This week’s pastoral letter is about criticism. Let me begin by expressing my deep and profound understanding for those who were raised in a home where criticism and ridicule were the norm. Therefore, many of those people are predisposed to being critical themselves. Many of us were raised in households where the standards and expectations were very high. Some of us had parents who were either well educated or had influential positions in the community as it related to their jobs. I also believe that there is a natural inclination to find fault in others before looking in the mirror. Perhaps this is just human nature, but I’m a firm believer that Christ came not only to correct but to affirm, encourage, support and uphold others. As Christians is it not our responsibility to follow his example?

Once upon a time a young boy observed his father scrutinizing the work of a taxidermist. The father stated, “That owl is not stuffed right. Its head is not on right. The body is not poised right. The feathers are not mixed right. Even I could have stuffed that owl better than the taxidermist.” Just then the owl moved. The man had criticized a living owl. His son just shook his head, but it was the beginning of doubts about his dad.

Judge Harold Medina once said, “Criticizing others is a dangerous thing, not so much because you may make mistakes about them, but because you may be revealing the truth about yourself.” I must admit that it takes significant effort to try to see the very best in others. Especially when they have already gone out of their way to show significant evidence that they have a critical spirit. That is to say that they find fault in everyone around them but seldom look in the mirror.

An unknown author once said, “Don’t mind criticism. If it’s untrue, disregard it. If it’s unfair, keep from irritation. If it is ignorant, smile. If it’s justified, learn from it.” Well, it’s probably fair to tell you that I keep a private daily journal. Within those pages, I reflect on the criticisms that are often whispered or shouted. I find it safer to journal my irritations. I find it wise to smile and even make a joke about criticisms but most of all I reflect and journal to try to learn from the critique. How do you handle criticism? How does it affect your temperament? How does it make you feel? Is there a safe place for you to reflect, refocus, re-energize and re-engage?

Have you ever heard of a gentleman by the name of Colonel George Washington Goethals? This is the gentleman who was the engineer responsible for leading the team to build the Panama Canal. He was criticized by many people about every detail in the building of the canal. The most unpleasant rumours were related to the accusation that he would never complete the task. Someone once asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer to your critics?” He smiled, then he said, “Yes, with a completed canal.”

There is wonderful story about a husband and wife. The husband once stated, “You’re a little different.” His wife responded, “You’re a lot different.” How human it is for us to see the faults of others and be unaware of our own. In the Bible (Matthew 7:3), it says, “Why do see the speck in your neighbours eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, let me take the speck out of your eye while the log is in your own eye?” … Again, some self-examination might be appropriate.

Two parents were faithful members of their local church. They took their children to church every Sunday. The parents were both active in teaching Sunday school, Parish Council and a series of committees. These were faithful and dedicated parents. But, every Sunday afternoon during their lunch with the children, they were intensely critical of the Pastor and church leadership. Eventually the children became teenagers. They developed disrespect for the Pastor and the leadership. They stopped going to church. They got in trouble. The parents said to one another, “Whatever could have happened? Whatever went wrong? Whatever happened to our children that they no longer go to church?” Interesting questions!

Let me summarize in this way. We all have doubts, fears, anxieties and uncertainties. All these things we need to take to Christ in prayer. But most of all we need to take our criticisms of others to the foot of the cross and leave them there.

Blessings

Fr Stephen