



Civil Dialogue

In their Introductory Note to *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the Catholic bishops of the United States urge Catholics to “contribute to civil and respectful public dialogue.” In the following essay, Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, reflects on how Catholics can carry out this call to civil dialogue.

Civil Discourse: Speaking Truth in Love

By Cardinal Donald Wuerl

The preacher's pulpit, the politician's podium and the print and electronic media all bear some responsibility to encourage a far more civil, responsible and respectful approach to national debate and the discussion of issues in our country today.

Over and over again, we are hearing, in the wake of the shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, that it is time to examine the tenor and tone of debate. Sadly, it took something as tragic as the Tucson shooting to generate a conversation about how we debate issues, especially those that engender great emotion.

A wise and ancient Catholic maxim has always insisted that we are to “hate the sin and love the sinner.” At the heart of this time-honored wisdom is the simple recognition that some things are wrong and yet we still distinguish between what is done and who does it.

Increasingly, there is a tendency to disparage the name and reputation, the character and life, of a person because he or she holds a different position. The identifying of some people as “bigots” and “hate mongers” simply because they hold a position contrary to another's has unfortunately become all too commonplace today. Locally, we have witnessed rhetorical hyperbole that, I believe, long since crossed the line between reasoned discourse and irresponsible demagoguery.

It should not be acceptable to denounce someone who favors immigration reform that includes the process to citizenship as a “traitor” and “unpatriotic.” The representatives in federal and state government who voted against the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program or against tax credits for Catholic schools educating minority children should not be labeled in the media as “anti-Catholic bigots” or “racists” since the majority of the children are African American. People and organizations should not be denounced disparagingly as “homophobic” simply because they support the traditional, worldwide, time-honored definition of marriage. The defaming words speak more about political posturing than about reasoned discourse.

Why is it so important that we respect both our constitutional right to free speech and our moral obligation that we not bear false witness against another? A profoundly basic reason is that we do not live alone. While each of us can claim a unique identity, we are, nonetheless, called to live out our lives in relationship with others ~ in some form of community.

All human community is rooted in this deep stirring of God's created plan within us that brings us into ever-widening circles of relationship: first with our parents, then our family, the Church and a variety of community experiences, educational, economic, cultural, social and, of course, political. We are by nature social and tend to come together so that in the various communities of which we are a part, we can experience full human development. All of this is part of God's plan initiated in creation and reflected in the natural law that calls us to live in community.

What does this have to do with toning down our rhetoric? Everything! No community, human or divine, political or religious, can exist without trust. At the very core of all human relations is the confidence that members speak the truth to each other. It is for this reason that God explicitly protected the bonds of community by prohibiting falsehood as a grave attack on the human spirit.

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Ex 20:16). To tamper with the truth or, worse yet, to pervert it, is to undermine the foundations of human community and to begin to cut the threads that weave us into a coherent human family.

The call to truthfulness is far from being a denial of freedom of speech. Rather, it is a God-given obligation to respect the very function of human speech. We are not free to say whatever we want about another, but only what is true. To the extent that freedom is improperly used to sever the bonds of trust that bind us together as a people, to that extent it is irresponsible. The commandment that obliges us to avoid false witness also calls us to tell the truth. We, therefore, have an obligation to ascertain that what we say or hear or read is really the truth.

Someone once described a "gossip" as a person who will never tell a lie if a half-truth will do as much harm. When we listen to news accounts or read what is presented in the print and electronic media, we are too often reminded that spin, selecting only some of the facts, highlighting only parts of the picture, has replaced too often an effort to present the facts ~ the full story. We all know the tragic results of gossip against which there is little or no defense. In an age of blogs, even the wildest accusations can quickly become "fact." Gossip is like an insidious infection that spreads sickness throughout the body. These untruths go unchallenged because the persons who are the object of the discussion are usually not present to defend themselves, their views or actions.

Irresponsible blogs, electronic and print media stories, and pulpit and podium people-bashing rhetoric can be likened to many forms of anonymous violence. Spin and extremist language should not be embraced as the best this country is capable of achieving. Selecting only some facts, choosing inflammatory words, spinning the story, are activities that seem much more directed to achieving someone's political purpose rather than reporting events. One side is described as "inquiring minds that want to know" and the other side as "lashing out in response."

We need to look at how we engage in discourse and how we live out our commitment to be a people of profound respect for the truth and our right to express our thoughts, opinions, positions ~ always in love. We who follow Christ must not only speak the truth but must do so in love (Eph 4:15). It is not enough that we know or believe something to be true. We must express that truth in charity with respect for others so that the bonds between us can be strengthened in building up the body of Christ.

Freedom of speech and respect for others, freedom of expression and regard for the truth, should always be woven together. This should be true of everyone, whether they speak from a pulpit, a political platform, or through the electronic and print media and other means of social communications.

Ground Rules for Civil Dialogue

We are all called to engage in civil dialogue. Here are some possible ground rules for civil dialogue:

1. Make sure everyone has an opportunity to speak.
2. Share your personal experience, not someone else's.
3. Listen carefully and respectfully. Speak carefully and respectfully. Do not play the role of know-it-all, convincer or corrector. Remember that a dialogue is *not* a debate.
4. Don't interrupt unless for clarification or time keeping.
5. Accept that no group or viewpoint has a complete monopoly on the truth.
6. "Be more ready to give a favorable interpretation to another's statement than condemn it" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2478, quoting St. Ignatius of Loyola).
7. Be cautious about assigning motives to another person.



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