

More senior members of our parish may recall the harrowing story of Kitty Genovese, the New York City woman who was brutally assaulted and murdered in 1964. It was so newsworthy because the New York Times reported that 38 people witnessed the event, yet no one came to her aid. While this number has been debunked, at least some did just that. The incident led psychologists to begin to study the phenomenon known as the Bystander Effect. It led in no small part to the emergency 911 system.¹

Last fall in Long Island, a 16-year-old was stabbed in an after-school fight witnessed by at least 50 students. While many videotaped the fight, no one stepped in; they continued to film as he lay bleeding. He later died in a hospital. What is our duty to our neighbor? Many people do not know their neighbors. In an increasingly mobile society, this is not reserved to urban centers. Many suburbanites do not know their neighbors.

Catholic tradition speaks of *Works of Mercy*, both spiritual and corporal:

The *works of mercy* are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our **neighbor** in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are **spiritual works** of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The **corporal works** of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead.²

Today's Gospel is clearly an example of one such spiritual work of mercy, namely that of **admonishing the sinner**. Understandably, many find it difficult to admonish the sinner. Some feel hypocritical, knowing too well their own sinfulness, even though our faith never demands perfection before calling out the fault of another. Our approach to another is based upon our fundamental belief that each of us is flawed, and that as fellow

¹ New York Times, April 4, 2016. Her assailant died in prison in 2016, one of the longest prison terms ever.

² Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph # 2447, Cf. Mt 25:31-46.

Christians we aim to assist one another through this valley of tears. We begin our approach in utter humility, fully aware of our own sinfulness.

Still, the parent calmly explains to their children the errors of their ways, also promising assistance. But what if it is a co-worker, boss, a rector, a grown young adult child? “When are we bound to **admonish** the **sinner**?” Answer: “We are bound to **admonish** the **sinner** when the following conditions are fulfilled: when his fault is a mortal sin; when we have authority or influence over him; and when there is reason to believe that our warning will not make him worse instead of better.”³

As the prophet Ezekiel made clear in our first reading, “the wicked shall die for his guilt, but [the Lord] will hold you responsible for his death,” if you fail to warn him. Parents are bound to admonish their children– they have a God given duty to do so; as adults, a different approach is called for, one that respects their autonomy. Many today will cry “foul” to such a proposal. Hold me responsible?

But we must bear in mind that to admonish is **not the same** as to scold, though it has that connotation to some. It comes from a root word meaning to warn, to advise.⁴ Jesus admonished and warned sinners, but also developed a relationship and this is what is often missing when we seek to admonish others. It is a key determinative factor.

At the same time, it appears hard to judge one person for the sins of another. Do we not have free will after all? Of course we do, and from one perspective, we cannot be held accountable, provided that we perform our due diligence with respect to the spiritual works of mercy. But if we do nothing to warn someone of spiritual danger, are we serious believers? If our admonishment comes, not from a sincere heart, but out of anger or frustration, it is not virtuous. If it is out of haughtiness, even worse.

³ cf. The Baltimore Catechism, No. 19, paragraph # 814.

⁴ Lat. *admoneo*, “to remind, advise, warn or teach.”

But done in love, it is a spiritual work of mercy, albeit done in a most gentle way. There is an old adage given to priests- “preach like a lion from the pulpit but act like a lamb in the confessional.” This rings true, though I will leave it up to the judgment of others whether I live this out!

If a young adult is concerned about the problem drinking of a friend: “As your friend, I care for you deeply, and as such, may I share a concern I have with you?” To the parent concerned about cohabitation before marriage: “You are my son, I love you, and so I share what I have learned about marriage, so that you may best prepare for it, by living apart now.”

The local bishop aware of a Catholic politician who advocates for late-term abortion may write: “In my role as your bishop, I am duty bound to share that you ought not to be presenting yourself for Holy Communion ...I desire to discuss at greater length my reasons if you would meet with me in private.”

There are many examples, none is easy. I will not candy coat this-this is hard work. To warn or admonish someone you love who is in serious sin is gut wrenching, but what is the alternative? To say or do nothing? Sometimes, people need just a little push back, because in their own consciences that are uncomfortable.

May we all pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit for the right words to say and for the gift of discernment. May we distinguish what might backfire, thereby making it worse, versus what will best accomplish to goal of returning another to the right path. We struggle in this together, trusting that the Lord will show us the way.