

**Works of Mercy
and
Education of the Young**

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New Delhi

2016

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page No.
Presentation	1
Maria Arokiam Kanaga	
Introduction	7
Sahayadas Fernando & Jesu Pudumai Doss	
CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY	
1. To Feed the Hungry	25
<i>Casimir Raj Motcham</i>	
2. To Give Drink to the Thirsty	39
<i>Sahayadas Fernando</i>	
3. To Clothe the Naked	57
<i>Adaikalaraj John</i>	
4. To Welcome the Stranger	67
<i>Maria Charles Antonysamy</i>	
5. To Heal the Sick	85
<i>Rajkumar Mervyn</i>	
6. To Visit the Imprisoned	95
<i>Amala Jeya Rayan</i>	
7. To Bury the Dead	109
<i>Clement Antony</i>	
SPIRITUAL WORKS OF MERCY	
8. To Counsel the Doubtful	127
<i>Antony Christy</i>	
9. To Instruct the Ignorant	139
<i>Siluvai A. Muthu</i>	
10. To Admonish Sinners	153
<i>Sahaya G. Selvam</i>	
11. To Comfort the Afflicted	169
<i>Joseph Jeyaraj</i>	
12. To Forgive Offences	183
<i>Pathiaraj Rayappan</i>	
13. To Bear Wrongs Patiently	195
<i>Jesu Pudumai Doss</i>	
14. To Pray for the Living and the Dead	217
<i>Sitrarasu Kanickaraj</i>	
Contributors	233

10. To Admonish Sinners

Dr. Sahaya G. Selvam

*“If your brother does something wrong,
go and have it out with him alone,
between your two selves” (Mt 18:15).*

1. Introduction

One of the contemporary developments in the understanding of the human person is “individuality.” Among other aspects, individuality basically consists in the acknowledgement of individual differences. This is a positive development that protects the existentiality of the individual from being lost in the collective social identity. The rhetoric of human rights and affirmative action, which flows from individuality, is an appropriate development that protects the dignity of the individual human person. This, however, has some implications for human morality. The norm of morality has shifted largely from socially established norms to individual-interpretative criteria. This includes also the preferred option for individual conscience in making moral judgement and choice. In itself this may not be a problem. In fact, in urban societies where people are generally anonymous, morality cannot be maintained anymore by means of social control, by means of taboos and sanctions. However, when individuality is exaggerated it takes on the form of individualism. It begins to deny the inherent social nature of the human person. This leads to a problem in understanding morality; it breeds moral relativism.

Pope Benedict XVI referred to this current situation as the “dictatorship of moral relativism” (Benedict XVI, 2010). Moral relativism has a reciprocal relationship with relativism in faith. In his homily to the College of Cardinals at the Opening Mass of the Conclave of 2005, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger said:

Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labelled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be ‘tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine’, seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.

In this context, what does “admonition of sinners” – a spiritual Work of Mercy – mean? What criteria could we use in our judgement of sin, and how do we admonish the sinner using common criteria? This article attempts to answer these questions. In discussing these issues, within the scope of this book, the focus will be the education of youth to the admonition of sinners as a spiritual Work of Mercy. There are three initial sections: the first of which attempts at a definition of sin drawing insight from Ignatian spirituality. Based on this definition, the following section explores the meaning of admonition of sinners. This second section relies much on the Biblical meaning of the spiritual act of mercy. In the third section, we go on to discuss the challenge of practising admonition of sinners, given our initial remarks about relativism and our definition of sin itself. Every section of this chapter is useful for the formation of youth, however, the last section, namely the fourth, will point out some specific themes which could provide a framework for the education of youth. We begin with a definition of sin.

2. What is Sin? An Insight from Ignatian Spirituality

When we take up seriously the spiritual Work of Mercy of admonishing the sinner, we realise that this is a heavy task. The difficulty in practising this Work of Mercy begins with having to tackle two baffling questions: what is sin, after all? And, how do we know that someone is a sinner?

The explanation of sin offered here below is informed by spirituality rather than philosophical ethics or moral theology.

We base ourselves on the purpose of human life as proposed by St Ignatius of Loyola, and delineate sin as an orientation (that includes intentions and actions) which thwarts this purpose. Here is a contemporary translation of what St Ignatius calls, “Principle and Foundation” of human existence (Saint Ignatius and David Fleming, 1978):

The goal of our life is to live with God forever. God, who loves us, gave us life. Our own response of love allows God’s life to flow into us without limit. All the things in this world are gifts of God, presented to us so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more readily. As a result, we appreciate and use all these gifts of God insofar as they help us develop as loving persons. But if any of these gifts become the centre of our lives, they displace God and so hinder our growth toward our goal.

In everyday life, then, we must hold ourselves in balance before all of these created gifts insofar as we have a choice and are not bound by some obligation. We should not fix our desires on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or short one. For everything has the potential of calling forth in us a deeper response to our life in God.

Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God’s deepening his life in me.

Not surprisingly, these very sentiments are captured in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (One can recognise here the input of St Ignatius through the Jesuits who contributed to the early versions of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*). Here is a quote from the current *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (which summarises CCC 27-30; 44-45) in answering the question of “Why does man have a desire for God?”

God himself, in creating man in his own image, has written upon his heart the desire to see him. Even if this desire is often ignored,

God never ceases to draw man to himself because *only in God will he find and live the fullness of truth and happiness for which he never stops searching*. By nature and by vocation, therefore, man is a religious being, capable of entering into communion with God. This intimate and vital bond with God confers on man his fundamental dignity (*italics mine*).

How do these bulky quotations answer the question that we set out to answer: what is sin? We attempt to answer this question in a syllogistic manner, even though the premises of our discussion here are drawn from our Christian faith and not from philosophical reasoning. The first premise is that God has created us in His own image (*Gen 1:27*). Whether we are male or female, black or white, tall or short, at the core of our self we are in the image of God. We resemble God. There is something of God within us. We could call this image of God within us, spirit or soul. This spiritual dimension in the human being accounts for the need for transcendence: we want to go beyond. Constantly we want to go beyond our body; we want to go beyond the here and now. We want to transcend.

The second premise is that God has deigned that the need to go beyond can be fulfilled only in being one with God. God who created me in his own image also put the thirst/desire within me to seek him. And the need in me to go beyond is the expression of that desire. The source of that desire is the image of God in me. This is almost tautological, because God is the origin (Alpha) and the goal/telos (Omega) of my life. That is why, St Ignatius asserts as cited above, “The goal of our life is to live with God forever. God, who loves us, gave us life. Our own response of love allows God’s life to flow into us without limit.”

Thirdly, what happens between those two points – the Alpha and Omega of my existence? How do I traverse from point zero to the telos of my life? Would I be able to move on my own? No, it is God himself who moves me from within me towards himself. This action of God in me is called “Grace”. Grace is the

gratuitous action of God within me, which flows from the image of God within me, and which moves me moment by moment towards the goal of my life.

Here is the final proposition: however, there is also a kind of resistance in me: not to flow with grace; not to cooperate with the action of God within me. This resistance is an outcome of the fact that I am created free by God. Contradicting as it may seem, this free will that I am endowed with is tied to my own spiritual nature. Therefore, the true purpose of the free will is to choose God – who is all good – and flow towards him. Therefore, when I use that same free will to choose to move away from God, I am in sin!

The Greek word for sin, ‘*hamartia*’ captures this meaning very succinctly. *Hamartia* literally means “missing the target”. When an archer releases the arrow from the bow, and if the arrow does not hit the bull’s eye, this is *hamartia*. In contemporary parlance of football game we could say, it is like “missing the goal”. In summary, the goal of my life is to be one with God for ever; when I miss that target of my life by my waywardness, I am in sin. This is a possible way of understanding what sin is. As the reader can see, this understanding ascends above the common simplistic explanation of sin as breaking of commandments – even though they are all related as we will see in the following sections.

3. Meaning of Admonishing the Sinner: A Biblical Perspective

Back to our discussion on admonishing the sinner, we are faced with a more difficult question given our definition of sin. It may be relatively easier for me to detect sin within me, though often, even this is a puzzling task. Now, how do I know when another person is in sin so as to admonish the person?

This is never straightforward. We never know what the internal disposition of the individual towards God is. We only judge by the observable behaviour of the individual: by means

of what they say and do, and not even in terms of what we think they intend to do unless they give explicit signs of their intension in a particular context. Therefore, in terms of the observation of others we fall back to socially agreed upon norms, which, put in other words include, laws and commandments. However, these socially agreed ethical norms are justified only in so far as they enable the individual to allow the life of God to flow in them.

In this context, it is important to note also that sin has a social dimension just as the search for God also has a social dimension. This is the logical consequence of the very social nature of the human person. Human beings learn to be human by means of their interaction within the society that they find themselves in or choose to belong to. They are born into a family and grow in a social context. They draw their identity from the groups that they belong to. Therefore, our own search for God is expressed by belonging to a community of faith, the Church. Our experience of God is often mediated in the context of the community, even if that experience itself could be personal.

In a similar vein, our sin – not flowing with the action of God in us that leads us towards the goal of our life – has a social implication. Our counter-movement away from God is, also at the same time, a choice that isolates us from the believing community. Conversely, the intention or the action of causing harm to another individual or a group of people isolates us from the life of God in us, because the offence against another human being is also an offence against the image of God within that person. This dual implication of sin is very well captured in the conversation between the elder son and the father in the Lukan Parable of the Lost Son (read particularly, *Lk 15: 25-32*).

Note that the elder son does not begin his lines calling on the “Father!” and refers to his brother as “this son of yours”. The father, on the other hand, corrects his son on both these scores. In other words, what we are trying to argue for is that sin does have

an observable character to it. Therefore, admonition of the sinner is still possible based on the observation of the external forum, based on behaviours that suggest breaking up of norms agreed upon in the light of faith, which are meant to make us fulfil the purpose of life designed by God.

In any case, St Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, says, “We urge you, brothers, to *admonish those who are undisciplined*, encourage the apprehensive, support the weak and be patient with everyone” (*1Thes* 5:14). It is interesting to note that St Paul hesitates to use explicitly the word, “sinners.” He prefers to use a term that is based more on the observable behaviour of the person, as translated in English by different versions of the Bible: “undisciplined” (NJB), “unruly” (KJV), “idle” (NAV, NIV & RSV). As long as we base ourselves on the observable aspects of the individual, it is still possible not to fall short of another of Jesus’ dictums: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven” (*Lk* 6:37; also *Mt* 7:1-2). When we assume the internal disposition of the individual as being sinful, then we actually judge them.

On a similar plane, for Jesus, it seems that admonishing a sinner is tied to forgiveness. When Peter asks Jesus, how often am I expected to forgive my brother, He says, “If your brother does something wrong, go and have it out with him alone, between your two selves” (*Mt* 18:15). This is the practical guideline that Jesus offers His disciples on admonition of sinners. Jesus continues, “If he listens to you, you have won back your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you: whatever the misdemeanour, the evidence of two or three witnesses is required to sustain the charge. But if he refuses to listen to these, report it to the community; and if he refuses to listen to the community, treat him like a gentile or a tax collector” (*Mt* 18:15-17).

What is important to note is that this text is sandwiched between Jesus' preaching on searching out the lost sheep (*Mt* 18: 12-13) and forgiveness (verses 21-35). Jesus says, "Tell me. Suppose a man has a hundred sheep and one of them strays; will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go in search of the stray? In truth I tell you, if he finds it, it gives him more joy than do the ninety-nine that did not stray at all." Therefore, the tone of admonishing sinners, proposed by Jesus, is not a stern condemnatory judgement but a genuine concern for the sinner's wellbeing. There are two implications of this insight: one, the style; and two, the aim of admonition.

In connection to the style of admonition, it is relevant to consider here that St Thomas Aquinas refers to admonition as "fraternal correction". This is very consistent with the perspective offered by Jesus in the Gospels (*Mt* 18:15-17). St Paul, urges the Ephesians to say the truth in love (*Eph* 4:15). In a similar tone writing to the Corinthians, in his hymn of love, St Paul invites us to combine truth and love: "Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth. It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes" (*1Cor* 13:6-7). What this implies is that truth admonishes, but love does it with deep compassion. However, this delicate combination of love and truth is not an easy task. We are ready to take on this challenge because this is exactly how God in Jesus deals with us. John the Evangelist writes, "For the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ" (*Jn* 1:17). Similar statements galore are to be found in the epistles of St Paul (*Rom* 5:8; *Gal* 4:4-6).

Secondly, the aim of admonition is the salvation and wellbeing of the individual. Of course, our eagerness to admonish someone who is in grave fault might begin with an objective of establishing moral order, but it seems that admonition of the sinner is never to be an expression of psychological self-defence or self-justification. Being consistent with our definition of sin itself, the

aim of admonition needs to be in order to bring the other person to a closer relationship with God; to invite persons to allow God's life to flow within them. This is salvation. This is eternal life: life in God and God's life in us. In this connection what Benedict XVI writes in his book, *Jesus of Nazareth* (pp.82-84) about eternal life is quite relevant:

‘Eternal life’ is not – as the modern reader might immediately assume – life after death, in contrast to this present life, which is transient and not eternal. ‘Eternal life’ is life itself, real life, which can also be living in the present age and is no longer challenged by physical death. This is the point: to seize ‘life’ here and now, real life that can no longer be destroyed by anything or anyone. ‘Eternal life’ is thus a relational event... Through relationship with the one who is himself life [- God in Jesus], man too comes alive.

In short, admonition of the sinner is aimed at eternal life for the one who admonishes and the admonished.

4. The Challenge of Admonition: How do we actually admonish?

Now, let us get down to more practical aspects. How do we go about admonishing the sinner? Here we consider the challenge of admonishing the sinner at three levels: intrapersonal level – the courage to admonish oneself; interpersonal level – admonishing others; socio-personal level – admonishing the structure of sin in the society.

Splinter and Log: I admonish myself first

In his Sermon on the Mount, in a very powerful statement, Jesus invites us: “Take the log out of your own eye first, and then you will see clearly enough to take the splinter out of your brother’s eye” (*Mt 7:5*). The failure to do this would amount to hypocrisy. Therefore, admonition begins with my own self. In order to admonish another person for a vice, I need to be free of that vice. Otherwise, I run the risk of psychological defence

mechanism of projection and “psychological witch-hunting.” Projection is an unconscious reaction whereby I begin to point out in another person the very defects that I am struggling to face in myself, as a means of dealing with my own defects. Similarly, witch-hunting is when I begin to hunt down other people who might exhibit a behaviour that I want to hide in myself. In fact, I notice the defect in the other person very quickly because I suffer from it myself. If I am authentic, admonishing the sinner challenges me first to own up my own struggles!

On a lighter note, there is a story told of the Indian guru, Ramakrishna Parahamsa; sometimes it is also attributed to Mahatma Gandhi. Even if it is just a legend in the Indian tradition, it is a powerful story. A woman once came to the guru with her little boy. She said, “Guruji, tell my little boy to stop eating sugar. He eats too much of it, and it is not going to do him any good.” “Come back after a week,” said the guru. In a week’s time the woman returned with the little boy. The guru said to the little boy, “My boy, stop eating sugar.” When the boy went away to play by himself, the woman came back to ask, “Why was it necessary for us to return after a week only for you to tell my little boy that much?” The guru replied: “A week ago I had not stopped eating sugar too much.”

Admonishing sin in interpersonal interactions

In his dealings with sinners, Jesus makes a clear distinction between the sinner and the sin. He embraces the sinner but challenges the sin. This is powerfully portrayed in the way Jesus deals with the woman caught in adultery. After Jesus challenges the people who wanted to stone her to death, “Jesus again straightened up and said, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one, sir,’ she replied. ‘Neither do I condemn you,’ said Jesus. ‘Go away, and from this moment sin no more’” (*Jn 8:10-11*). Jesus does not condemn the woman, but he challenges her to sin no more. Therefore, “admonishing

the sinner” actually means admonishing the sin. In fact, we have no right to make judgement on the interior disposition of the individual. Therefore, we admonish the external observable behaviour of the individual, as we have discussed earlier.

In addition, we recall what we have said about the style of admonition: saying the truth in charity. We do this with the sole aim of the wellbeing and salvation of those involved. Otherwise, we might end up expressing our own pride, and worse still, protecting our own selves in the form of projection and witch-hunting.

Admonishing the Social Structures of Sin

Philip Zimbardo (2007), a psychologist who has systematically studied “evil” from a psychological perspective, points out that even a good apple can turn out to be bad because of the barrel that it is confined in. In other words, even though human beings are basically good, systemic evil which individuals find themselves in is capable of bringing the worst in them. This systemic evil is also the result of the synergy of individual dispositions to evil. The teaching of the Church on the matter is similar to what the psychologist suggests. “Sins give rise to social situations and institutions that are contrary to the divine goodness. ‘Structures of sin’ are the expression and effect of personal sins. They lead their victims to do evil in their turn. In an analogous sense, they constitute a ‘social sin’” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1869; see also, Pope John Paul II, 1984, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no.16).

It is needless to list here some of the structures of sin that are prevalent in the contemporary world. In the context of our discussion on admonishing sin, it suffices to point out that the Christian is called to play a prophetic role also in courageously admonishing the society to shed its structures of sin. Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, famously said, “Jesus came to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

The comfortable are those who contribute to the creation of the structure of sin; included also are those who may not notice the structure of sin, or those who notice but do nothing about it. Thus, admonishing sinners as a spiritual work of mercy comes with deep responsibilities.

5. Implications for the Education of Youth: Towards Admonition of Sinners

In conclusion to the reflection on admonishing sinners, I would like to list briefly certain implications of the above reflection for the context of educating young people. These suggestions could be meaningful and useful not only for the youth but also for youth ministers. Some of these elements would seem to be a repetition of what has already been said above; the purpose here is to bring together some practical points that flow from the above reflection.

Be the Change that you want to see

We have already talked about admonishing one's own self. This has implications for the youth minister or the educator and the youth themselves. In both cases transformation has to begin with the self. Before educators begin to admonish the youth, they themselves have to show a certain level of humility, expressing that they are working on their own weaknesses in their personality and moral integrity. When the educator emerges as a humble and honest person it becomes easier for young people to accept whatever the educator is communicating. From this point of credibility, the educator invites the young persons to begin a transformative work on themselves before they begin to admonish their own peers. In this context, the saying that is attributed to Mahatma Gandhi becomes alive: "Be the change that you want to see in the world."

Formation of Conscience without replacing it

One necessary way of admonishing the sinful tendencies in young people is to form conscience. However, Pope Francis

warns us in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, “We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them” (no.37). What he says in the context of marriage and family could also be meaningful in the education of youth. But what does Pope Francis actually mean? He only cautions against an easy and ineffectual way of re-establishing moral order among the faithful by simply stressing doctrinal and moral issues without encouraging openness to grace. Moreover, as the Pope further explains, the easy way consists also in not making room “for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations.”

A precise implication of this for the educator, in admonishing sin among youth, and in educating the youth towards the admonition of sinners, is not to clearly stipulate the choice the young person could make in a complex moral situation, but to offer principles and possibilities in an attempt to form conscience. We need to trust that the young person is capable of exercising their own conscience in such situations. That way, the educator will not replace the conscience of the young person, but continue to form it.

Distinguishing the Sin from the Sinner

We have already spoken at length about making a distinction between the sin and the sinner. When the educator deals with the wrong doings of the young person, and particularly when the educator is forced to offer a punishment, it is so important to pass on the message that the punishment is only a sanction against a wrong action committed by the person. The punishment is a form of expressing reparation for the damage that the action might have caused. The nature of the punishment itself needs to ensure that it offers a sense of hope to the young person to grow as a person. When such a message is clear, it will become a proposal for the young person to replicate such an attitude when they are dealing with others’ failure.

Admonish in love and mercy

We have also discussed at some length the style of admonition. The proposed style needs to be integrated into the educational system. Often educators themselves tend to admonish young people out of anger or because they are moody. This is noticed particularly when a fault of a young person is tolerated one day but the same fault is severely punished another day. The admonition seems to depend on the mood of the educator. The inconsistency could be confusing the young learner. Similarly, when the admonition is carried out in anger the message gets distorted. The young person thinks that the admonition is offered not because of the wrong that they committed but because of the anger of the educator. Worse still, when the admonition takes on the form of corporal punishment it dehumanises the young person. The young person learns to use violence as a way of dealing with conflicts. This breeds violence in the society.

Against this background, saying the truth in love is not just a suggestion, but it is indeed a requirement if we want to establish a non-violent society. Pope Francis' discussion on justice and mercy in his Bull convoking the Year of Mercy seems very relevant here. Admonition is indeed related to justice, however, admonition has to be mingled with mercy. The Pope says, "Mercy is not opposed to justice but rather expresses God's way of reaching out to the sinner, offering him a new chance to look at himself, convert, and believe" (*Misericordiae Vultus*, no. 21).

The Role of Sacrament of Reconciliation

Finally, one powerful means of ensuring that the young persons are not condemned but only their actions are admonished, and that they can always turn over a new leaf, is through the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation. The sacrament becomes a social context for the young person – in the presence of another human being in the person of the priest – to admonish

themselves and take on a just punishment as an expression of reparation. The celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation is also an expression of the commitment of the young person to continue to grow in virtue. The sacrament is, above all, an instrument of grace – the action of God within the individual – towards sharing in the life of God. From the perspective of the Church, the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation is also a pedagogical moment. Through the sacrament, the Church admonishes the young person! In summary, the sacrament of reconciliation is a powerful context as well as an opportunity for the admonition of the sinner!

Let me conclude with a note on the personal experience of writing this chapter. I began on a situation of being in the dark about the topic. Through a cursory reading on the topic and subsequent reflection, it occurred to me that the topic of admonition of sinner actually requires a whole book. I had to make some choices to keep the size of the chapter within the scope of the present book. I would conclude by inviting the reader to continue a journey, even inspired by this chapter, to undertake further reading and reflection on this topic. Admonition of sinners as a spiritual act of mercy could include and inspire many other dimensions of Christian life.

Admonition of the sinner is aimed at eternal life for the one who admonishes and the admonished.

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To Admonish Sinners

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