

FAITH FAITH AND REASON JULY 9, 2018 ISSUE

9 rules for civility from the Catholic tradition

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We all know that something is gravely wrong with our public conversation in the United States. The lack of civility is so pervasive that it is pointless to assign blame. We each have a responsibility to change the game, to treat each other better, particularly when we disagree.

Partisan divisiveness infects our church, even on matters of little social or theological significance. Last year, when St. Patrick's Day fell on a Friday in Lent, I granted a dispensation to Catholics in my diocese so that those who wished to partake of corned beef could do so. My inbox was swamped with nasty responses in the aftermath, accusing me of destroying Catholic tradition, purposely undermining the faith and paving someone's journey straight to hell. This is a failure of our social discourse.

Catholic tradition has much to teach us about civility. The starting principle is that every human being has God-given dignity and is worthy of respect. Or, in the words of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

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The Bible also has plenty to say about how we speak to one another. Two stories in particular address our use of language. Genesis tells of a society that sought to challenge God's authority by building a tower high enough to reach heaven. God responded by reducing humanity to a Babel of languages, unable to understand each other or work together. Humanity's hubris—the original sin reflected in the Garden of Eden narrative—shattered humanity's unity. Language became a source of conflict, war and hatred. Language lost its holiness.

But language was redeemed at Pentecost. The Acts of the Apostles describes how, when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, people of every language background understood them. The holiness of language had been restored. This is how we must use language: to bring about understanding and to speak of faith, hope and love.

The cultural headwinds against civility are strong. The screaming heads on cable news, the fortunes poured into electioneering and the “Wild West” of social media make it hard to engage in reasonable dialogue. I am reminded of my homiletics professor's critique of a practice homily that was particularly argumentative, closed-minded and delivered at high decibels. He dismissed it as “C. W. Y. L. H.”: “content weak, yell like hell.”

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Civility demonstrates strength—not weakness—of thought, voice and conviction. It is a way of speaking and acting that takes seriously what I believe and what others believe. It includes a robust and passionate engagement with those of differing views. Civility assumes that the ties that bind us are far more important than the differences we have on important social and political issues. A corollary is that people live and learn in communities, including families, faith traditions, affinity groups and civil societies. Civility requires us to work together within and between these communities, for common purposes.

Civility is not willful ignorance of another's opinion. It is built upon integrity, which is consistency in our beliefs and actions. When we claim to follow the one who called us to love our enemies but then direct caustic diatribes toward those who are even mildly critical of our views, we have no credibility. And we must be careful to treat those within our family of faith as charitably as we do those on the outside. People of faith demonstrate integrity only when our conversations and disagreements *ad intra* are as civil, respectful and tactful as our *ad extra* dialogues and arguments.

Civility requires a "civil tongue." When we direct insults toward another human being, we degrade ourselves even more than we degrade that person—and we display an impoverished vocabulary. Recently a friend of mine could not help overhearing a man making an angry, obscenity-laden phone call. He used one obscenity repeatedly as subject, object, adjective and verb. My friend was shocked that two young women nearby showed no reaction, especially as it became clear this man was talking to his wife.

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I believe that such routine obscenity is related to the vileness of our public discourse. Vulgar language is not the cause, but it is a link in the chain. The degrading quality of our everyday language numbs us to the frightening degradation of our public conversation. Racial and sexual slurs, bigotry, anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism and hatred in general have emerged from under rocks and slithered into the public square.

We need to recapture the sacredness of language. It is through words that we express life, that we express all that we love, all that we fundamentally believe.

So let me suggest "Nine Rules for Civility and Integrity for Faith Communities and Everyone Else." They come from my experience in ecumenical and interfaith dialogues, from which I have learned much and have formed treasured friendships

with faith leaders of other traditions. We can disagree on profound theological and social issues but love what we see in each other's hearts.

1. In a healthy, civil dialogue, we listen to one another. Listening is more than hearing. It requires time and energy to appreciate where a person or group comes from, what they believe and why they believe it. Authentic, empathic listening takes to heart the feelings of another's heart and builds bridges among people who differ on important issues.

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2. Civil conversation presumes that we are each working for the common good. We nearly always have areas of agreement and disagreement. Instead of zeroing in on points of divergence, we should first acknowledge where we can stand together. At that point, we can address our differences more effectively. When we work together on such things, we build bridges that can allow a constructive conversation about what abortion does to children, women and our society.

3. Any civil public discussion recognizes the validity of contending groups in society. My goal cannot be to shut down another voice. Democracy and freedom guarantee differences of convictions and conclusions. I frequently hear from groups that disagree with me, whether it is about gun control or liturgy. They have a right, even a duty, to speak up when they believe the ship is off course. I read their letters carefully and try to respond carefully. I may invite some of them to my office for a conversation. While we may never agree, I owe them the respect of an honest dialogue.

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Yet not every cause is worthy of respect. For example, we have recently seen the importance of naming the evils of white supremacy, Nazism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. These ideologies must be heard for what they are—efforts to deprive

some human beings of the dignity and respect that is theirs as children of God. Even as the First Amendment allows expression of these hateful ideas, we must condemn them firmly and nonviolently. Denounce the idea, not the person. After my predecessor did that 20 years ago, at the time of a white supremacist march in Pittsburgh, a K.K.K. leader renounced his racism, became a practicing Catholic and began working against organized hatred. Civility is transformational.

4. Civility shows respect for the person with whom I differ. You and I can do this, even while we try to persuade someone on the other side of the issue. Search out your critics' strengths: Are they trying to build a better society, help the abused, right a wrong? Affirm them for that, while pointing out that there may be better ways to achieve their goal.

5. Civility works for the inclusion of all members of society and is especially sensitive to minorities and marginalized persons. Sometimes we will have conflict over what "inclusion" requires, but we can disagree in ways that do not denigrate the other person. Differing beliefs about the nature of marriage mean that I will sometimes have serious disagreements with some in the L.G.B.T.Q. community. But if I were to call them names, accuse them of malicious motives or otherwise treat them as anything less than beloved children of God, then I would be guilty of sin. My words would make me the neon sign of the contempt that spewed forth from my mouth.

6. Civility distinguishes between facts and opinions. Let facts speak for themselves where possible. (The quote from the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan is more pertinent today than ever: "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.")

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7. The flip side to this rule is that facts can only take us so far. Disagreements about values are difficult, and we cannot and should not avoid passionate discussion. We can critique an idea without lambasting a person.

Not long ago during a dinner conversation with a good friend, she held that as few immigrants as possible should be allowed to enter our country. I could not have disagreed more, and the conversation became heated. Recognizing how close I was to leaving the table, I asked, "What if the immigrant was your brother?" The conversation ended with the realization that there was something more at stake than either of our arguments. We ended the evening with our mutual respect and friendship intact.

8. We should not assume or impugn motives. People often turn to bad or questionable solutions out of a desire to do good. Years ago I heard a story about a priest who saw the same woman fall asleep every week during his homily. He was incensed that she used his homily to nap, until he visited her home and saw that she had six loud, demanding children. He left that visit glad that she could take a little nap in church. We never know the full story. So why should we judge?

9. We must be willing to be self-critical. Honest dialogue helps us to examine the roots of our own positions, leading us to clarify—and sometimes modify—our convictions.

Civility is a virtue, a habit of choices and conscience, which shapes the way we encounter others. It does not come to anyone automatically. Like any virtue, we have to work at it day after day after day after day. But we must, if we are to work for policies that support and sustain human dignity, human rights, human life.

Rules such as these, religious values and moral principles will not, by themselves, solve complex public problems. But they are part of the solution. Faith-inspired principles, when expressed with civility and conviction, are more important than ever. Issues like the economy, foreign policy, bioethics, climate change, health care and warfare require calm, thoughtful and empathic religious voices. We must be bridge builders who call the diverse members of our society to common ground, with shared values focused on the common good.

After all is said and done, isn't that what it means to live the Gospel? Jesus showed us how to listen. He knew how to change hearts. Let's all pray to do the same.

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