NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Calling one another to conversion

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Sep. 4, 2011

If you saw your young child about to put his hand in a hot stove, wouldn?t you move quickly to prevent him from being burned? If that same child got hold of your prescription medicine, you?d act just as quickly to prevent a terrible mishap. If a distracted friend was about to step into oncoming traffic, you?d grab her arm to save her, wouldn?t you? If, perhaps, a companion drank too much at a party, you would see to it that he did not drive. If your teenager was hanging out with friends who were known to be troublemakers, wouldn?t you do something to remedy the situation? What if a friend or coworker was in an abusive relationship -- wouldn?t you try to help her in some way?

There are countless other occasions when we see someone hurt or in danger or on the brink of a calamity and we, good friends and family members that we are, step up to help. If we can extend our care to others in all these instances of physical, emotional or psychological need, why are we reluctant to do the same with regard to sin? Today the sacred texts address this issue clearly and frankly, affirming that we are to muster whatever gumption is necessary to meet this mutual responsibility.

September 4, 2011
Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Ezekiel 33:7-9

-10

5-20

Paul, in his letter to the Roman Christians (second reading), underscored the motivation for reaching out to one another with care: We owe it to one another to love each other. Because authentic love does no evil, love is willing to confront others with their failures -- not solely for the sake of correction but with an eye to their conversion and ours as well.

As an integral aspect of his own conversion to God, Ezekiel was called to serve his contemporaries as a sentinel or watchman. Like his prophetic colleagues, Ezekiel was to be so attuned to God?s will and God?s ways that he could mediate whatever God wished to be made known. God?s message very frequently came in the form of a call to turn from evil so as to embrace the good. If he did not respond to God and made that call known, Ezekiel would be held culpable; if he fulfilled his ministry faithfully, then the onus of responsibility fell upon the recipients of his message to hear and to heed his words.

In today?s Gospel, the Matthean Jesus is represented as offering a procedure for helping another to see the error and their ways and turn again to God. This procedure of brotherly and sisterly correction probably reflects the situation of the Matthean community of the eighties and was intended not to alienate or isolate the sinner but to encourage his/her conversion.

In his reflection on mutual correction, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*Life Together*, Harper and Row Pub., 1954) has described the willingness to admit one?s sinfulness before God and others as a process of liberation marked by several breakthroughs. Those who will surrender to this process break through first of all to community. Whereas sin isolates one from the other, the admission of sin empowers a fellowship that mutually strengthens believers to resist sin together.

Those who unite in admitting their sinfulness and in helping one another to resist sin will also break through to the cross. On the cross, Jesus suffered the scandalous, public execution of a criminal for our sakes. Our belonging to Jesus enables us to face the ?dying? that comes with admitting our sins to one another and the even more difficult death of helping another to see and own his/her sinfulness. This breakthrough, though often painful, leads to a breakthrough to new life. When sin is called by its name and repented of, its dominion is broken and a new beginning becomes possible.

Finally, honest admission of sin and mutual correction can enable the believer to break through to certainty. God gives us this certainty, explained Bonhoeffer, through our brother and/or sister. A person who admits his/her sin in the presence of another knows that he/she is no longer alone; he/she experiences God in the reality of the other person.

Therefore, when Ezekiel or Paul, or the Matthean Jesus or any member of the community cares enough for us to help us to see and to overcome the power of sin in our lives, we are to be humble enough and truthful enough to accept this opportunity as the grace that it is. Then, together, we will be able to break through to community, to the cross, to new life and to the certainty of God?s love.

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Source URL (retrieved on *08/21/2014 - 09:58*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/calling-one-another-conversion