

FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP: GROUND RULES FOR CIVIL DIALOGUE



As September nears, Americans are spectators to some very heated contests. In Major League Baseball, there is the National League West rivalry between the Los Angeles Dodgers and the San Francisco Giants, bitter foes with one game separating them as of this writing. In the American League East we have the well-known enmity between the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox, where nothing stops the physical and verbal brawls between the two teams and their fans.

The bitterest contests, however, are likely found in our local and national elections. Although the war of words between baseball teams is endless, the Catholic bishops of the United States urge Catholics to “contribute to civil and respectful public dialogue [particularly during elections].” (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: Introductory Note*)

What does a civil dialogue look like?

I have a habit of leaving my breakfast dishes in the sink instead of putting them in the dishwasher even though the dishwasher is right there next to the sink. Am I a pig or a slob because of this one bad habit? No, I simply leave my breakfast dishes in the sink. Therefore, while it is right to *complain* that I leave my dirty breakfast dishes in the sink, it is unfair to *criticize* me for being a slob, and it is entirely uncivil to label me a “pig.” Similarly, most of us have heard the adage, “Hate the sin, love the sinner.” This is worth remembering in the midst of disagreements over political issues.

Focusing on the difference and not the person, however admirable this behavior is, may still not be enough. Because someone disagrees with your position does not necessarily mean that he or she is wrong, that your complaint is valid, or that his or her position is even remotely a sin. Jesus is the Truth, yet even the apostles that knew Him differed and disagreed. We aspire to a sense of personal confidence and inner peace that allows us to accept the differences between us and to accept that, guided by the Holy Spirit, we walk different paths at different paces as we journey to the Truth.

As people of God, let us pray daily, especially during this election season, that we manifest the love that God has for us by treating each other with civility and dignity.

Ground Rules for Civil Dialogue (From the USCCB)

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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