
Mutual Correction

BY DARIN H. DAVIS

One of the most important, difficult, and neglected obligations we owe to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ is mutual correction, which is the practice of giving and accepting counsel, admonishment, and rebuke as a form of spiritual rescue.

A student of mine came to see me recently to talk about friendship. He began by asking questions about the writings of Aristotle and Aquinas that we were reading in class, but soon he was asking questions about friendship in his own life.

He described a close friend who is abusing alcohol. The friend's academic work was beginning to suffer, and his relationships with family and friends were beginning to fray. My student was greatly concerned about his friend's drinking. "I am worried something terrible may happen," he told me. "I know I need to do something, but I am worried that if I say or do the wrong thing, my friend will turn against me, and then what?"

And then my student said, "People always talk about friends encouraging one another, but we don't talk much about correcting each other's ways. It seems like Christians hardly ever talk about that."

We all want encouragement from those around us, especially those who are close to us. We want a genuine pat on the back, a sincere word of exhortation, some sign that someone truly believes in us and wants us to do and be well. Indeed, encouragement is not simply something we want; it seems entirely necessary if we are to live and do well. No one is immune from times of trial and difficulty, and no one bears such hard times well on his own. Paul had Barnabas, and we, too, need people who inspire us, especially in hard times.

But in the context of friendship, family, and congregational life, we need a richer and more expansive understanding of encouragement. If we are actually trying to “put courage in” one another – or perhaps better understood, trying to open one another to God’s redemptive grace – then we have to realize that encouragement includes mutual correction. This is one of the most important, difficult, and (as my student had recognized) neglected obligations we owe to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. By mutual correction I mean the practice of giving and accepting counsel, admonishment, and rebuke as a form of spiritual rescue. For Christians called to bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), mutual correction is a profound expression of charity: it is a way of loving others, who, like us, are prone to missteps along the path that God sets before us. Mutual correction helps us return to the “the narrow way.”



Even the bare mention of mutual correction makes us nervous. Some of us immediately cue in our memories the smug “Church Lady” character named “Enid Strict” from distant episodes of Saturday Night Live. We worry that only snoopers and moral busybodies care about moral correction, and that there is nothing “mutual” in the way they practice it. Moreover, mutual correction seems to run headlong into the view that Christians at all costs must never be “judgmental.” But the Church Lady, though she made us laugh, is not the best model of moral and spiritual encouragement we can find. And the view that Christians ought not be judgmental is confused, self-refuting, and flies in the face of both Scripture and the historical teaching of the Church.

Yet there are good reasons for concern about how we are to offer mutual correction. It is complicated business, which if badly handled, can alienate those we care about the most – all in the name of trying to do something good for them. Feelings are likely to get hurt, sometimes irrevocably so. We fret about when and how to say what needs to be said.

And receiving mutual correction is rarely pleasant. We naturally recoil when told we are mistaken or doing something wrong. Having someone call our attention to our sinful, disordered self – that we are acting in ways incongruent with God’s design and calling – will likely injure our pride, shock us, or anger us greatly. It is not the kind of message we happily receive.

Despite all of this, however, we must remember that we are called to help each other in times of moral distress. If our pursuit of faithfulness really is the most important thing – and if we see someone in dire straits, with their spiritual good in jeopardy – what good reason can there be for looking the other way? Likewise, we are called to receive mutual correction as well, no matter how painful it seems. While no one is perfect, this fact alone does

not release us from striving to be faithful. And since striving to be faithful is the work of the Church, so must mutual correction be a practice of the Church. If we rarely speak of it, let alone know how to carry it out well, the Church's spiritual wellbeing is seriously undermined.



So how can mutual correction be practiced in a way that is truthful, restorative, and truly encouraging?

First and foremost, mutual correction needs to be offered and received among friends. There are at least two reasons this is so. To begin, it is doubtful that we will receive well and embrace moral counsel or rebuke from persons we only casually know. Our first and legitimate reaction would likely be: what business is this of yours? Even when it is well-intended, such blind moral correction easily can make matters much worse. That is why we have no obligation to admonish everyone whom we suspect is in some state of moral disorder. We are called first to offer correction to those closest to us, for it is our duty to attend to their good in a special way. Only as the opportunity arises (and surely such cases will be rare indeed) should we be concerned with correcting those distantly related to us. We cannot go about trying to right the ways of the whole world.

But there is a second reason that mutual correction needs to be practiced among friends. Mutual

correction requires a deep knowledge of one another's character, history, hopes, desires, fears, and struggles. This kind of understanding can only be among friends who truly know one another, who, as Aristotle phrased it, have "tasted the salt together."¹ No mere loose association with one another in so-called community can ground something as important as being able to look a friend in the eye and say: "I care

about you enough to tell you that I am worried about you." Without truly knowing one another, we have no idea how even to approach one another, let alone how to receive counsel or rebuke.

I think it is fair to conclude that unless mutual correction is offered and received among friends, we have little idea of how our moral and spiritual good might be restored.

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But if friendship is the right home for mutual correction, what is required for its faithful practice? One way to answer this question is to envision the virtues that might sustain it. Four virtues deserve special attention: charity, humility, prudence, and courage.

When mutual correction is appropriately motivated, it arises from charity. We are called to help our friends in their time of spiritual peril because we love them, we love God, and we see their moral distress as something that thwarts their true happiness. The elimination of sin is a way of helping our friends live according to what God intends for their life; when we help them to see their present condition correctly, we remove an obstacle to their true happiness. When viewed as an act of love, offering and receiving correction can be clearly seen as fuller expressions of the encouragement we are called to give others. In other words, encouragement may mean saying to our friend not only “I believe in you,” but also “Because I love you, I have to tell you that I think you are mistaken.” Because we love our friends, we want to do all we can to help them. And because we realize that our friends love us, we must receive their correction with the same spirit it is offered.

It is helpful here to imagine cases in which love is not the root of mutual correction. I might, for instance, point out my friend’s moral failings from self-serving motives, perhaps as a way to exercise my power by exposing her mistakes. In this way, if I can catch my friend in a mistake, then I will be able to use that fact against her when it is to my advantage. This is sheer manipulation, hardly the mark of a friendship. Or perhaps I am only too ready to point out the moral shortcomings of my friend because it shifts the attention towards her and covers my own, perhaps more glaring, moral weakness. Even as I seek to expose my friend’s sins, I know that my own moral character is disordered, but I am only too eager to shift attention away from me and to my friend. But this is blinding self-deception.

Mutual correction also requires humility because it helps us be clear sighted about our own sin before we attempt to correct someone else. This has nothing to do with being in some kind of morally superior and justifiable position to offer correction to someone else. It has everything to do with the recognition that we cannot focus on our friend’s trouble until we first truthfully acknowledge and confront our own sinfulness.

The virtue of humility properly orients our entire moral life. Humility is not false modesty or self-abasement, but rather a deep self-understanding and refusal to base our self-judgment on a winning comparison with others. Of course, in some ways we are different from others; we have comparative strengths and weaknesses. But humble people are neither puffed up by their superiority to other persons, in this or that particular respect, nor spiritually deflated by their inferiority to them, in this or that respect. Humble people—perhaps because they know that they and others are equally creatures of a

loving God—realize their true value does not depend on being better than others. In this sense, Bob Roberts explains, “humility is a psychological principle of independence from others and a necessary ground of genuine fellowship with them, an emotional independence of one’s judgments concerning how one ranks vis-à-vis other human beings.”² This freedom from comparisons allows us to act from an honest self-assessment.

The importance of humility for moral correction should be obvious. When we recognize our place in the created order involves deep equality with other human beings, and we understand how our own striving for God is compromised by sin, then we are likely to have a richer appreciation of the fragility of our own moral character and clearer awareness of the nature of our friend’s trouble.

Without humility, we will find ourselves useless to offer any form of spiritual rescue to another. On this very point we do well to recognize that Jesus’s teaching about not judging others in Matthew 7:1-5 is not a prohibition of moral correction, but a call to moral self-awareness. Jesus teaches that any attempt to right another’s path presupposes that we ourselves have “removed the plank” from our own eyes. Recognizing the sin of our friend and how he might be helped first requires an extraordinary degree of self-knowledge about the condition of our own moral lives; humility helps bring about this clarity of vision. Humility also counters the vice of arrogance. If we are to look first to our own sin and orient ourselves properly to God, we are unlikely to become moral busybodies, constantly at watch for others’ moral missteps, incessantly meddling in others’ lives all the while unable to see the true state of our own moral character.

Next, because mutual correction can be so difficult and complicated, those who offer it must be led by prudence—the wise discernment that enables us to judge well in individual cases about what is to be done. There will always be a question about the manner in which such moral counsel and rebuke

correction should be offered. Without careful discernment, one is likely to bungle the attempt to offer even the most soft-spoken advice to a friend. It is not difficult to imagine examples when a failure of prudence spoils efforts that are otherwise well intended.

Perhaps I think a friend is spending too much time with someone whom I know is trying hard to corrupt him, and that he has already, in the company

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of this new friend, acted badly and seriously out of character. I want to tell my friend that I worry about him, that the person he is hanging out with, it seems to me, is seriously compromising his character. Sound as my counsel may be, and though it is motivated by charity, it has little chance of the intended effect if I offer it in a way that will embarrass or humiliate my friend. Indeed, prudence may dictate that in certain circumstances, I should not seek to correct my friend; I may well need to let silence speak. In particular, there may be instances in which admonishment might well lead the person being corrected to reject and resent all moral counsel. The risk is not simply that my friend may recoil from my efforts to rebuke him, but that he comes to detest goodness itself.

When Aquinas explains the role of prudence in moral correction, he turns to the step-by-step approach that Jesus teaches in Matthew 18:15-17. Because sin threatens both a person's conscience and his reputation, the first step of moral correction is to appeal to a friend's conscience. Accordingly, we should attempt to correct our friend in private before we involve others. If our friend does not respond to this confidential effort, it is advisable to involve a few others – preferably, other mutual friends – to help call his attention to the sin. Last, and only when all else has failed, such correction should be made in public. This last tactic is the riskiest option of the three, given the danger of alienating our friend so that he ends up turning away not just from our friendship, but from virtue altogether. In all of these steps, Aquinas counsels, “You need to preserve proper distinctions, observing appropriate times, places, and other circumstances, and do everything that you see to be helpful for reforming your brother....”³ Prudence, therefore, is decisive: charity must be rightly directed towards the aim of helping our friend avoid sin and pursue goodness.

But even if charity, humility, and prudence animate mutual correction, still we must acknowledge just how hard it is simply to give voice to our concerns about a wayward friend. We may remain silent, painfully aware that something needs to be said or done. This was at the heart of my student's fear that “I know I need to do something, but I'm worried that if I say or do the wrong thing, my friend will turn against me, and then what?”

Courage, therefore, seems especially important to overcome the reluctance that may accompany mutual correction, for it allows us to follow reason by removing the obstacles that prevent us from doing what is required. Though courage is often understood as the virtue that combats physical fear in the face of dangers – the greatest of these being death – it applies to all manner of “difficult things,” including instances of weakness, moments of indecision, temptation, and perplexity that pervade the moral life.⁴ Seen this way, courage is the quintessential virtue for sustaining the Christian moral life's quest for true happiness. Without courage, the charity that rightly motivates our care and concern for a wayward friend may remain hidden, unexpressed. With courage, we can find the voice to speak up, even when it is difficult.

The story of Johnny Cash and June Carter, so brilliantly told in the film *Walk the Line*, is a powerful tale of friendship that offers a captivating example of just this kind of courage strengthening an effort of moral correction. Near the nadir of Johnny Cash's alcohol and drug abuse – when his prolific career was on hold and he was wandering aimlessly through his life – he goes to a bank, hoping to cash a crumpled \$24,000 check for the money that he needs to pay the telephone company bill and get his car out of the shop. The bank refuses to cash his check, and in disgust, he tears up the check in front of the bank teller and then sets out on a “love walk” to see June Carter. With chemicals coursing through his veins, he walks for miles to see the woman he says he loves. Carter's career, tied so closely to Cash's success, is on hold because of his addiction. She is living with her parents, and her young children are with her. Cash has come to ask her to marry him. Carter comes out of the house and immediately sizes him up from head to toe. Sobered up somewhat from his walk, Cash's thinking is no clearer than it has been for months. He is adrift, yet he wants her to be his wife.

June Carter could have responded to Johnny Cash in a number of ways. She could have, quite reasonably, gone back inside the house with her children and shut the door and tried to ignore him. She could have, on the other hand, showered him with false encouragement, perhaps reassuring him that everything would be fine, that the tough times in his life would soon be over. She has good reason not to confront him: she and her children are financially dependent on him, and though he is a drug addict and alcoholic, he is still the famous Johnny Cash.

Her response to him is an example of how courage conquers the difficult things; indeed, June Carter's courage has to be enough for both of them. She looks him squarely in the eyes and asks him, “Where is my friend John? Did he get high? Is he incognito? Is he gone? ‘Cause I don't like this guy Cash.”⁵ She calls him to a higher aspiration, a recovery

of something he has perhaps forgotten or never realized. Indeed, in the context of the Christian faith they share, she is calling him to see what God truly intends him to be, to turn away from what has now taken hold of his life.

June Carter is willing to do the hard work of friendship, even in a circumstance that involves great risk. Johnny Cash could have responded quite negatively to her forthright admonishment. He could have become

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angry, perhaps violently so. He could have shunned both her and her rebuke, and eventually turned away from the good altogether. Certainly June Carter recognized the risks involved; perhaps she was afraid, though her forthright manner belies fear. Nonetheless, she showed courage that made possible this profound expression of love for Johnny Cash. In this instance, she showed him just how much she loved him and was committed to his good.

Later in the film, as Johnny Cash begins to recover from his substance abuse, he looks tenderly at June Carter and tells her that she must be an angel. She shakes her head and says simply: "I had a friend who needed help. You're my friend."⁶

Such friendship is a profound expression of real encouragement, for it opens us to God's love, which restores all of us, no matter how far we have strayed from his path.

NOTES

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII.3.

² Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 83.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Question On Brotherly Correction*, a 2, in *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, translated by E. M. Atkins (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 211.

⁴ See Aquinas's discussion in *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q 123, a 3.

⁵ *Walk the Line*, directed by James Mangold (20th Century Fox, 2005).

⁶ *Ibid.*



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