

"Getting Along"

Homily of September 8, 2002

by Fr. Michael Dibble

I have a couple of classmates - priests, one in San Francisco and one back in New York, whose answering machine begins with a long, long interlude of loud music. I timed the New York one this week; 37 seconds. Well, 37 seconds - when you call nine times out of ten and he's not there, and you've been dealing with years of this machine, 37 seconds looms large. At least, he changes the music (the New York one) - Montovani or Mancini, but the message is always the same. And the message is, the music finally stops, "This is Fr. Gooch, and how we getting along? How we getting along? Please leave your name." By the time the music ends, I'm in a fit of rage; but then when the message comes across, which he's been using since he was a young priest, this guy in New York, "How we getting along?" my fury fades, 'cause it's a good message. Especially on Sunday, and especially for this Gospel.

Our Lord, in today's Gospel is telling his disciples - his followers, people who loved him and liked him and wanted to follow him - he's telling them how to get along, how you get along, we brothers and sisters in Christ, in the Church. How are we getting along?

And I'll spare you an acronym today, but let's take three words that all start with the letter "C", trying to break down today's Gospel a little bit. "Correcting" one another, that's how our Lord starts out - correcting each other, with love, as he always did; and then "collecting" each other for prayer, as we have done at this Mass; then finally "connecting" with each other and Christ. Cause this isn't just group therapy or socioeconomic allegiance, we're connecting with each other with Christ!

Correcting one another regarding fault, and our Lord starts off by saying, "Just maybe one of you, one on one can do it." Our Lord says, "Tell him his fault." Now, the only way I can do this is examples. The strongest correction I ever got was just one person and it was just as a school year was ending, it was a hot, hot day in June (upstate New York), and the class was taking their final exam and they finished (and this was an honors English class, so they really finish fast). And it was hot, and they were kind of sitting there, all blue books were finished, looking at me and I looking at them, and the school rule was, "Do not dismiss until noon!" But they had another half hour, so I said, "You can go." And with a grateful nod, they shimmied out the door. Then I gathered up my books (the blue books and my book I was reading) and I went to the door and there at the door, looking at me - through the door - was the Principal, like this! (Makes face - laughter!) See, that was 1969, I never forgot it! I'm still talking about it! Because it was powerful! Now he was another priest, very good-hearted, but that was a correction. And I studied anthropology, and in anthropology (in some primitive tribes) that's called the

"stony stare!" Ha, ha! Tell them his fault.

Now, if you read Church history, we brothers and sisters have been yelling at each other for 2,000 years. We have! We're brothers and sisters - brothers and sisters fight! We're in a family! If you read, or ever get a chance to read the Acts of the Apostles, in the New Testament, right after our Lord goes back to his Father in paradise, Peter and Paul are at each other's throats! "Shall we let non-Jews in? And if we let non-Jews in, do they have to keep all the Jewish laws?" Peter and Paul! But they're doing it with love, for the Church!

Just to conclude the first "C", about correcting - sometimes in that parish I'm always talking about, the one on Wall Street that I came here from, those people would pack, Monday through Friday, the seven o'clock in the morning Mass was packed! All week long - packed! With all different kinds of people - people who mopped the floors and people who ran companies would come to pray, and talking about correction; the ultimate Catholic correction has been as you know, excommunication! And sometimes a father or a mother would grab me after morning Mass and say, "Father, my adult son or my adult daughter is involved in this, or has done this, and so, of course, oh Father, they're excommunicated, aren't they?" Fortunately, I was able to say, "No! Not according to Church law, they are not excommunicated. In some ways, they may be messing up their spiritual lives, cast adrift, they're not excommunicated." Getting a divorce does not mean excommunication; some people I've known had to get a divorce because the father was drunk, you know, or addicted and beating them up and they needed divorce to get some kind of money - legally. The divorce itself is not a cause for excommunication. In fact, I called two priests this week, on the phone! I said, "Tell me what are the current reasons to be excommunicated?" Long pause, from both of them. And they both came up with the same two! Well, there are two left. Number 1: if you take a poke at the Pope - whether it lands or not, you're excommunicated. And the other is if one of those priests would reveal what we hear in the secrecy and seal of confession. And that should be an excommunication. But that's about it. The ultimate correction - correcting one another, one on one if we can, with the kind of love Jesus showed, Jesus showed.

The second one is "collecting" one another. Now, according to the expression that our Lord used, and I checked those three scholarly Bible books by Catholic scholars on each Gospel we think about together, when our Lord used the phrase "when two or three are gathered," that meant not just praying but also studying together or counseling together, that he'd be there, "where two or three are gathered." And all different types, our Catholic church is small "c" as well as big "C". Small "c" means universal - every type, every color, every race throughout the world is in our Church. And I used to love watching them from the window on Wall Street. From my left window (I was on the top floor) I could see the stairs leading up to St. Peter's Church, the name of the church in that area. And across this window was a Wall Street office building, but the entire

first floor was a mirror, and I loved watching them as they were piling in for 7AM Mass, Monday through Friday, at the mirror! There was one woman, I used to call her the Rosalind Russell (that was the name of a movie actress who always played lady executives), and in the cold weather this lady had a real posh fur coat and her Gucci bag, and she'd stand in front of the mirror and fix her hair, and then come up to Church! And there were a couple of guys who went to Pace College - these guys went to Mass, every day, for four years - two guys, going to college with their backpacks. They, too, checking their hair. A lot of people kept checking hair. (Laughter!) There was one executive who was really Brooks Brothers, you could tell even from the top floor that it was a Brooks Brothers suit he was wearing, executive type, I guess. But he had the longest, wispiest white beard, diaphanous almost - and he was calmly stroking it. And they'd all come into Church. People would be there who mopped the floors on Wall Street and people would be there who ran huge companies and they were all were there collected together, praying together. Probably fighting now and then about the Church, but brothers and sisters. Now I know I've told you this example before, but I love it because it helps me. About brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church fighting, you know, about things and the Church and issues and stuff. G.K. Chesterton was a first-rate mind, a British convert to the Roman Catholic Church. And then he came to love the Church, wrote great books - but in one of the books he uses the example, and he studied Church history, everything he could get his hands on - he said, the Catholic Church is like a chariot (remember Ben Hur? The chariot race?), except this particular chariot, in Chesterton's example, is that one charioteer, he's coming down this cliff, and on his left is the side of the cliff with the jagged jutting rocks, sharp jutting rocks on this side. And on his right is a sheer drop, a precipitous drop, thousands of feet below; and the charioteer has to keep his chariot like this, and for the two thousand years that the Catholic Church has been (and Chesterton is like a lot of Protestants who became Catholic and said, "how did the Catholic Church do it?"), some people have been yelling, and still do, "Get over! Get over to the left! How are you going to get the young around? Get over to the left!" And others will shout, "No, stay on the right, you'll lose the loyal ones!" And the poor charioteer manages to keep the chariot going for two thousand years because the charioteer is Christ - and his brothers and sisters are yelling at him for two thousand years, in the back. But they're in the chariot - they're still in the chariot ("right!" "left!").

And the third and last is "connecting" - with Jesus Christ. This isn't group therapy or socioeconomic relationships. Jesus Christ, Man and God - that's why we're here. Connecting with him. And I looked up the Greek - you know, parsing the Greek verb which scholarly books do, and our Lord says, "where two or three gather in my name, I am there in the midst." The Greek - it means, "I'm right there in the middle of them!" It's very powerful - "I'm right there!" Not, his wonderful, ethical teaching - He! Is here! He's probably saying, "I wish he'd shut up and get on with the Mass!"

Now prayer can be private or public. You've known that since you were children.

Prayer can be private or public. Private prayer can be anywhere. Anywhere! There's a lady in Berkeley I've known since 1963; she still says she does her best prayer making casseroles. And, this next anecdote is true. There's a group of Jesuit scholars called Bolendisks, And they examine all the legends about the saints, and they throw out the pious junk, and they keep authentic hagiography (which is, authentic facts about saints). And this is authentic - Theresa of Avila. Sixteenth century. She was trying to clean up the convents in Spain, because the convents had gotten very sloppy and materialistic. The nuns were having jewelry and cocktails, and Theresa of Avila came in and tried to make convents sources of help to the poor and so forth - real nuns, real sisters. And she was in her late 50s, Theresa of Avila; she wasn't a kid and she was tired. In this new convent she'd set up, there was a list of chores for the sisters to do during the day. And she was looking for one sister who had a chore and she couldn't find the nun, and she finally located this young nun - you know, young religious are so ardent and zealous, a little wacky (sometimes). The young nun was in the chapel by herself, like this, according to the hagiographical sketch (gestures). So Theresa, the mother superior, tapped her and said, "Sister, what are you doing?" And the young, zealous sister said, "Oh I am here in the chapel waiting for Jesus to commune with me!" And Theresa de Avila, said, "Well, I just left the kitchen and He's hollering for you!" (Laughter!) True story!

Private prayer can be anywhere, and public prayer is what we're doing now. Public prayer, all of this spiritual energy - some people depressed, some people happy, some people whose faith is shaky, some people whose faith has been tested by terrible suffering; but, we're all together with Christ. And one of the things we do together (and this is embarrassing, but at my age you tell the truth), one of the things we do together is we sing together. And we start off, you know, the priest and the other helpers come down the main aisle, and the lyrics are on the screens. Well, I got here three years ago. And if I look up at the lyrics before we start down and I think, "'oh those lyrics are a little too high-falutin' for me, or they're too deep,' let me make it relevant. Let me pray from the viscera. So for three years I've been praying my own lyrics walking down the procession. (Singing,) "Dear Lord, protect my brother's business; let it prosper." Today, when I'm here all day long, I pray about my dog. "Saint Francis of Assisi, watch over my Irish Terrier." Now some of you are sitting in shocked silence; I don't blame you! But a couple of Sundays ago, it finally clicked! You know, some of us in the religious life, some things are all up here - it's cerebral! It's intellectual - "I have my PhD in mystical theology!" But it's cerebral, it's here and it's got to get from here to here (gestures). That's why our Lord was such a great teacher, because He always reached from here to here. A couple of weeks ago, it finally got here, from what we laughingly call my intelligence because I was walking down the aisle and the priest next to me was singing, good and loud, the lyrics, and I thought, "That's what I should be doing! Praying with all the other Catholic believers at this church!" 42 years as a priest, to get from here, to here. OK.

Now, to end up, you remember (of course you remember), the horror of September a year ago. And do you remember that Sunday afterwards? This place was packed, it was standing-room only. It was great; it was wonderful. And all throughout the United States, I read in the Times that Catholic churches were jammed, which was great. And there was a commentator about the disaster, and the tragedy on TV. One of those commentators who drops his voice to a lugubrious melancholy, which sounds so bogus to me, so artificial. But what he said was good, I wrote it down. He said, "Last September, we recognized our commonality as human beings." That's good. That's what we do. But we go so much deeper when we come to Mass. So much deeper than our commonality as human beings. Our community is believing Catholics - fighting a lot, but believing, believing in Jesus Christ. Anyhow, I've got to call Gooch tonight, that priest in New York? And go through 37 seconds of I don't know what. And so loud; but at the end of it, he won't be in, but what he says, "Hello, how are we getting along?" I'm determined to answer, "How are we getting along? By correcting one another with love, by collecting one another for private and public prayer, and communicating with Jesus Christ as a family - that's how we're getting along for 2000 years and every Sunday of our lives!"