

Getting There with a Little Help From Our Friends

By Stephen Gabriel

The readings for today's Mass point to the importance of the apostolate in the economy of salvation – that is, Our Lord has done His part in saving mankind through His passion and death on the cross. But, it is God's will that we creatures correspond to the saving grace won for us by our Savior. And He expects us to help each other stay on the path that will lead us to eternal happiness.

In today's Gospel (Mt 18:15-20), Our Lord instructs us to correct our friends and family discreetly when they offend God in some way: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone."

Later, He assures us that when we pray to Him together, He will answer our prayer. "If two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." We are not expected to go it alone. He wants us to rely on and help one another. You might say that God has ordained that the working out of our salvation be a group project.

God made us social beings. We need other people, their company and their love. And they need our love. When we love, we are most human, and we are most divine. This is why God gave us the Ten Commandments, which can be summed up as a single command to love. Indeed, in our second reading (Rom 13:8-10), St. Paul reiterates the teaching of Our Lord when he says, "The commandments...are summed up in this saying, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law."

Our vocation to love is a call to action. We must love our family and friends in very concrete ways, which frequently means giving of ourselves. It means going out of our way or taking risks for our friends. But most importantly, it means making our friends' salvation our business.

Imagine gently urging a friend to go to confession for the first time in many years. Even if he were not well-disposed to do so, he would probably be touched by your concern.

But what if he took offense and declared that the state of his soul was none of your business? You could look him in the eye affectionately and say with confidence, "Oh, yes it is!" In the first reading (Ez 33:7-9), Our Lord makes this clear through the prophet Ezekiel when He says, "If I tell the wicked man that he shall surely die, and you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked man from his way, he shall die for his guilt, but I will hold you responsible for his death. But if you warn the wicked man, trying to turn him from his way, and he refuses to turn from his way, he shall die for his guilt, but you shall save yourself." Clearly, God's commandment to love our neighbor demands that we

concern ourselves with the state of his soul. Indeed, we ignore this divine imperative only at our own peril.

We must love our friends enough to help them to get to heaven. But the flip side is also true. How do we respond when a friend gives us a needed correction? This is a time to grow in humility and sincerely thank our friend for bringing a fault to our attention. And if we are truly humble and sincere, we will make an effort to overcome that defect.

Love, as Jesus taught and exemplified, is characterized by sacrifice and service. Let us examine just how we love God and our neighbor. If it does not involve a measure of sacrifice, self-giving, service and risk, it is probably not true love. If we love God, we struggle daily to do His will. If we love our friends and family, we want what is best for them – humanly, but especially spiritually. And beyond merely wanting what is best for our friends, we help them grow closer to God. After all, we do want to be with them in heaven for all eternity.

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