

Christian Love Requires Commitment

After graduation from university, I was assigned as a resident engineer on a construction project in a small town in Northern Ontario. Another young fellow, I'll call him Bill, came from North Bay to help me.

One day at lunch time, Bill went to the bank and, while he was there, he decided to ask one of the tellers to go to a movie. When Bill returned to the construction site, one of the townspeople who worked on site asked him about his upcoming date. Bill was amazed that, in the half-hour that it took him to return from the bank, the news of his date had spread from person to person in town and returned to him. All he could say was: 'I wish people would mind their own business!'

In the First Reading for this Sunday (Ez. 33: 7-9), God gives Ezekiel the following words of warning that he is to pass on to the people of Israel: 'If I say to the wicked, 'O wicked one, you shall surely die', and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked person shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked person to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, they shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.'

God tells Ezekiel to make it clear to the Israelites that they are not to ignore the sinner. They must intervene and warn the sinner to repent of his/her evil ways. Through Ezekiel, God warns the Israelites that, if they choose not to warn the sinner, not only will the sinner be damned but so will they because of their inaction. The sinner would be guilty of a sin of commission and the person who neglected to admonish him would be guilty of a sin of omission.

In the Gospel (Matt. 18: 15-20), the same message is reinforced. Jesus tells His disciples that they are not meant to stand idly by and 'mind their own business' when someone in the community sins and is going down the wrong path. First, they are to point out the sin to the person in private, but, if the person does not repent, they are to confront the person with two or three witnesses present. If that is not enough to turn the person from their sinning ways, they are to report the person to the Church.

Jesus tells His followers that they must do everything they can to bring a sinner to repentance. They are not to ignore the sinner because, not only will the sin destroy the sinner but also the sin will harm the whole community.

Jesus said that one of the greatest commandments was to love your neighbour as yourself. It is an act of Christian love to intervene in a person's life to warn them of the potential grave consequences of their life choices. Being a Christian does not mean always being a 'nice guy' and not rocking the boat. Sometimes, we need to avoid the sin of omission.

Perhaps, in matters of gossip, it is better to mind our own business and to not get involved in someone else's affairs. But, in matters of importance where a person's heavenly inheritance hangs in the balance, the Scriptures are clear. We must intervene to bring the sinner back from the precipice and to not allow him/her to fall into the pit. Our own lives depend on it.