

A doctor and a lawyer were attending a party when the doctor was approached by a man who asked advice on how to handle his diabetes. The doctor mumbled some medical advice, then turned to the lawyer and remarked, "I don't know how to handle the situation when I'm asked for medical advice during a social function. Is it acceptable to send a bill for such advice?" The lawyer replied that it was certainly acceptable to do so. The next day, the doctor sent the diabetic man a bill. But the Doctor himself received a heavy bill from the lawyer.

Advice given or received at the wrong time in wrong place may result like this. But this does not mean that we should stop giving advice or receiving advice.

In fact, the main theme of this Sunday's First reading and the Gospel is on giving advice and correcting others if they are going astray. The readings tell us our responsibility towards the salvation of others in our community because they are God's children and our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are, therefore, the "keepers" of our brothers and sisters.

In today's first reading God describes Prophet Ezekiel as a watchman over the people of Israel. God tells his prophet to warn the sinner of the certain damnation that will follow if he does not mend his ways. If the prophet does not do so the sinner will die in his sins, but the prophet will have to share in his damnation. On the other hand, if the prophet gives the warning to the sinner and the latter still dies in his sins, the prophet will not bear any responsibility for that man's damnation. The reading reminds us that we as God's people have the great responsibility placed on us by God. Everyone has the duty and obligation to rectify errors that we see in persons around us.

In today's Gospel passage we see a three-stage procedure for dealing with a community member who has done "something wrong". Presumably, it is some form of external behavior which is harmful to the quality of the community's witnessing to the Gospel. Jesus proposes three stages to correct a sinner. 1st at a private level, 2nd with two witnesses and finally together with the whole community.

But the main thrust of the passage is that we should all work towards reconciliation rather than punishment and solve the issue without any unnecessary publicity. If it works out at that level, that is the ideal situation. Jesus says: "You have won back your brother." To win back here is a Jewish technical term for conversion, a change of heart.

In Jesus' time, people lived in small and closely knitted communities and not in megacities like we do today. Thus, the idea of fraternal or communal correction was quite familiar to them. In early Christian community, it would have been crucial to resolve internal disputes and ensure harmony of a common life for all. Today's Gospel addresses difficult circumstances that confront the life of a community. When a brother or a sister strays, it is the duty of the whole community to restore him/her. In effect, we are called to be our brother's/sister's keepers. In our increasingly litigious society, Jesus provides us with the alternative Christian model of fraternal correction, care, accompaniment.

As Christians we are responsible and are made accountable for the welfare of those under our care, be it children, parents, elders, or even friends. As Christians we are not individuals but members of the Body of Christ that is the Church. The readings of today tell us of God's command of spiritual responsibility and accountability that each one of us have towards our neighbors. It speaks of our responsibility of correcting our brothers and sisters in Christ who live in error. This obligation always existed in the Catholic Church, from the early days of the Christian community right up to the present time.

This weekend's teaching is difficult to practice because we live in a society where "mind your own business" and "respect the privacy" are strongly upheld.

Let's see how St. Francis addressed this issue. A man approached him and said, "Brother Francis, I am in a quandary. In the Bible it says we should rebuke sinners, but I see people sinning all the time. I don't feel like I should go around rebuking everybody."

St. Francis thought and then said, "What you must do is live in such a way that your life rebukes the sinner - how you act will call others to repentance."

Your own lifestyle will give the sinner a better advice than words of mouth.