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The Twenty-third Sunday of the Year (A)

Today we are once again confronted with the age-old question, "Am I my brother's keeper" (Genesis 4:9)? The answer, of course, is a resounding, "Yes!"

We are our brother's keeper; not in the sense of a busy-body, not as one searching for one more piece of gossip, but as one who truly loves, who truly desires what is good for others. This is the task to which Christ has called us, that of love.

But what does it mean to love? Saint Augustine teaches us that "the rule of love is that one should wish his friend to have all the good things he wants to have himself and should not wish the evils to befall his friend which he wishes to avoid himself."¹

Saint Paul instructs us to "owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another" (Romans 13:8). Consider this: the debt that we owe each other is love. Love is not therefore merely some Christian ideal; it is our duty, our duty as members of the Body of Christ, the Church!

¹ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Of True Religion*, 87. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Vol. VI*, Thomas C. Oden et al, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2002), 320.

When we consider the nature of love we cannot help but recall the command of Jesus: "love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (John 13:24).

In the fullness of time the only Son of God took on flesh, announcing the kingdom of God, saying, "Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:15). He came to us holding nothing back, and through the Sacraments he comes to us each day of our lives.

Jesus loves us by calling us to conversion, to repentance. He loves us by pointing out our sin, in clear and certain terms, showing us the narrow gate that opens onto the path of discipleship that leads to salvation (cf. Matthew 7:13).

Is this not a cruel thing to do, to point out another's failures and sins? We often mistakenly think so, but the Lord shows us our sin not out of cruelty but out of love. What do I mean?

It is sin that brings death and conversion that brings life. It would be a very cruel thing indeed to let someone live in sin without correcting them, knowing full well where the path they are on will lead.

We know that sin itself wounds us and others; no one can sin without suffering its terrible effects, even if they are, at first, unnoticeable. He who sins

has done someone harm, and by doing harm has stricken himself with a grievous wound. Will you then completely disregard your brother's wound? Will you simply watch him

stumble and fall down...? If so, you are worse in your silence than he in his abuse.²

How can we love someone if we willingly watch them forsake divine love and walk the road to Hell? Sitting idly by is not a mark of love at all. Love requires that we help him and seek to remedy his wound.

We desire life, do we not, for those we love? Jesus tells us that he came so that we "might have life, and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). Indeed, he is the only path to true and authentic life; he is life itself!

Why, then, do we harden our hearts when he, in love, speaks to us of our sin in the depths of our hearts (cf. Psalm 95:8)? Why do we ignore him? Why do we close our ears? Why do we run away? Do we not want life, true and authentic life? Of course we do, and so we should want it for others, too. And we should help them attain it.

Too often we shy away from helping someone see his sin. "Who am I to judge?" we ask. In doing so we forget that we are our brother's keeper because we are all one body in Christ. We forget, too, the words of Saint James: "Remember this: the person who brings a sinner back from his way will save his soul from death and cancel a multitude of sins" (James 5:20). We

² *Ibid.*, Sermon 82.7 in *ibid.* Vol. Ib, 77.

are, as it were, in this not alone, but together; it is impossible to be a solitary Christian.

Furthermore, the Lord is clear that if we fail to help someone recognize the sin that we see so clearly, we will be held responsible for his sin because we did not warn him and call him to conversion.

We might claim that "the Lord's way is not fair," but is this truly the case (Ezekiel 18:25)? If we fail to correct our brother who sins, we fail to love him; we allow him to continue living in sin, walking along the path to eternal death. There is no love in this. It is that simple.

All of this presupposes two things: first, an awareness of sin and its consequences and, second, a recognition of our own sin.

Every sin is "an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is a failure in genuine love of God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods."³ In his Letter to the Galatians, Saint Paul offers us a short list of some of the most common sins, what he calls the works of the flesh:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like (Galatians 5:19-21).

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1849.

Surely each of us can accuse ourselves of at least one of these on a regular basis.

The Apostle further says, "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:21). The consequence of sin is serious indeed!

If sin were not so terrible, if we were not sinners in thought, word, and deed, the Lord Jesus would not have had to endure the agony of the Cross! The very fact of the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus reveals the reality of sin and its deadly consequences.

How many times do we hear or say, "I don't have any sins to confess; I haven't done anything wrong"? There could be no more foolish words to utter and no greater lie!

"We have to recognize that we sin, even in our new identity as baptized persons."⁴ The simplest way to do so is to consider the many times that we fail to love in thought, word or deed. If we spend only a few minutes each night looking back over the day, we will see that sin time and time again. Only then can we sincerely implore the Lord's forgiveness and seek to amend our lives. Only then can we lead others from their sin. Only then

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 20 March 2008.

will we "sing joyfully to the LORD" and "acclaim the rock of our salvation" (Psalm 95:1).

But as we consider our own sins and the sins of others, we must always bear in mind the admonition of the Divine Physician: "remove the wooden beam from your own eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5). Only by recalling that we, too, are sinful will we approach our brother in truth and in love. And only when our brother recognizes our sincerity to save his soul will he listen to us and be won over (cf. Matthew 18:15).

Let each of us then help each other to root out sin from our lives that we might together "bow down in worship" and "kneel before the LORD who made us" (Psalm 95:6). Amen.