capital punishment, those who oppress the poor, etc.!)

Our parishes will always have a mixture of the good and the bad! It is up to the Lord to separate and to exclude. I find it dangerous to have the Church playing God! We do not have a very good record of absolute wisdom in these matters. The Church has been wrong so many times in the past in trying to separate the good from the bad. It should have learned its lesson.

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