

The Church must be a counter witness



Most Rev. Alexander Sample, Archbishop of Portland

Thursday, July 5, 2018 9:46 AM



Pro-Trump and anti-fascist demonstrators clash on Portland's waterfront in 2017. (Sarah Silbiger/The Oregonian)

"I give you a new commandment: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

Many people, including myself, have come to a point where we are seriously limiting our viewing of cable news television. The divisive rhetoric, the vitriol and the lack of respect and kindness people are showing to one another these days is sad and depressing. Where has civility gone?

From the highest level of our government all the way down to the local level, we can no longer speak of “civil society.” The first meaning of “civil” in this context refers to ordinary citizens and their concerns, as distinct from military or religious matters. But the secondary meaning is “courteous and polite.” The first meaning still holds, but to a large extent, not the second.

It does not matter where one stands on the political spectrum. Both sides are guilty. Examples include provocative, rude, disrespectful, uncharitable and vulgar comments on social media, efforts to shut down free speech and opinions that differ from one’s own, and now calls to harass those who disagree with one’s own political views. Too many people are acting out of their emotions and not giving room for rational and respectful debate over the important issues facing this country.

But what saddens me the most is that this kind of disrespectful behavior is even affecting the Church and our communion as brothers and sisters in Christ. Catholics are spending way too much time reading blogs, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, and then importing the divisive rhetoric into their relationships with each other.

I recently had to remove a posting on my own Facebook page because, in the comments section, folks who profess to be Catholics were “going at each other” in a way that did not reflect the love and respect demanded by Jesus of his disciples. I see this sort of behavior all over the place in the Catholic media world. It is sad to see Catholics viewing other Catholics as somehow their enemies.

Honest discussion and even debate over the many important issues affecting our lives as Catholics is a good and healthy thing for the Church. But when it devolves into emotionally driven, irrational behavior and “*ad hominem*” attacks on the other, we have lost our way. All of our conversations with each other should be marked by Christian charity and respect. This applies whether we are discussing morality, political issues, immigration or even the liturgy, just to name a few.

Catholics can take the lead in showing a better example for the world. We must be countercultural in this respect. We will be much more effective in our work of evangelization if we do. We must not allow ourselves to be dragged down to the level to which so many in society have sunk.

My mother used to say to me, “Everybody loves you.” Of course she was terribly biased, and who is going to tell the mother of the archbishop that they think he’s a jerk? She only heard nice things (except someone once told her that I preach too long!). I used to just laugh when she would say this and tell her she should come and read my mail for a month. Plenty of people don’t think I’m so great.

I say this not to garner any sympathy, but to simply point out that at times people even write to their bishop in a harsh, sarcastic, passive aggressive and uncharitable tone. I get to see the division and lack of respect and civility from a different perspective. Now I am completely open to the faithful questioning or disagreeing with what I may say or do as their bishop. They have a right to do so, and I do my best to respond in some way. But when a tone is adopted that

mimics the way people are treating each other and political leaders in the wider society, it disappoints me. And I see the faithful treating each other in a similar way at times.

Catholics often are more driven by their own political or world views than by their Catholic faith. I know this because, if I say something about immigrants or refugees, I get slammed from one side. If I speak out on a moral issue such as abortion or same sex marriage, I get hit from another group. Catholics are morally bound to embrace all the teachings of the Church both in the moral and social spheres. We must accept both the moral and social doctrines of the Church, trusting that the Holy Spirit guides the Church into all truth, as Jesus told us (John 16: 12-15).

Now there are some areas that touch on political solutions to our problems in society, and there is room for prudential judgment and disagreement about how to go about those solutions. This is the realm of the laity, but they must be guided by Catholic moral teaching, and the principles laid out in Catholic social teaching. But when these discussions and debates happen, Christian respect and charity must rule the day.

We must always remember that we are Catholic disciples of Jesus Christ first, fellow citizens of America second, and then our party affiliation (if we have one). Let us all examine our consciences and recommit ourselves to loving and respecting each other as Jesus has commanded us. And as my bishop in Michigan once said, "Beware the bloggers!"