

HAVE WE GOT EACH OTHER'S BACK?

As a major seminarian at Bigard Memory Seminary Enugu, under the Congregation of Christ the Emmanuel (Emmanuelites), there was a group of seminarians I was positively jealous of and admired. I was jealous of and admired this group of seminarians because they were exceptional in learning and behaviour. Everyone in the seminary was in awe of them; they headed various key positions in the seminary, and they were equally the brightest ones in class. They were so exceptional that none of them misbehaved publicly nor was caught flaunting the rules of the seminary. This group of seminarians were none other than Awka Diocesan Seminarians. As an outsider, I often wondered the secret behind their exceptionalism; that secret was revealed to me when I joined them after the expiration of my First Profession of Religious Vows. The crux of that secret is – **FRATERNAL CORRECTION**. The Awka Diocesan Seminarians were grouped in their respective classes with a *Primus inter pares* at the head. Among the duties of the primus was to keep a close watch over his classmates from Awka Diocese and to act as the bridge-builder between his classmates and the overall Primus of the Diocese who was the Head Boy of the diocese. Should any of the seminarians start slacking in anyway, it was the primus who received the complaint first and he was the one who approached the seminarian and discussed the situation to find a solution. If the primus was unable to handle the problem personally, he sought the help from the overall primus before the situation could get out of hand. If they could not resolve the problem themselves, they would involve a priest of the diocese who might help internally; the problem was only brought to the attention of the authorities in the seminary and in the diocese if the situation could not be remedied. Fraternal Correction was so interwoven in the DNA of Awka Diocesan Seminarians of that era that it was accepted with gratitude, implemented with certitude and harmony restored quamprimum. Yes, everybody had each other's back because the onus laid on everyone to uphold the Diocesan Corporate Image of Excellence in Learning and Behaviour; this is exactly what the readings of today are asking us to do to change the world and the Church.

In today's First Reading from Ezekiel Chapter 33, God asked Prophet Ezekiel to be the sentry/sentinel/watchman/guardsman, to the House of Israel. The Old Testament Sentries were schooled in alertness that nothing and nobody could take them unawares; they never let their guards down. As a sentry, Prophet Ezekiel was given the task of keeping attentive watch over the people and pointing out their faults to them to enable change and healing. In speaking truth to power, Prophet Ezekiel was not concerned about his own welfare but the welfare of the individuals and harmony within the community. This was exactly what Christ advised His disciples to do in today's Gospel pericope from Matthew Chapter 18. Christ knew there would be wrongdoings within the community He was forming, and He gave them the appropriate recipes for settling them – **Fraternal and Sororal Correction**. Although today Gospel uses the phrase "Go and have it out with him alone", the Greek version uses a stronger and harsher phrase – *Hypage Elencho auton, metaxy sou kai autou monon*. The major word here is *Elencho* which means – To expose, Rebuke, Refute, Convince and Convict. Christ is not in any way asking us to hide our frustrations regarding the wrongdoing of our brethren

nor sugarcoat things with them, not at all; Christ wants us to expose the wrongs of our fellows and rebuke them. However, we must do so *Monon – Alone and Simply (In the Internal Forum)*. Yes, although we might be raging against the hurts others might have inflicted on us, as followers of Christ, we must be able to rise above their emotional baggage and address the issue/s with the offender alone and simply. We expose and rebuke the wrongdoings of our fellows out of love for them and the continuous harmony of the community and nothing more. This was what St Paul admonishes us to do in today's Second Reading from his letter to the Romans Chapter 18 – **Avoid getting into debt, except the debt of mutual love. Yes, Genuine Love is the one thing that cannot hurt our neighbour and why it is the answer to all the commandments.**

My friends, when was the last time you and I accepted or offered gentle corrections without making a fuss? When was the last time we accepted corrections as one of the ways we continue to develop ourselves? When was the last time we corrected others simply without crushing their egos and undermining them? We now live in a social media era where every little thing is addressed on Instagram, Facebook and/or TikTok Live. It is alarming and deeply worrying too, how siblings, close friends, married couples, business partners and classmates, use the social media platforms as the major route for addressing personal issues and conflicts. We even have Catholic priests, Bishops, and Cardinals, who openly berate Pope Francis without first and foremost taking up those matters with him alone and simply. We do not seem to have secrets anymore and that is hugely troubling and nauseating. My dad always warned my siblings and I never to wash our dirty linens in public; my dad insisted that we must always revert to the family and close relations in settling troubling issues that are not legal matters. As Christians, we are called to have each other's back gently and calmly. Nobody is perfect and no man/woman is an Island; we need each other to grow and be better in life. What we cannot and should not do, is to inflict hurts on others through our words and actions because we are hurting ourselves. It is a truism that two wrongs can never make a right.

Like Awka Diocesan Seminarians of my time, let us look out for each other, be each other's keeper and have of each other's back in mutual love and harmonious co-existence.

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