



Things to Ponder

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Am I My Brother's Keeper?

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

History remembers the fateful day in May of 1915 when a German submarine torpedoed the American passenger liner, Lusitania. This attack played a very important role in getting the United States to enter World War I. It was not until thirty years later that the truth came out. The Lusitania was carrying munitions and American officials knew about it. But they deliberately concealed the fact to mobilize public opinion against Germany to get the United States into the war.

One hero stood out in that shameful affair: Senator La Follette of Wisconsin. He stated in a public speech that the Lusitania was carrying munitions and that the President knew it. The Senate threatened to expel La Follette for making that statement. In his defense, La Follette asked that the cargo of the Lusitania be made public. This request was denied. Dudley Field Malone of the New York Customs quietly offered to testify in La Follette's behalf and reveal the cargo of the Lusitania. When the Senate heard this, they dropped all charges against La Follette.

This story reminds us that there comes a time when we must speak out against evil. There comes a time when we must confront those who are involved in wrongdoing. There comes a time when we cannot remain silent in the face of evil. There comes a time when confronting evil leads to personal sacrifice and rejection.

This is precisely the point Jesus is making in today's Gospel (Matthew 18:15-20). Each of us has some degree of responsibility regarding the spiritual good of our neighbor, brother or sister, child or grandchild, business associate or friend. That responsibility sometimes must manifest itself in what we term, "fraternal correction." We expect to be responsible and accountable for our own spiritual lives, and that at times is difficult. When Jesus asks us to attend to the spiritual lives of others it is not always easy.

Ezekiel (Ezekiel 33:7-9) tells us in rather blunt terms that if we fail to call those who are in sin away from sin, we will be held accountable. Jesus echoes this same admonition when He tells us to correct our brothers and sisters or involve others in correcting them if they fail to listen to us. Today's Scriptures' challenge of fraternal correction is one of the most difficult to live out and yet it is a vital part of our Christian life.

Exercising that responsibility is not an option. We are not being loving Christians if we fail to call others away from sin or fail to offer guidance to someone seeking to be free of sin. If we are concerned only about our own spiritual lives, we deny our unity with others in the body of Christ. We restrict Christ from working in and through us, and we inflict upon our own souls the sins of selfishness and neglect.

All around us are those for whom we will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment. A spouse, children, relatives, friends, neighbors, co-workers and colleagues--all are entrusted to our care. Today's readings should cause all of us to question how many times we silently watch as others do things that we know are wrong.

To correct our brothers and sisters is ultimately to "Love your neighbor as yourself." Just as we need correction so that we may do what is right and holy, so, too, we must be willing to challenge others, calling them to be holy people. Perhaps the first, if not the best step, in correcting others is to pray for them. How often do we pray for our enemies? When we gather with friends at a social engagement and the talk turns to abortion or cloning or the Pope or war or capital punishment or scandals within the Church--all of which the Church has a very clear position--do we say nothing, or do we recognize that this is a moment that may call for fraternal correction?

Recall the question posed by Cain to God when he asked Him where his brother Abel was: "Am I my brother's keeper." Today's readings answer that question very clearly and succinctly: "Yes, you are!"

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