WHAT DO YOU SAY WHEN ...

Your sister wants to argue about religion at family dinners?
THE QUESTION:

At family dinners, my sister and I always seem to end up arguing about religion. If we, as Catholics, possess the truth, can’t I just tell her she’s wrong?

First, it is important to acknowledge the truth that being religious does not mean being perfect. Religious people are subject to the same cultural blind spots and social conditioning as everyone else.

The Catholic Church certainly recognizes this. For example, the Church teaches that our sins are forgiven and that we are made “holy and without blemish” through our baptism. However, the new life granted to us in baptism does not mean that we will remain “holy and without blemish.” Our human nature remains frail and weak. What’s more, we still tend toward sin, which makes a holy life oriented toward eternal life a continuous struggle.

THE QUESTION

Every truth claim has the character of an absolute. When we believe something to be true, then that is it for us. If it is true, then we are obligated to believe it — that is, if we do not want to live according to a falsehood or knowingly introduce contradiction into our lives.

So when we disagree about faith, each person believes he or she possesses the truth. The temptation is to label the opposing truth claim as bad. If we characterize it as wrong and evil, then we feel it can be dismissed and we can rest assured of the rightness and superiority of our position. We never have to enter humbly into respectful dialogue and debate about the truth.

Of course, by choosing the easy way of refusing to engage in respectful dialogue, we de facto can become guilty of that for which we are convicting the other side.

SEEKING THE TRUTH

The Catholic faith calls us to the truth. This truth is Jesus Christ, a whole and indivisible person. Part of what this means practically is that we are to reject all that is false and to affirm all that is true. In short, we are called to a life of discernment that is indeed arduous. We are constantly tempted to either accept the false as true or reduce reality to a partial truth at the expense of the fullness of truth.

The task can become even more daunting when we encounter what seems to be a reasonable position that contradicts the teachings of Christ and his Church. How do we handle such a situation?

Do we simply accept the challenge as true? No, at least hopefully not. If Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life, then anything that contradicts his teachings and that of his Spirit-led Church must necessarily contain some element of falsehood within it. However, to stand against such a challenge, especially when it is a very popular position and accepted as true by the dominant culture, is to risk being labeled as a hateful or bigoted person.

Do we counter the position by mounting a “defense” of the Church’s teachings? At times, this approach is certainly warranted. However, those who are nonbelievers or lukewarm about their faith often will not be moved by such arguments. Convinced of the rightness of their own position, they will be deaf to and dismissive of your arguments regardless of their validity.

Is there a third way? I believe so. The key is finding and articulating the element of falsehood that must be present in the challenge if Christianity is taken as true. By demonstrating the falsehood or illogic inherent in the challenge itself, the ground can be prepared for the truth of the Gospel message to break in. Seeing the false as false then becomes the major task for the believer.

APPROACH WITH LOVE

Finally, remember to approach others in love. Jesus did not tell us to argue others into faith, but to “love one another as I have loved you.” (Jn 13:34) ἡ

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Consider prayerfully reading the following Scripture passage:

- “Then to what shall I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children who sit in the marketplace and call to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, but you did not dance. We sang a dirge, but you did not weep.’”

- “For John the Baptist came neither eating food nor drinking wine, and you said, ‘He is possessed by a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking and you said, ‘Look, he is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is vindicated by all her children.” (Lk 7:31-35)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. Reflect for a few moments on this passage: What do these words of Jesus have to teach us about the nature of society when it comes to discerning the truth?

EVANGELIZATION QUIZ

- Who said the following? When you seek truth, you seek God whether you know it or not.

A. St. Jerome
B. St. Isidore
C. St. Teresa of Avila
D. St. Teresa Benedicta (Edith Stein)

ANSWER: D. St. Teresa Benedicta

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