

Civility and Sanctity in 2021

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When we receive a thank you note in the USPS mail, the sight, texture and heft of it add to its power. The recipient knows that this is a thoughtful gesture worth the price of a stamp.

There is also a proportionate force attached to a letter of negative criticism. Written criticisms are often received as a hundred times harsher to the eye – and heart – of the addressee. We should be thus mindful of the recipient.

As I have huddled with my brother bishops in 2020, more by videoconference than in person, we have all commented about a general lack of civility in public discourse. What is increasingly visible to many people is the negative tenor of many letter-borne, or web-borne messages by Church members critical of other Catholics, clergy or laity.

Rather than questioning whether certain events happened the way they were reported, some people are too quick to assume every assertion is true—and then rebroadcast it. When I was a child, we learned that not everything we read in newspapers was a proven fact. This lesson transfers less easily to ‘news’ on the web or social media.

The Eighth Commandment is: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” To study the tradition around this commandment is to learn that it cautions against gossip or spreading damaging news about someone – even if it is true! This is where wise grandparents know better than to tell grandchildren about the dumb things the grandkids’ parents did as teenagers.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church discusses this commandment in paragraphs 2464 through 2513. Paragraph 2478 tells us, “To avoid rash judgment, everyone should be careful to interpret insofar as possible his neighbor’s thoughts, words, and deeds in a favorable way.”

I pulled my Baltimore Catechism No 2 (1960 edition) off the shelf for its take on this commandment. The wording is spare, but the page holds an ink drawing of a revolver (a firearm) shooting out rash judgement, calumny, slander and lies – a graphic suggesting the damage these things do!

Heading into the year 2021, it behooves us to review Church teaching on respect for persons and their reputations. It surprises some people that Canon Law applies to all of us, not clergy only. Canon 220 reads, “No one is permitted to harm illegitimately the good reputation which a person possesses nor to injure the right of any person to protect his or her own privacy.” I realize that certain folks will jump on the word “illegitimately” to support many a righteous impulse. But a legitimate comment about another person, group or their motives must be based on facts, not assertions. (Please tell the court how you know that what you say is a fact, not hearsay.)

Yes, there is much in the world that needs correction, but God’s grace will be the determining factor if we welcome it by our actions. In 2021, I am resolved to view everyone in a favorable way. I know that the default to cynicism and irony take far less energy, but these were not the purpose of our being adopted into Christ in baptism.

Let us seek the high road that is illuminated with St. Paul's words to the Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."