

Holy Spirit Province

PROVINCIAL NEWSLETTER

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DEALING WITH AN OFFENDER: 23RD SUNDAY A

Life in a family or other community, is sometimes a bit of heaven on earth, but not always. As French philosopher, John-Paul Sartre, once put it, “hell is other people!” Certainly, unless we cut ourselves off from other people and go to live alone on a desert island, being alive means having to deal with other people, and the distinct possibility of differences, disagreements, tension, frustration, anger, bullying, exchange of heated words, insults, slurs, payback, and even worse. It’s well-known by now, that during the restrictions of the Covid-19 lockdown, there has been a big increase in domestic violence, resulting in home-visits from the police, and escapes, especially by mothers and children, to the safety of refuges run by kind people, such as Good Samaritan Sister Michelle Reid and Team at “The Inn”, Preston, Victoria. Today, speaking through Matthew, Jesus instructs Christians how to sort out their differences and develop togetherness. Like Jesus himself, they must act with understanding, compassion and forgiveness, and with a determination to be fully reconciled and completely at peace with others.

This leads to the questions: What do you and I do when somebody hurts or offends us? Do we just ignore the offender, keep our hurt to ourselves, yet keep brooding over our wounds? Or do we take out our anger by moaning and groaning to others? In short, do we do anything but, speak to the person who has been bugging us, and towards sorting it out, say just how we are feeling?

In our gospel today, Matthew draws on the attitudes, example and teachings of Jesus, to put to his community a three-step process for forgiveness, reconciliation and harmony.

1. At first just two people are involved: “If your brother or sister sins against you, go and have it out with him/her alone.” Notice that it is the one offended who must take the initiative. At this stage, there are no third parties. The aim is to tell the truth in love, rather than humiliate the other. It is hoped, then, that the two at loggerheads will speak in a calm and matter-of-fact way, about how each has experienced the other.

2. But this first step towards peace doesn't always work. That's not the end of the matter. So, if Step One fails, Step Two is to get support for a second approach to the offender. The conversation is to include just one or two more persons, who can act as unbiased witnesses, and help to settle the matter before it goes viral and public.
3. The instructions of Jesus continue. If one or the other is stubborn and still refuses to admit that he/she has done anything wrong, the process moves to another level: 'If he/she refuses to listen [so far], then tell the local church [community]'. Here Jesus gives the whole community the power to settle the matter. If the community establishes that the offender is now truly sorry, it makes peace between the parties. If not, it may discipline the offender, even to the point of excluding the offender from the group, at least for a time. This is because such people have shown that their unloving attitudes and behaviour are simply unchristian, and they don't really belong. It's understood all along that the decision of the community is actually the decision of Christ, present in person, and living and acting within his community.

All this is so different from "my lawyer will talk to your lawyer" kind of thing. We're living in a society which emphasizes "three strikes and you're out" and even "zero tolerance", i.e. "one strike and you're out". But that's not the full picture. Here is one instance of reconciliation and peace, at work in a courtroom. It comes from *The New York Times* (and relayed by courtesy of Fr Jude Siciliano OP, in his publication *Preacher Exchange I*).

Ryan, aged nineteen, was charged with tossing a turkey through a car windshield. He nearly killed the driver, Victoria, aged forty-four. She suffered severe injuries which required many hours of surgery to rebuild the bones of her shattered face. Ryan pleaded guilty in court. In the adjournment he came face to face with his victim for the first time. He said he was truly sorry and begged her to forgive him. She did just that. She cradled his head as he sobbed. She stroked his face and patted his back. "It's O.K., it's O.K.," she said over and over again, "I just want you to make your life the best it can be."

When the case resumed, Victoria took her forgiveness further. She saved Ryan from twenty-five years in gaol, by insisting that the prosecutor offer him a plea bargain instead - six months in gaol and five years probation.

Surely, her forgiveness could hardly have been more generous and more genuine than that! Surely too her forgiveness bears out the truth of what St Paul says in our Second Reading today: "Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour."

Then too, there is the powerful example of St Maria Goretti. In 1901 her poor family was sharing a farm house with the Serenelli family, near Nettuno Italy. On July 5th, Allesandro Serenelli made sexual advances to her, while she was sitting on the back step of the house and mending his shirt. She kept resisting and yelling, "No, it's a sin. God does not want it." Angry at her resistance, he then stabbed her fourteen times. As she was dying from her wounds 24 hours later in hospital in Nettuno, Maria kept expressing her forgiveness for him, and saying that she wanted him to be in heaven with her. His death sentence was commuted to 30 years in prison. For the first 3 years there he was uncommunicative and unrepentant. But after a pastoral visit from Bishop Giovanni Blandini, he changed. He wrote a "thank-you" note to the bishop, and told him of a dream "in which Maria gave him lilies". On release from prison, he visited Maria's mother, Assunta, and begged her forgiveness. She forgave him, and the next day they went to Mass together and received Holy Communion side by side. Allesandro was at St Peter's in Rome for her canonization as a saint in 1950. He went on to become a Capuchin Franciscan brother, and worked as a receptionist and gardener till he died in 1970.

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