

Arguing vs Dialogue

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

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“What were you arguing about on the way?” This was the question Jesus asked his disciples once they reached Capernaum after their journey through Galilee. He could very well ask that same question of all of us in 2021. ‘What are you arguing about on the way?’

The preferred style of communication in today’s world is argumentation. When presented with a different perspective, opinion, or answer, our way of dealing with it is to get assertive, combative, and defensive. In other words, like the disciples, we want to show why we are the greatest and the others are the least. Yet, it is this very dynamic that Jesus reversed. As he said to his disciples, “If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.” The wisdom of Jesus is that whenever we are no longer concerned with being the greatest, we are less argumentative.

In his document on marriage and family life, Pope Francis advocates for dialogue instead of arguing as the preferred style of communication. Like Jesus, the pope recognizes that dialogue begins whenever we have a servant attitude. Whereas arguing is assertive, combative, and defensive, dialogue is constructive and creative. Even if the other person still wants to argue, we can initiate the conversation from a place of humility. To help us enter into dialogue, Pope Francis offers the following advice:

Develop the habit of giving real importance to the other person.

This means appreciating them and recognizing their right to exist,

to think as they do and to be happy. Never downplay what they say or think, even if you need to express your own point of view. Everyone has something to contribute, because they have their life experiences, they look at things from a different standpoint and they have their own concerns, abilities and insights. We ought to be able to acknowledge the other person's truth, the value of his or her deepest concerns, and what it is that they are trying to communicate, however aggressively. We have to put ourselves in their shoes and try to peer into their hearts, to perceive their deepest concerns and to take them as a point of departure for further dialogue. (*The Joy of Love*, 138)

This advice from the pope sounds very basic and even non-spiritual. Yet, it is very good advice that many people do not follow. If Christians would put it into practice, the world would be in a much better place to deal with our serious current issues as well as the issues that still await us. If not, we will have to resign ourselves to arguing and division.

By becoming the last of all and the servant of all, we can help shift communication in society from arguments to dialogues.

Do I prefer to argue with people? Am I capable of authentic dialogue? What advice from Pope Francis could help me?

As we continue with this mass, let us ask the Lord to help us enter into dialogue with each other. May the Lord not have to disapprovingly ask us, 'what are you arguing about on the way?,' but curiously and happily ask us, 'what are you dialoguing about on the way?'