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Audio of Prelate: Correcting those who err

In this month's podcast, Bishop Javier Echevarria offers reflections on one of the spiritual works of mercy. "Fraternal correction is the duty of all Christians. When someone gives us a warning for our own good, we should see it as an expression of divine mercy."

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Translation of the Prelate's audio recording is found below.

To listen to the 10-minute audio in Spanish click here.

The history of salvation shows us the continuous interaction between God's merciful love and mankind's weakness. As a mother follows her youngest child closely to keep him from danger or harm, so God has guided mankind throughout the centuries. Each of us has experienced in our own lives this close guidance, the hand of Divine Providence. And therefore, how many falls or mistakes on our daily path have become opportunities for an encounter with our Lord!

Correcting those who err [or “admonishing the sinner”] is a work of mercy that we see God carrying out constantly in the biblical narratives, whenever men have been determined (and we can also say, when we are determined) to choose the path of evil. The history of the Chosen People is a clear manifestation of this divine care. In many situations, Yahweh could have

let go his guiding hand, but He always (sometimes also with punishments and other warnings from the prophets) leads his People back, putting them once again on the way to salvation.

With the Incarnation of the Word, God's mercy takes on a human face: that of Jesus. God has become our Brother to look for us one by one: in our present circumstances, with our personal qualities, with the few or many talents that we have. In the Gospel, we see that Christ does not hold back from reprimanding, from correcting, those He wants to lead by the straight path, not only the Pharisees who reject his message, but also his friends. He reprimands Peter, even sternly, when he suggests that our Lord should flee from the Passion; and Martha in Bethany, gently, for worrying excessively about her housework. Our Lord

knew what tone and language was best suited for each occasion.

Following our Lord's example, we recall that fraternal correction practiced with rectitude, without humiliating others, has been a help in the Church right from the beginning. "Brothers," writes St. Paul to the Galatians, "in case someone is found to be at fault, you who are spiritual, correct him gently, taking care of yourself, lest thou also be tempted." The Apostle is simply repeating Jesus' command: "If your brother sins against you, go and correct him, just between the two of you. If he listens, you have won your brother."

Therefore, fraternal correction is the duty of all Christians. When someone gives us a warning for our own good, we should see it as an expression of divine mercy, which uses human instruments to guide us along the

right path. At first, we might find it distasteful and unpleasant. Pride may lead us to rebel, and to seek excuses that are always easy to find. However, if we consider this correction in God's presence, a sincere sense of gratitude will arise, because someone has taken the trouble to make us aware of an error that we had not perceived.

Let us not underestimate the power of mercy, since a fraternal correction accepted humbly can build up a relationship, strengthen a friendship, avoid future complications and be the starting point of a new stage in one's life.

Some years ago now, Pope Benedict XVI (to whom we should be very grateful) made ample reference to this manifestation of charity. "Today we are generally very sensitive to care and charity with regard to the physical and material good of others,

but we are almost completely silent regarding spiritual responsibility towards each other.” And he added: “When faced with evil, we cannot be silent. I’m thinking here of the attitude of those Christians,” the Pope continued, “who out of human respect or convenience conform themselves to the prevailing mentality instead of advising their brothers or sisters about certain ways of thinking and acting that contradict the truth and do not follow the right path.”

Therefore, I tell all of you and I tell myself, when helping someone by a fraternal correction, we need to be guided by charity and prudence, looking for the right time and the right words so as not to hurt our sister or brother unnecessarily. Paul himself encouraged the Galatians to correct “with gentleness.” So the best thing to do is to think about the correction in God’s presence, asking

the Holy Spirit to put the right words in our mouth, with complete rectitude of intention.

The temptation may arise to think that our correction will fall on deaf ears, or that the person won't struggle to change, or that their problems don't affect us.... And that's not the case. Those of us in the Church form a united body, and the mistakes of the others must awaken in us (without becoming scandalized and without critical spirit) feelings of compassion and the need to help them with charity.

When we correct, we also need to count on time. Grace is always effective, but people need time—we need time—to make the changes required. Let us recall that the Apostle Peter didn't want to accept that Christ was going to be put to death, even though the Master had announced it to him clearly and

firmly. He needed the time he spent in prison confined in chains in order to fully understand that this sacrifice was God's will.

Perhaps it also happens to us that, after having corrected someone, their attitude doesn't change and they persist in their error. In such cases, let us pray, which is the first way to help. Once the seed of mercy has been planted, it has to be watered with prayer, patience and human affection, so that the seed will germinate and bear fruit.

With the practice of fraternal correction, we can effectively resist the temptation to gossip and make ironic comments, which causes so much damage to family and social relationships. This can be a good resolution for the Jubilee of Mercy: to avoid even the slightest criticism of our relatives or friends, of our superiors or those who depend on us,

of people we know and people we don't know. This may seem like no easy task, since numerous frictions and misunderstandings arise every day. But if we persist with God's help and strength, we will be sowers of the serenity that comes from avoiding confrontations and trying to suggest positive solutions.

Let us help one another with this balm of mercy. No one can find happiness when they seek it alone. Let us not be oblivious to the struggles of the others, and let us ask God for the simplicity of heart needed to accept corrections with humility and gratitude; and to help others by correcting them with affection and understanding when necessary.

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