

**Reflection on the Gospel–23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A
(Matthew 18:15-20)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

What does a just society or community do with its persistent offenders, with those whose behaviour continually disrupts or even destroys the unity of a group? This is an age old question that has no easy answer. The people of South Africa in the wake of apartheid and Timor Leste after twenty-five years of oppression recognised that a too easy amnesty is no solution for violent and destructive behaviour. Offences need to be named and acknowledged by their perpetrators for the sake of community reconciliation and for building the trust essential to the creation of a new future.

The processes followed in South Africa and in Timor Leste were similar to those proposed in today's gospel for members of the 'church' community. The power to deal with transgression is firmly in the hands of the community members. All care must be taken not to shame a person, but to allow her or him to acknowledge the offence in private. If that fails, the matter is referred to a group of two or three witnesses in line with Israel's ancient legal practice (Deuteronomy 19:15). The next step is referral 'to the church', or in other words to the assembled community. A person who refuses to listen 'to the church' is to be treated as a Gentile or a tax-collector. The meaning here is not at all clear. Some scholars suggest that the Matthean Jesus is proposing exclusion from the community. Others consider that he is advocating the sort of compassionate approach that Jesus has personally shown to 'outsiders', to those in need of conversion.

The responsibility for maintaining right relationship in the community lies with the community members. If our personal efforts to resolve conflict are unsuccessful, we do well to seek the wisdom of others. Jesus, God-with-us, is present in the assembly. We have that assurance. We also have the assurance that our failure to deal with transgression can leave a person unreconciled. It is very easy to hold on to past hurts. We need to 'loose' the sins of those who acknowledge their offences. In other words, we need to forgive them and thus set them free from the burden of their sins against us. Forgiveness is needed at personal, group, national and global levels if we are to be in right relationship in the Earth community. Most global tensions have their origin in the unresolved conflicts of the distant past. Our future on this planet depends largely on our capacity to "surrender to the sky [our] heart of anger" (NZ poet James K. Baxter).