

The Gospel, Nonviolence and Civil Discourse

Reflections on civil discourse, respectful dialogue
across difference, and nonviolence

by Marie Dennis
Pax Christi International Co-President

a Pax Christi USA resource for small group discussion

Pax Christi USA | 1225 Otis Street NE | Washington, D.C. 20017 | 202.635.2741
info@paxchristiusa.org | www.paxchristiusa.org

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Dear friends,

The following reflections were written by Marie Dennis. Marie is a Pax Christi USA Ambassador of Peace, former chair of the PCUSA National Council, and currently the co-president of Pax Christi International. These reflections were originally posted as a series for the Bread for the Journey blog on the Pax Christi USA website from August through October of 2012, exploring the topic in the context of the election year and the political rhetoric that is symptomatic of such a time.

We believe that the material in this series isn't simply applicable to an election year, but instead offers insight and ideas which respond to a growing crisis of civility and respect in our nation. We hope that the material in these reflections help to inform your conversations with families, friends, and co-workers. Pax Christi local groups might want to consider using these articles for reflection and study as part of your regular meeting. Regional leaders may want to incorporate the articles into your newsletters, for discussion at a regional event, or for commenting over regional email lists and blogs/websites.

We're interested in hearing your responses as well. Please consider posting comments on the website in the comments area after each section of the article. You can find the original articles by searching for them by title in the search box on the homepage.

In peace.

*Johnny Zokovitch
Director of Communications, Pax Christi USA*

Small groups reflecting on these readings together may want to begin each meeting for reflection and discussion with this prayer. The prayer (adapted) comes from the "Sojourning Spirituality" blog at <http://ephphatha-poetry.blogspot.com/>.

Prayer for Civility

Gracious God, we stand before You to ask for healing and forgiveness. Sins of division have disconnected us from civil conversation, from one another, and from You.

Some of us have been hurt by adversarial rhetoric and uncivil conversation. We have felt the sting of pointed comments. We have heard people belittle our deepest passions. We have watched shock jocks become primetime commentators. And in the process, we get harmed and forget that we are made in Your sacred image, Holy One. For this, we ask for healing.

Some of us have hurt others by using adversarial rhetoric and uncivil remarks. We have made pointed comments. We have belittled the beliefs of others. We have tuned in to watch shock jocks, giving them an audience. And in the process, we have harmed others and cause others to forget that they are made in Your sacred image, Holy One. For this, we ask for forgiveness.

Some of us have been lured into the cyclone of cable news. We listen to their sound-bites. We repeat their talking points. We share their alarmist stories. And in the midst of this cacophony, we fail to hear Your voice of wisdom, Loving God. For this, we ask for forgiveness.

Gracious God, please forgive what needs to be forgiven, so we can start afresh on the path to civility. And please heal what needs to be healed, so we can be connected more deeply with one another and with You, Loving God. Weave us together into a beautiful tapestry of peoples. Amen!

The Gospel, nonviolence and civil discourse

Last week Cardinal Dolan responded to those who criticized him for inviting both President Obama and Governor Romney to the “Al Smith Dinner” in New York in October. Although I have been disheartened by a lot of the partisan commentary from – and campaigning by – Catholic Church hierarchy in this election year, I found the Cardinal’s remarks important and encouraging.

The Al Smith Dinner, the Cardinal said, has been an acclaimed example of “civility in political life.” Furthermore, “the teaching of the Church, so radiant in the Second Vatican Council, is that the posture of the Church towards culture, society, and government is that of engagement and dialogue. In other words, it’s better to invite than to ignore, more effective to talk together than to yell from a distance, more productive to open a door than to shut one.”

“In the end,” he said, “I’m encouraged by the example of Jesus, who was blistered by his critics for dining with those some considered sinners; and by the recognition that, if I only sat down with people who agreed with me, and I with them, or with those who were saints, I’d be taking all my meals alone.”

With the possible exception of the hermits among us, we have all been on the receiving end of an avalanche of political rhetoric this year and the next few months will be worse. In that context, genuine dialogue across difference is extremely difficult, but it seems to me that it is an essential dimension of a genuine commitment to the Gospel and nonviolence.

In the coming weeks, a conversation about what that means and what it doesn’t mean might be helpful, so I invite your comments!

Let me begin by saying that, in my mind, civil discourse and respectful dialogue do NOT imply neutrality on social, economic, environmental or other critical issues – or on the fundamental direction in which our country will move in the coming years. Jesus, it seems to me, was fully engaged in the public debate about the laws and systems of first century Palestine. His harsh critique of exclusionary purity and debt codes is a case in point.

The public dialogue in which we as a country are engaged is a very high stakes conversation – about the common good and human dignity; about what kind of a theological message we will give by our federal budget priorities and whether the people of Afghanistan or Pakistan – or U.S. soldiers – will live or die; about health insurance for 30 million people, the rights and safety of 15 million immigrants, and the survival of our planet.

In addition to the seriousness of the issues we are discussing, we also know that the playing field onto which we will venture for any dialogue is dangerous and already toxic. Dangerous due, for example, to the anonymity, facility and speed of electronic communications – or the “spin” that can distort any word out of a public figure’s mouth or off a politician’s pen. Anyone can say anything on the internet with almost complete impunity. Too many media personalities are more interested in fame and fortune than in truth or dialogue – more interested in partisan ideology than in a serious pursuit of accurate

information or careful analysis. Too many politicians are more concerned about being elected than about finding the best answers to extremely difficult public questions.

Perhaps too many of us are more interested in verbal victory than accuracy – ideological purity than honesty – political correctness than truth.

Jesus was very clear:

- *Do to others what you would have them do to you ... (Mt 7:12; Luke 6:30)*
- *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Mt 5:44)*

To infuse our nation and our world with this approach to the “other” seems almost impossible, but, without a doubt, would go a long way toward promoting civil discourse, and – perhaps even more importantly, a world that is peaceful, socially just and more sustainable.

The challenge is huge: to promote a compassionate society, just structures and systems, peace and respect for the integrity of creation and to recognize that no one has the corner on truth; see God’s presence in every person; and listen with an open mind and heart – never demonizing another person, but at the same time, being honest and able to disagree with their actions or positions.

We who would be disciples must “choose sides.” How we do that in the current political context is the challenge.

Truth-telling in the public square

One of the most disturbing dimensions of the current, polarized political debate is the sacrifice of truth in pursuit of power. A person can say almost anything about a candidate or political party without having to demonstrate the veracity of their assertions.

It is almost impossible to make an informed decision about which candidate's proposals best reflect our own values because disinformation is so rampant in much of the political discourse to which we are now being subjected.

At the same time, the issues at stake are extremely critical to the global community present and future, particularly those for whom a life of dignity is perpetually elusive – and, for that matter, for the future of the whole earth community. Disengagement is not an option. Neither is knee-jerk decision-making.

My point now is not to enter the debate about which approach to any public policy squares more closely with the values of the Gospel or Catholic social teaching, but to suggest that we can't begin to decide which proposals we prefer until we ferret out the truth to the best of our ability.

Actually, I've been thinking about this for a while because electronic media have opened wide the space for anyone with a computer to put almost anything in writing – truth or not. The real tension between our First Amendment right to free speech and the moral obligation to honesty errs, perhaps rightly, on the side of free speech. We might see a move to limit where some sexually explicit messages can be published or to put some control tools in parents' hands, but that's about it.

From what I can see, there are no boundaries on broadcast violence or outright lies. Laws against libel and slander exist, but seem to have little relevance on the campaign trail, which is pretty vicious territory. This is having a huge impact on civil discourse in this election year.

I've been doing a little examination of my own conscience. I have very strong opinions about the fundamental direction in which I believe our country and our society should move and I wonder sometimes if I think I have the "corner" on truth. In the coming weeks I will challenge myself to work harder at ferreting out more accurate information about a given issue ("Fact Checker-like" columns can help) and I will try to listen with more openness to others' perspectives – particularly the perspectives of people and communities on the margins of our society and our world – before I form my opinion. But I will form an opinion – and hopefully, after study and discussion, it will still reflect a commitment to social justice, peace and respect for the integrity of creation.

Catholic social teaching (CST) should be a consistent guide to decision-making in the public arena, but disinformation and a "thin" reading of CST can lead to an ethical wasteland. The principle of subsidiarity, for example, articulates a principled balance between respect for the dignity of each person and a commitment to the common good — a recognition that we as a society have to create mechanisms that protect individual rights and structures that tend to our social (and environmental) responsibilities. Small is beautiful, but in complex societies and an intensely globalized world, government at many levels is essential.

In the coming weeks I will be re-reading some of the essential documents of CST and trying to understand the context in which they were written. The October 2011 “Note on Financial Reform” from the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace is a good example, as is *Caritas in Veritate* from 2009, but so is *Pacem in Terris*, written almost 50 years ago. My guess is their relevance will be stunning.

Civil discourse grounded in respect

One of the great blessings of my life is family – six strong minded, politically astute and opinionated children and their six spouses who are also strong minded, politically astute and opinionated. All children and children-in-law are truly good human beings who care deeply about social justice and are contributing in amazing and very different ways to a better future for the whole “earth community.”

Despite their common roots; what I thought was a pretty similar “up-bringing;” and my serious attempt at brain-washing, my six do not always agree with each other or with me when it comes to important issues. When you add the beautiful diversity of their life partners we can have some great debates about “hot button” issues, especially politics!

Even when we disagree, I love every minute of those conversations and always learn something new. Often, my own opinions on specific issues are affected by these family encounters and I think the reverse is also true. Last night for example, I had a great, too-brief conversation with my son-in-law about Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s response to the killing of the U.S. ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, and three embassy aides. We agreed on the importance of free speech and the need to reject violence, but the nuances of his reasoning about these events were very different and helpful to my own thinking about the insulting video and the violence it has sparked in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Sudan and elsewhere in the Middle East.

I have often wondered why we are all so open to each other’s perspective – why we can disagree and still really love each other. I think the answer is respect.

I completely respect these good human beings who are such an important part of my life and they respect me. I have a sense of their life journeys, of what is important to them and I believe deeply that they are people of integrity. When we disagree about anything – but especially about politics, I want to understand their perspective because I know it is honestly held.

Because the life experiences, especially of my children-in-law, are different from my own, I always feel that I can learn something from them when we talk. In fact, the same is true of my own children, especially as their circles of life have expanded. And without exception, each of them wants to know what I think specifically because they know that my life is planted in what is a thoughtful and experienced community, Assisi Community, and that my work for peace puts me in touch with very different realities around the world.

If we could engender in our body politic more respect for each other as human beings whose opinions are shaped by the experience of life and if we had confidence that we as a body politic share some basic values – especially a commitment to the common good and respect for the dignity of each person and Earth, perhaps we could disagree without so much rancor. If that basic respect and confidence are absent, I am not sure how civil discourse is possible.

Telling the other side of the story

As heads of state and delegations to the United Nations gathered in New York for the opening of the U.N. General Assembly, significant attention, including in President Obama's address, was given to critical questions raised by the insulting video produced in the United States and the violence it sparked in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Sudan and elsewhere in the Middle East. The violent fruit of extreme polarization, ignorance, demonization and manipulation was made highly visible by international media and electronic networking sites, but the other side of the story was neither well told nor adequately discussed.

At the end of the week, Religions for Peace and the Institute for Global Engagement invited representatives of faith-based civil society to a dialogue with several States, including the U.S. and Kenya, representatives of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Alliance of Civilizations, researchers and analysts.

The brief remarks of Libyan Islamic scholar Dr. Aref Ali Nayed were deeply moving and extremely important. This was the first time he had spoken publicly since the killing of the U.S. Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, and three embassy aides. He described Ambassador Stevens as a great friend of Libya. He also spoke with tremendous sadness about the many others in Libya whose lives were lost in recent days, including ten youth who were trying to stop the violence – who were, as he said, “brave enough to say ‘no’ to the stealing of the Libyan revolution.”

Perhaps if the media and all of us had focused more attention on the sacrificial efforts of many in Libya and elsewhere to stop the violence, we would be able to turn the tide on the escalating hate.

Dr. Ali Nayed identified five principles to guide us as we try to move from a deeply polarized world to one of mutual care and understanding:

- *A transcendent vision that places compassion above national or individual ambition*
- *Preservation of the sacredness of all that God holds sacred, including all persons and certainly what he called “paradigmatic” persons – Mohammed and Jesus. Free speech, he said, can never be used to attack this sacredness.*
- *Dedication to service*
- *Persistent determination – the revolution, including against our own selfishness, will be long*
- *Appreciation of gifts, including the gifts of diversity and of other persons who can keep us honest*

These are deep and rich principles that are alien to the current political discussion in the U.S. but would be well worth pondering in this last month before the elections. They might help us probe more deeply the crucial decisions we will make on November 6th and examine our own narrow-mindedness that facilitates enemy-making of exactly the sort our world needs to overcome.

Toward U.S. “troubles”?

I am writing this as I prepare to leave Belfast after a few extremely informative and interesting days learning about the peace process that is slowly moving the people of Northern Ireland out of the “troubles” toward a stable peace. At first encounter, Belfast seems to be entirely past the endemic violence that plagued community after community for decades. Tremendous credit is due to courageous people and an effective peace process that is rebuilding the structures of a society that was deeply fractured for generations. Very, very hopeful is the commitment of parents we met to raise their young children without prejudice.

But lurking just beneath the surface and threatening to undercut movement toward peace are deep divisions that still separate too many local communities. The “peace wall” that separates Catholic from Protestant neighborhoods in Belfast cannot yet be dismantled. Gates in the wall are open during the day, but are still locked at night. Hundreds of British flags fly on the Protestant side of the wall, but are noticeably absent on the Catholic side where affiliation tends to be stronger with Ireland to the south than with the UK. Partisan murals are slowly being replaced with some more focused on peace, but there is ample evidence that different stories are being told and retold on opposite sides of the wall.

On the one hand, I was struck by the tremendous difference between the “peace wall” in Belfast, a wall that actually does help keep the peace, and the “separation wall” being built by the Israeli government that divides Palestinian communities internally; people from their land, work and needed services; and family members from each other. This separation wall, once built, is never open for free passage and is exacerbating the brokenness, while Belfast’s “peace wall” seems at least to point in the right direction.

On the other hand, I could not help reflecting on the great tragedy of Northern Ireland’s “troubles” and the possibility that the lack of civil discourse in the U.S. political arena could ultimately lead to our own bleak version of “troubles.” The multi-dimensional enemy-making and destructive wall-building now so prevalent in our society threatens to breed a kind of hatred that is not easily reversed. Already it has provoked – or at least created space for – inexcusable violence directed at the “other:” Muslims, Sikhs, immigrants, liberals, conservatives

As Election Day approaches, efforts to promote respectful political discourse will become even more important. The Franciscan Action Network (FAN) has developed excellent guidelines that you might find helpful (www.franciscanaction.org), while many parishes or local communities are sponsoring workshops and parish dialogues to promote civility.

At the same time, every effort is important to break down walls of hatred and to foster respect for – *celebration* of – the gift of diversity. For example, Pax Christi USA’s partner, JustFaith Ministries, has developed an excellent program to foster Christian-Muslim understanding. Consider sponsoring [*Muslims and Christians Working Together for the Common Good*](#) in your local community.

Civil discourse is a necessary step toward the common good

A helpful parish program on civil discourse this week provided a good opportunity to think through many different aspects of this topic. We began the conversation by viewing together a 10 minute segment of Jon Stewart's recent interview of Senator Marco Rubio, with its good examples of civil (and occasionally not-so-civil) discourse. We also looked at the recent interaction between the Vatican and LCWR to see what we could learn there. A few observations:

- Respect for the other person and a real desire to understand their point of view makes civil dialogue even across substantial differences of opinion possible; conversely, without respect, civil discourse is virtually impossible.
- No one has the corner on truth; civil discourse is more possible when we are open to gaining new insights, information or understanding from the other.
- Attentive listening is crucial; asking questions to make sure you understand what the other person is saying, and perhaps why they hold that opinion, can help.
- So do being well-informed and truthful; owning personal opinion as opinion; speaking respectfully; shared humor; neutral body language; and avoiding rhetoric.
- The "atmosphere" also can facilitate or preclude civil discourse; print, broadcast and electronic media play an important role in setting the tone of our political discussions, as do our personal communications and conversations.
- When any common ground exists, it helps to name it, but it can also be a gift to agree to disagree and still continue the dialogue, making the effort to understand another person's perspective.

If we are truly informed by faith, it seems to me that we will not be neutral. Rather, we are called by the Gospel to be on the side of those who are impoverished and excluded; to speak out for an end to war and violence; to respect the integrity of creation; to work for the common good. To do so in the public arena – and often in private conversations as well – we will have to choose sides, to have an opinion. I think one of the greatest challenges of these complex times is to claim with vigor that Gospel bias and to be prophetic in response to the greed and violence of our culture, without losing the capacity for respectful listening or the humility that opens us to new ways of thinking, new information, new ideas, new answers.

In these long months of heated debate, we U.S. Americans have failed to identify the common values or goals that might repair the jagged tear in our national fabric. We have been richly blessed with a great diversity of culture, experience, religious and ethical belief, opinion. As the 2012 presidential election draws near, let us pray for national and local leadership that will help us reclaim a commitment to the common good, to just and sustainable peace, to social and ecological justice, and insist on the kind of civil discourse necessary to move our country in that direction.

** If you have found this small group resource helpful, we ask that you consider making a donation to Pax Christi USA to allow us to keep producing resources like these and cover the costs associated with doing so. Donations to Pax Christi USA can be made on our website, www.paxchristiusa.org, or by mail at the address on the cover page of this resource. Thank you.*