

## “Conflict Resolution”

September 10, 2017, St. Ann  
Fr. Jim Plough

Addition made in revision for 7:30 09//10/17. Plough Shares IV for 2014.

The theme for today’s Scriptures begins with the role of Ezekiel, called to be the watchman of Israel, the one appointed to stand at the border and warn against the approach of enemy troops (Ezekiel 33: 7-9). Ezekiel is like an Indian scout in American western movies, perched on a mountain top and sending a smoke signal when the army cavalry appears in the distance. This image is personalized in Ezekiel’s instruction to warn an evildoer of his wicked conduct. The Lord tells him “if you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked from his way, . . . I will hold you responsible for his death.” Today we would describe this work as akin to conflict resolution or intervention, when a family needs to step in to persuade a victim of alcoholism to change their ways.

Today’s gospel applies the theme directly to what spiritual writers would call the duty of “fraternal correction.” “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault (Matthew 18: 15-20).” St. Matthew has Jesus advising his disciples to follow a progression, taking additional steps if necessary to resolve the issue. “If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you.” If he refuses to listen to them tell the church. (This is only the second time Matthew calls a Christian community “the church.”) In the end, Jesus assures his disciples that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” We usually regard these words as a commendation for gathering in prayer. In fact, they relate to a special kind of prayer, discernment on how to deal with conflict resolution.

Confronting wrongdoing is a tricky business. You need to do it prayerfully. Be careful of your motivation. Are you telling someone their faults to help them, or are you subtly comparing your own virtue with their faults to gain an advantage? If you are in a position of authority, you sometimes have to rein in someone who is out of step. When I was a pastor, I hated to confront a staff person or a parishioner for being out of line. I was not good at confrontation. I sometimes let the matter fester too long. Then, when the tooth had to be pulled, there was a bloody mess!

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Confrontation takes a good deal of skill and a good deal of soul-searching in regard to one’s own conduct. Besides having the right motive, you need to show compassion toward the one confronted. If you lord it over them, put them down, you have failed and probably made matters worse.

Here is an example of confrontation of the best kind. Pope Francis has had to confront some of the members of the curia, the Roman departments surrounding the work of the Vatican, the necessary bureaucracy involved in any large organization. These leaders are mostly bishops and clergy of the “old guard,” oldtimers who have been in charge and consider their views and measures to be quite proper. The issue relates especially to the financial operations of the Vatican.

Pope Francis has had to “retire” some of the curia involved in Vatican finances, replacing them with lay persons highly regarded internationally for their skills in financial matters. This has been a painful process. FORTUNE MAGAZINE in a lead article in 2014 was entitled “This Pope Means Business.” The magazine saw him as more than a pontiff of the people; he’s an elite manager who is reforming the Vatican’s troubled finances. FORTUNE named Pope Francis as Number 1 on its World’s Greatest Business Leaders list!

Pope Francis has had to confront wrong-doing, not in a moral sense, but in a matter of competence. He has shown great managerial skill. The lesson for us is that it takes skill to resolve conflicts, not just good intentions. The pope’s integrity shines through in his own personal lifestyle. He has said that for his spiritual message to be credible – a message of concern for the poor – the Vatican’s finances must be credible as well.

We know of examples of his emphasis upon simplicity instead of pomp, how he prefers to drive his own inexpensive car rather than having a limousine transport him about. He has removed a German bishop for living too ostentatiously. He resides in a one-bedroom, second-floor suite in Casa Santa Marta, a Vatican hotel,

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rather than in the apostolic palace. He is frequently spotted in the buffet line, tray in hand, at the Santa Marta dining room, where the cuisine isn't fancy. He takes no holidays, explaining that if the poor can't take vacations, why should he?

Pope Francis knows how to deal with conflict resolution. He prays over matters and shows compassion in dealing with incompetence. He has managerial skills in accomplishing the work. Most of all, his own lifestyle speaks volumes in regard to his motivation. Pope Francis is a model for all of us when we are called to act responsibly when having to confront wrongdoing.

Fraternal correction is very different from what has become a more frequent practice in our nation, namely calling out in public those we deem undeserving. One's opponents are viewed as not simply mistaken; they are wrong, they are morally offensive. Hate groups like the White Nationalists want to root out the weeds, the chaff, all shades other than white, so that they can “take our country back.”

The terrible violent clash in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 12, was destructive and deadly, coming at a moment, one writer described, when we can practically feel underfoot the hardening of our common ground. We are losing our sense of unity; we are coming to experience only divisive intolerance. It's time for a great awakening, a return to the ideals on which our nation was founded.

Jesus did not say “root out the weeds.” He said let both the wheat and the weeds grow together. The weeds are not harming the wheat. It's God's job, not ours, to sort them out in God's good time.

We all stand in need of correction, none of us is pure. Fraternal correction belongs to the role of a community to protect itself against conduct that undermines the

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community’s health. A correction needs to be made because harm is being done. This is far different from the correction hate groups would foist upon us.

Confronting wrongdoing is a tricky business. You need to do it prayerfully and to acknowledge the difference between weeds that are doing no harm and conduct which is detrimental.