Genuine social order is grounded in mutual respect and concern more than in the enforcement of laws or regulations. However, what role does mutual respect play when there is a rupture in the social fabric? The readings for today’s liturgy address this issue.

The first reading and the gospel passage address the issue of ‘fraternal correction,’ a concept that troubles many people because of its gender-specific identification, and one that has lost credibility because of the individualistic character of Western society. Our society tells us to ‘Mind our own business!’ But, when we suffer from the errors of others, we are quick to demand retribution or punishment; seldom does ‘fraternal or communitarian correction’ come to mind. However, if we genuinely respect and value the erring person, we will be more concerned with aiding a change in them than with their punishment.

We have much to learn in this regard from those loving circles of friends and families that execute an addiction intervention and from individuals or groups who work to rehabilitate gang members. They are responding positively to Pope Francis’ admonition to those of us in ministry to go out to those who seem lost and not wait for them to come to us.

If we look carefully at these readings, we will see that in each case the erring person is a member of the community. We know that the misdeeds of an individual member can disrupt the harmony of the entire community, so it is a community concern as well. Since this is a community issue, not merely a problem for the individual ‘communitarian correction’ can benefit both the individual and the group.

How are we to go about such ‘communitarian correction?’ Before we consider steps in any process, we should look at the dispositions of our hearts. Today’s reading from Paul sets the direction. There he insists that love fulfills the law. Paul does not tell us to obey the law; he tells us to love one another. In fact, he says that love is the only thing that we should owe each other. In other words, we owe the erring person love, respect, valuing. Only when love is the disposition of our hearts should we venture into ‘communitarian correction,’ whatever process of correction we employ.

These are very hard readings because they remind us that we are somehow responsible for each other. As children of God, we must help each other when we fail, and we must do this with respect. We as a community don’t seem to be very good at this. We prefer to leave correction to ‘the authorities,’ who are not always good at it either. But we cannot allow our sisters and brothers to be lost to us. So we must learn to do something.
Unfortunately, there are times when the erring person is not ready for our intervention. Our good will might be met with anger and resentment. We might be tempted to respond with exasperation and reprisal; but we cannot. We must stand firm, but with an open, gentle heart, and we must wait as long as this might take. Genuine love expects this of us.

Dianne Bergant, CSA
Carroll Stuhlmueller, CP Distinguished Professor Emerita of Old Testament Studies