It was the biggest test of the school year and two classmates did extremely well, missing one question on the test. However, the first student got an A but the second student received an F. The second student took issue with the teacher, why should the other student get an A and he receive an F? The teacher responded that it wasn’t just getting a single question wrong on the test that gave him an F but what he put down as the answer. The teacher replied, “The other guy simply wrote ‘I don’t know’ as his answer, but your answer was ‘neither do I.’”

Fraternal correction, pointing out another person’s faults to their face, is never easy. We dread having to do it and we hate to be on the receiving end. However, if we really love the person we need to correct, there are times when we have to do it. And if we know the person who is correcting us loves us, or at least has our best interest in mind, we would do well to listen. We have an obligation to help correct each other along life’s journey. It’s the only way we grow. Jesus says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens, you have won over your brother.” The message is clear and yet difficult to do. In addition to encouraging us to correct others when it’s necessary, Jesus also tells us how to do it. If we can’t win over our brother by talking with him alone, we’re to bring a couple other people to help win him over. Catholic Social Teaching calls this subsidiarity.

Subsidiarity is the principle that problems should be worked out at the most local level. When a problem exceeds the most local level's ability to cope, we ask the next regional authority to solve the issue. For example, when siblings can’t determine for themselves who gets the remote control to the TV, a parent might step in and solve the problem? And since every kid should know a parent might solve the problem by turning off the TV, they should eventually learn how to work this out between themselves. Subsidiarity is about putting responsibility where responsibility is due: at the most local level. In society, communities should be allowed to handle their own problems, even serious ones, without outside interference. However, when it becomes abundantly clear they can’t solve the problem by themselves, and the problem is deemed serious enough, the next highest authority not only has a right but a moral obligation to step in. That’s the principal of subsidiarity.

We’ve all had the task of correcting someone. Nobody enjoys doing it and nobody enjoys being on the receiving end. How we go about resolving issues, beginning with the most local level, is important lest we end up falling into sin ourselves, such as gossip which is the opposite of handling our problems through subsidiarity. Spreading our grievances about someone at work, on the gym bleachers, and Facebook is gossip and it’s a terrible sin. St. Paul’s letter fits so well. We owe people our love, even those we disagree with. If we set out to correct someone from any place other than love, we need to keep our mouth shut until we find that place of love inside us for the person we need to correct. Subsidiarity, fraternal correction, to save a soul is the greatest victory imagineable.