

Fraternal correction, a help along the path to holiness

Fraternal correction is an admonishment given by a Christian to his or her neighbor to help them along the path to holiness. It is a means of spiritual progress that helps us to know our defects, since otherwise these may often be hidden from us by our own limitations, or disguised by our self-love. It is often a necessary precondition to enable us to tackle those defects with God's help, and so improve our Christian living.

1. A deep-rooted Christian tradition

The heart of fraternal correction is deep in the Gospel. Jesus tells us to practice it in the context of serving little ones and unlimited forgiveness. "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."¹ Jesus himself corrects his disciples on several occasions, as the Gospels show us: he reproves them when they are jealous of someone else casting out demons in Jesus' name;² he rebukes Peter firmly because his way of thinking is not God's but men's;³ he redirects James and John's misguided ambition, affectionately correcting their mistaken understanding of the kingdom he announces, while acknowledging their courageous readiness to "drink of his cup".⁴

Starting from Jesus' teaching and example, fraternal correction has become a sort of Christian family tradition that has been practiced in the Church from the earliest times. It is a duty not only of justice but of love. Among the recommendations given by St Paul to the Christians at Corinth is to "exhort one another" (*exhortamini invicem*).⁵ Plenty of passages in the New Testament witness to the watchfulness of the shepherds of the Church to correct the abuses that were worming their way into some of the first Christian communities.⁶ St Ambrose testified to the practice of fraternal correction when he wrote, in the fourth century, "If you discover some defect in a friend, correct him privately (...) For corrections do more

¹ Matthew 18:5.

² Cf. Mark 9:38-40.

³ Cf. Matthew 16:23.

⁴ Cf. Matthew 20:20-23.

⁵ 2 Corinthians 13:11.

⁶ Cf., for example, James 2.

good and are more profitable than friendship that keeps silent. If the friend is offended, correct him just the same, firmly and without fear, even though the correction tastes bitter to him. It is written in the Book of Proverbs that wounds from a true friend are preferable to kisses from flatterers (Proverbs 27:6).⁷ And St Augustine also warns against the grave fault entailed in omitting to offer this help to one's neighbor: "You do worse by keeping silent than he does by sinning."⁸

2. A Christian necessity

The natural basis for fraternal correction is the need everyone has to be helped by others to attain their goal, because no-one can see themselves objectively, nor is it easy to recognize one's own faults. Hence this practice has also been recommended by classical authors as a way of helping friends.⁹ In turn, allowing oneself to be corrected by others is a sign of maturity and a condition for spiritual progress: "the good man rejoices to be corrected; every wicked man reacts violently against guidance" (*admoneri bonus gaudet; pessimus quisque correctorem asperrime patitur*).¹⁰

Christians need their brothers and sisters in the faith to do them the favor of fraternal correction. Together with other essential helps – prayer, mortification, good example – the practice of fraternal correction (which was recommended in Jewish Wisdom literature) is a fundamental means for reaching holiness, and contributes to the spreading of the Kingdom of God in the world. "He who heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof goes astray."¹¹

3. Correcting out of love for our neighbor

Christian fraternal correction is born of charity, the theological virtue by which we love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves for love of God. Since charity is the "bond of

⁷ St Ambrose, *De officiis ministrorum* III, 125-135.

⁸ St Augustine, Sermon 82, 7.

⁹ Cf. Plutarch, *Moralia*, I.

¹⁰ Seneca, *De Ira*, 3, 36, 4.

¹¹ Proverbs 10:17.

perfection”¹² and the form of all the virtues, the exercise of fraternal correction is a source of personal sanctification for the person who gives it and the person who receives it. It offers the giver a chance to practice our Lord’s command, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”¹³ It offers the receiver the lights they need to renew their following of Christ in the specific point that has been corrected.

“To practice fraternal correction – which is so deeply rooted in the Gospel – is a proof of supernatural trust and affection. Be thankful for it when you receive it, and don’t neglect to practice it with those around you.”¹⁴ Fraternal correction is not the outcome of irritation at another’s faults, or of offended pride or wounded vanity. Love is the only possible motive for fraternally correcting our neighbor. As St Augustine teaches, “we must correct out of love, not out of a desire to hurt, but with the loving intention of helping the person’s amendment. If we act like that, we will be fulfilling the commandment very well – “if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” Why do you correct him? Because you are upset that he has offended you? God forbid. If you do it out of self-love, your action is worthless. If it is love that moves you, you are acting excellently.”¹⁵

4. A duty of justice

Christians have the duty to correct their neighbor fraternally as a grave requirement of the virtue of charity.¹⁶ In the Old Testament we find examples where the Lord God reminds the prophets of this duty, as in the case of Ezekiel. “So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you shall surely die,’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity, but you will have saved your life.”¹⁷ The same idea appears in the New Testament. The Apostle James says, “My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and

¹² Cf. Colossians 3:14.

¹³ John 15:12.

¹⁴ St Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 566.

¹⁵ St Augustine, Sermon 82, 4.

¹⁶ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1829.

¹⁷ Ezekiel 33:7-9.

will cover a multitude of sins.”¹⁸ And St Paul considers fraternal correction as the best way to bring back someone who has strayed from the path: “If anyone refuses to obey what we say in this letter (...) do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”¹⁹ We cannot be passive or indifferent towards our neighbor’s faults. Still less can we indulge in complaining or angry accusation. “Friendly correction is more beneficial than violent accusation. The first inspires compunction, but the second only arouses indignation.”²⁰

All Christians are in need of this help, but we have a special duty to practice fraternal correction to those who are in positions of authority, spiritual guidance, formation of others, etc. in the Church, institutions that form part of the Church, families and Christian communities. People who are in charge of others need that help more urgently because they have more responsibility, because “no-one after lighting a lamp covers it with a vessel, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, that those who enter may see the light.”²¹ In the same way, those who work in governance or formation have a special responsibility to practice it. On this subject, St Josemaria teaches, “There is a great love of comfort, and at times a great irresponsibility, hidden behind the attitude of those in authority who flee from the sorrow of correcting, making the excuse that they want to avoid the suffering of others. They may perhaps save themselves some discomfort in this life. But they are gambling with eternal happiness – the eternal happiness of others as well as their own – by these omissions of theirs. These omissions are real sins.”²²

5. Dispositions necessary for giving and receiving fraternal correction

Fraternal correction is one of the most authentic manifestations of the “communion of saints” among those of us who still live as pilgrims in this world, while being united to the dead and risen Christ. All Christians, in Christ, form one single family, the Church, for the praise and glory of the Blessed Trinity.²³ Christians are stimulated to maintain the practice of fraternal correction by the realization of their responsibility for one another’s holiness, i.e. their duty to cooperate so that every baptized person perseveres in the place where they have been called by God to become holy. This awareness becomes progressively keener if we develop the

¹⁸ James 5:19-20.

¹⁹ 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15; cf. Galatians 6:1.

²⁰ St Ambrose, quoted in *Catena Aurea*, vol. VI.

²¹ Luke 8:16; cf. Mark 4:21.

²² St Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 577.

²³ Cf. *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 195.

habit of concern for our neighbor, – “the healthy psychological prejudice of thinking habitually about others.”²⁴

Another equally necessary attitude is to be prepared to overcome the difficulties that may arise. These are: (1) an excessively human and not very supernatural approach that leads us to think that it is not worthwhile making the correction; (2) the fear of upsetting the person whom we correct; (3) the idea that our own unworthiness prevents us from correcting the other person, whom we see as better qualified or better disposed; (4) the idea that it is not appropriate to correct someone else when we ourselves have the same defect, to an even greater degree; and (5) the thought that there is no possibility of any improvement in the person concerned, or that they had already been corrected for that same fault with no apparent results. The ultimate source of these objections is usually human respects, fear of being badly thought of, or indolence. They are easily dealt with if we keep a vivid awareness of the communion of saints, and hence of the loyalty we owe to the Church, her pastors and institutions, and all our brothers and sisters in the faith.

To receive fraternal corrections fruitfully, we need to have a keen desire for holiness. This will enable us to see the admonishment we have received as a divine grace aimed at improving our faithfulness to God and service to others. The exercise of humility will help us to receive correction gratefully, and will enable us to hear God’s voice and not harden our hearts.²⁵

6. How to give fraternal correction, and how to receive it

Jesus Christ’s specific recommendations,²⁶ and other instructions on charity in the Gospel, show how fraternal correction should be practiced: with supernatural outlook, humility, considerateness and affection.

Because it is an admonishment with a supernatural purpose – the holiness of the person corrected – the person giving the correction should discern in the presence of God whether the correction is opportune, and the most prudent way to give it (the best time, the

²⁴ St Josemaria, *The Forge*, no.861.

²⁵ Cf. Psalm 95(94):7-8.

²⁶ Matthew 18:15-17: “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

appropriate words, etc.) to avoid humiliating the person being corrected. Asking the Holy Spirit for light, and praying for the person we are going to correct, helps foster the supernatural atmosphere that is necessary for the correction to be effective.

Before giving the correction we should also consider humbly, in God's presence, our own unworthiness, and should examine our conscience on the fault that is the subject of the correction. St Augustine recommends this examination of conscience because we often find it easy to notice in other people the very defects we suffer from ourselves. "When we have to reprimand others, let us first think whether we have committed that fault; and if we have not committed it, let us consider the fact that we are human beings and we could have committed it. Or whether we have been guilty of it in the past, even though not at present. And then let us be mindful of our shared weakness, so that mercy, and not animosity, precedes the correction we give."²⁷

Considerateness and affection are the distinguishing marks of Christian charity and also, therefore, of the practice of fraternal correction. To ensure that this admonition is the expression of genuine charity, it is important to ask ourselves before giving it: "How would Jesus act towards this person in this situation?" Then it will be easier to see that Jesus would correct not only promptly and frankly, but also kindly, with understanding and respect. Hence St Josemaria teaches: "When you have to make a fraternal correction, do it with great kindness – great charity! – in what you say and in the way you say it, for at that moment you are God's instrument."²⁸ A specific note of kindness is to give the admonishment in private with the person concerned, and to avoid anything in the way of comments or jokes that might detract from the supernatural tone of the correction.

When we give fraternal corrections we should avoid a possible tendency to be overly impersonal, taking refuge in anonymity. This inclination disappears when, with God's grace, we make a specific act of loyalty and think about the communion of saints. Loyalty will lead us to correct the other person face to face, without equivocating and without humiliating them, but frankly, since what we are seeking is their good and the holiness of the Church. The firmness that is a necessary part of fraternal correction does not conflict with gentleness and considerateness; the person giving the correction should be like an iron fist in a velvet glove.²⁹

²⁷ St Augustine, *On the Sermon on the Mount*, 2.

²⁸ St Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 147.

²⁹ Cf. St Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 397: "... A mace of tempered steel, wrapped in a quilted covering."

The virtue of prudence has an important role to play as guide, rule and measure of how to make (and receive) fraternal correction. “Prudence disposes reason to discern in every circumstance our true good and to choose the right means for achieving it.”³⁰ A rule of prudence that is borne out by experience is to ask a competent person (spiritual director, priest, superior) for advice on whether the envisaged correction is opportune. This consultation is in no way an accusation or denunciation, but is a wise exercise of the virtue of prudence, seeking to ensure that the same person is not corrected for the same fault by several different people, and it helps those giving the correction to mature their judgment and form their own consciences – in short, to become “souls of worth”.³¹ Prudence will also lead us not to correct someone frequently about the same topic, because we should rely on God’s grace and the passage of time for others to improve.

Matters that may be the subject of fraternal correction include all aspects of Christian living, because all of them together make up the context of personal sanctification and the apostolate of the Church. Generally speaking, they would include: (1) habits contrary to the law of God and the commandments of the Church; (2) attitudes or behaviors that conflict with the witness that all Christians are called to give in their family and social life, in their job, etc.; (3) single faults if they represent grave harm to the Christian life of the person concerned or the Church.³²

When we receive fraternal correction it is important to maintain the right attitude, which can be summed up as follows: supernatural outlook, humility and gratitude. It is appropriate to accept a fraternal correction gratefully, without arguing or offering explanations or excuses, because we see the person who corrects us as a brother or sister who is concerned for our holiness. If we find ourselves annoyed or put off by a correction, we should meditate on the words of St Cyril: “Reproof makes the humble improve, but seems unbearable to the proud.”³³ In such cases, we should meditate on the correction in God’s presence to grasp its full meaning, and if we still cannot understand, we should consult a prudent person (priest, spiritual director, etc.) to help us comprehend it properly.

³⁰ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 380.

³¹ Cf. St Josemaria, *The Way*, Introduction.

³² Obviously, within the different institutions raised up by God in the Church, faults or behaviors contrary to the customs of the individual institution would also be material for fraternal correction.

³³ St Cyril, quoted in *Catena Aurea*, vol. VI.

7. Fruits of fraternal correction

The practice of fraternal correction brings many benefits, both for the giver and for the receiver. As a specific act of Christian charity, it bears fruits of joy, peace and mercy. It also requires us to exercise many virtues, starting with charity, humility, and prudence. It improves our formation on the human plane, making us more courteous; it improves interpersonal relationships; it impedes malicious gossip or unkind jokes about our neighbor's behavior or attitudes; it strengthens the unity of the Church and her institutions at every level, thus giving greater effectiveness to the evangelizing mission; it guarantees faithfulness to the spirit of Jesus Christ; and it enables Christians to experience the firm security of knowing that we can count on the help of our brothers and sisters in the faith: "A brother helped by his brother is like a strong city".³⁴

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³⁴ Proverbs 18:19.