

**Homily Twenty-third Sunday A
NOVA**

In the Garden of the Finzi-Contini

In my Jesuit novitiate a lot of effort went into correcting and controlling the minutiae of life. There were the particular examen, taking notice of a particular fault you wanted to correct, and examen beads to total the recurrence of the selected fault each day by pulling down a bead every time you failed. There was the general examen, or just the examen, a twice daily prayer that was distorted then out of its real function as a review of consciousness in which you pray over the day with the Lord into yet another instrument of personal reform with most of the emphasis on confession of one's sins, repentance and resolutions to change one's life.

Each of us had a brother admonitor whose job it was to watch and correct us, and there were specific times each week for the brother admonitor to stop and say how you had failed or how you could improve. Of course, there was also bi-weekly confession, the most serious custom of reform and repentance. And then there was the *capitulum particulare*, the particular chapter or "chapter of faults" where the whole novitiate gathered and your fellow novices could tell you where you needed to shape up. Our Latin nickname for the practice was *lapidatio* or "stoning." It actually caused more terror than it brought injury to its victims. Little guys myself usually got off pretty easily, but those with outsized characters got hit harder. The chapter of faults was an old monastic custom that

at some point the Jesuits had taken on. The whole system depended on an inadequate psychology of mind and will with too little sense of the movements of the Spirit and the life of Christian virtue.

Still, there was good sense in the idea that we sometimes owe a word of correction to others with whom we are close or with whom we are bound in a spiritual community. Today we have a different name for fraternal correction; we call it “intervention.” We use it in situations of addiction—to alcohol, to drugs, to gambling and to sex—to prevail upon a friend, family member or co-worker to confront their addiction and to enter on a course of treatment. In contrast to the chapter of faults, interventions are focused on a fault or small set of related faults which have reached a threshold where the addict has become impaired and is in danger of harming himself or others and where some form of help has been prepared to assist him. Of course, even interventions can be hard to pull together and difficult to execute.

There are people of a carping nature who habitually take other people down with nit-picking criticism. They are the moral bullies of social life and need to be confronted. There was an old priest who used to intimidate community members over the slightest, usually imagined slight with displays of anger. A couple of times I cut him short and said, “You are not going to do that to us.” He stopped his tantrum, and after the second time I corrected him, he seemed to have stopped altogether. We did not become great friends, but he then frequently came to sit by me. Bullies do need to be confronted.

Most of the time, however, many of us have a hard time offering fraternal correction. Bryan Hehir once said he'd rather do nuclear war—he meant the ethics of nuclear war—than do a personnel performance review. Later at the bishops' conference and at America I learned how right he was; and over the years I have heard his observation confirmed by other managers. One thing is sure, when it comes to correction, it is hard to get the balance right. I found it a grace myself that when I had to fire fellow Jesuits, whose termination others had put off far too long, that being summoned to my office was enough for them to say, "I am ready to resign." There was no fuss, no protest. A great relief to me.

But I had one bad miss. An employee from what I could see had been doing well. Then in my last couple of months at the office and before the time for his official evaluation, I had reports from outside the organization about how difficult he was to deal with. I made calls that confirmed the complaints. When I did my evaluation I identified the issues, and then his appeals began. It was a long, painful process. My successor often reminded me later of the mess I had left him. It's no wonder many management professionals have turned against the annual evaluation.

Fraternal correction is most often a topic on conservative Catholic websites. But, despite their ideological bent, those sites preserve some of the wisdom of past generations about when fraternal correction is in order. Saint Thomas tells us, "Fraternal correction properly so called . . . is directed to the amendment of the sinner. Now to do away with anyone's evil is the same as to

procure his good: and to procure a person's good is an act of charity, whereby we wish and do our friend well.”

So, fraternal correction is appropriate where we enjoy a spiritual friendship with someone or perhaps just a friendship built on virtue. Correction may be in order too when the offense to be corrected is causing spiritual harm to the friend in question (or to others). Fraternal correction is also part of the office of a spiritual director or confessor. The context of this teaching, as we heard it this morning, in Matthew’s Gospel, in the church, suggests it is also suitable in a close-knit religious community like NOVA.

The old moral theology makes over-fine distinctions about fraternal correction, but it indicates that under some circumstances correction is morally obligatory:

- First, when the offense in question is grave, say sex abuse or embezzlement,
- Secondly, where it harms others or the whole community as when bishops, coaches or school administrators cover-up of sex abuse,
- Or, lastly, where it can prevent scandal in the proper sense of confusing or misleading people about the demands of faith.

The classic example here is Paul correcting Peter for giving in to the Judaizers about imposing kosher on Gentile converts. Note how different the notion is from the ill-repute attached to the idea of scandal in the tabloids.

Today’s example of correction on grounds of scandal might be Pope Francis correcting bishops about princely lifestyles or

especially confusing lesser marks of orthodoxy, like opposition to abortion, for the heart of the gospel, which is love and forgiveness. A great part of Pope Francis' ministry has been about convincing us that Christianity is not about moral bookkeeping or examen-bead self-improvement, but rather about accepting God's merciful love and extending it to others. That's why when he talks about sinners, he asks us to notice their good deeds and holy desires in the expectation that if we respond to the Spirit working in them rather than react to their sin, a better sort of repentance and reform is likely to take place. Faults are seen and treated in the context of a person's life of virtue and the deep desire for holiness.

So, when you think about fraternal and sororal correction, think of it in the context of spiritual friendship and the community of faith, humbling acknowledging Jesus' admonition against being judgmental. "Do not neglect the log in your own eye even as you focus on the speck in the other's eye." Remember, too, that "God's ways are not our ways, and as far as the heavens are above the earth, just so far does he remove our sins from us."

Let me conclude with an example from the movies. One of my favorite directors is the Italian Vittorio Di Sica, and one of my favorite films is his *Garden of the Finzi-Contini*. It is a Holocaust story, about the divisions that creep in between a Jewish family and their upper-class Italian friends as a result of Mussolini's anti-Semitic laws and later his brief collaboration with Nazi Germany in rounding up Jews for deportation to the death camps.

The Finzi-Continis are a wealthy, educated Jewish family, well-integrated into society in their home city of Ferrara. Even as Fascist power grows, their Gentile neighbors enjoy playing tennis with their children on the courts in their garden. As the war and the anti-Semitic laws divide them, they are drawn out of their idyll into the heated divisions that afflicted Europe. For me what is remarkable about the film is that there are no easy stereotypes. Though DeSica's storytelling is always simple, almost pure, neither the police nor the German military are depicted as monsters. On seeing the film for the second time, I had the realization that what made DeSica different from most directors, especially American ones, and also from the bulk of Holocaust film directors, was that he treated all the characters with an almost divine compassion. He didn't lecture, he didn't wag his finger like a lazy moralizer. He invited the viewer to see the characters caught up in a great tragedy with the compassionate eyes of God. That is the way should view the flaws of our sisters and brothers to whom we owe the duty of spiritual correction—with the compassionate eyes of God.