

Insights in Liturgy

Local Church Is Place Of Sin, Too

By MSGR. WILLIAM A. SHANNON

In the two previous articles we drew an idealized picture of the local Church—the place of evangelization and catechesis, the place of service and praise. This is a picture of the local Church at its best. But the local Church is seldom, if ever, at its best. For the local Church is not only the place of God's presence; it is also the place of sin—not just sin as guilt, but sin in the biblical sense of "falling short of the mark," not just sin as failure in doing what we should do, but sin as failure to be what we should be. For this reason the local Church is at once the place of redemption and the place of unredemption. As Christians we are redeemed by Christ, yet we are constantly falling back

into the state of unredemption. That is why in the local Church we must deal with the reality of sin—sin in ourselves and sin on others.

It is difficult to deal with sin in ourselves; still more difficult to deal with sin on others. For the first at least we know what we must do, even though we may not always do it; but for the second we often do not know what to do. How do we deal with sin on others? That we have a responsibility to do so is something that Jesus insists on; He tells us that we must practice fraternal correction. Yet often we shy away from this responsibility. We tend to reserve correction for children, feeling that adults have formed their own consciences and that their responsibility is to God and not to us. Yet we are all affected by one another's sins. St. Paul tells us that if one member of the Body suffers, all suffer; if one member of the Body is glorified, all are glorified.

Must we not add that if one member of the Body sins, all share in that sin and in the responsibility to undo it?

We cannot slough off the duty of fraternal correction with Cain's cynical question: "Am I my brother's keeper?" As a community we are our brother's keeper—and our sister's too. As a community we must help one another to form mature consciences. We have to be prophets for and to one another. The chief task of the biblical prophets was to speak for God and call His people to return to Him. We must be prophets to one another—calling one another from our

selfishness, our bigotry, our greed, our arrogance. Sometimes parents will be prophets to their children; and there may be times when the roles will be reversed and the parents will hear a prophetic word spoken to them by their children. A pastor must be a prophet to his people, but he must also be ready to listen when his people speak a prophetic message to him.

Because the local Church is the place of sin, as well as grace, prophetic voices must be heard and listened to in the Church. Because the local Church is the place of sin, it must also become the place of forgiving love and fraternal correction.

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