



FRANCISCAN ACTION NETWORK

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On Civility in Political Communication

by Albert Merz, OFM

I was in Ruston, Louisiana, helping with a retreat for the college students at Louisiana Tech when I received the call inviting me to write this article. On my way back to Nashville I stopped at the Old Country Store Restaurant in Jackson, Tennessee. On the wall next to my table was an old plaque with the following message:

The Four-Way Test of the things we think, say or do:

- 1. *Is it the truth?***
- 2. *Is it fair to all concerned?***
- 3. *Will it build good will and better friendships?***
- 4. *Will it be beneficial to all concerned?***

These words provide a good beginning for the thoughts I have to offer regarding the need for civility in how we speak to each other about our differing political points of view.

Our answers to the first two questions are likely to be subject to our personal beliefs and convictions. While born with a God-given dignity in which we all share, in reality we are not shaped just by knowing this truth. Rather, we are shaped by the “Cast of Characters” in our lives: the people, the institutions, and the events we experience. By nature we are inclined to reflect on these experiences. Our perspectives/points of view/convictions/beliefs are born out of these reflections.

Since no one of us has exactly the same “cast of characters” in our lives, no one of us will have exactly the same point of view about anything. Hence, we are faced with not only the reality of differences of opinion that we can shrug off and go on living our own way, but also the reality of serious disagreements that we cannot walk away from because they affect the lives of all of us. The political reality is that we currently differ in what we consider the TRUTH (confer question #1 above). And we currently differ in what we see as FAIR to all concerned (confer question #2 above).

That we have disagreements is not the primary problem relative to being civil or uncivil toward each other. In fact, being stretched by the opposite ends of the spectrum of opinion, we actually can discover a pathway to new growth, a pathway to something better. How we handle the disagreements is the difference maker between finding this pathway or not. Our behavior, verbal or otherwise, in dealing with the differences can result in either building good will or destroying it (confer question #3 above).

At the heart of the process is communication. While there are a variety of forms of communication, I am focusing on verbal communication. It is my firm belief that all good communication on serious matters



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must begin in silence – reflective silence. In this silence we do the mental and spiritual work on: a) what is to be said; b) to whom it is to be said; c) how it is to be said; d) when it is to be said. Our reflective response to these four questions will guide us in determining whether our communication will build or diminish relationships, whether it will benefit or hinder the common good (confer question #4 above).

It is also vital that we realize all communication is subject to at least a two-fold filtering process. The thoughts of the one communicating go through the filter of his/her perspectives which were born out of a unique “cast of characters.” The one being communicated to in turn “hears” through the filter of his/her own perspectives. We are seldom sensitive enough to this filtering. Communication is difficult enough when we are sensitive to it. Communication becomes at best a noble effort when we are not sensitive to it.

Of particular concern in our current political environment is how we are talking not “with” but “to” or “at” each other. We certainly, as a whole, have not been deserving of high marks for civility. Perhaps we are not fully aware of the power of our choice of words, our tone of voice, or our attitude of righteousness that comes across.

One of the consequences of incivility in how we talk “to” or “at” each other is alienation. People are pushed apart rather than pulled together. The roots of solutions to society’s problems have to be found in common ground. It is almost impossible to find this common ground in a non-relational environment.

The more threatening consequence of incivility in how we talk “to” or “at” each other is that it can become a “seed of violence.” Our minds and our emotions feed on words. Both the speaker and the hearer are affected by them. There is an old saying: “We become what we eat.” In an applied sense we might say: “We become what we speak.” The very words we speak change us. We can calm ourselves and we can ignite ourselves by the words and tone we use. Likewise we can affect the ones to whom we are speaking.

Incivility in how we communicate, therefore, has the potential of raising the emotional level of the speaker from a feeling of “disagreement with” to a feeling of “disrespect for” the listeners, and perhaps even to a level of wanting to do harm. There was a recent news story in the Midwest about a person who built up more and more anger in himself the more he talked about his position on health care reform, that he wound up ramming his truck into the back of a car that had a bumper sticker of the political party he did not like.

Incivility in how we communicate also affects the listener, the receiver of the communication. There is always some level of an emotional effect. The deeper the effect, the greater the inclination of the



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listener to make a retaliatory response. When this happens, both parties find themselves on a pathway to mutual disrespect and mutual obstinacy. Witness our current political reality.

Earlier I said no one of us will have exactly the same point of view about anything. That is one truth about us. Another truth – a more important one – is that we share a common dignity as human beings. Perhaps the main reason we are behaving less civilly these days does not lie so much in a conscious intent to be uncivil as it does in the possibility that we have forgotten who we are, that our nature calls for mutual respect. In our Franciscan tradition we speak of the need to *reverence* each other, i.e., to “hold sacred” our brothers and sisters in the human family. This reverence is manifested in how we treat each other in both word and action.

Recently I read that the public school system in the United States grew out of a concern on the part of our political leaders that people were losing a sense of the common good, i.e., they were becoming *uncivil*. Therefore, the need for education in civics in the original meaning of the word was deemed necessary. *Civility*, then, really means more than just being polite. It means genuinely respecting and caring for one another.

It seems to me that we need to revive such courses in civics, but this time in adult education programs. I would visualize the course syllabus to include the following topics:

- 1) How perspectives are formed – thus we could respect how others obtained their points of view;
- 2) The value of open-mindedness to a diverse pool of ideas – thus we might spawn a greater idea;
- 3) The necessity of serving the common good – thus we would realize the need for some individual sacrificing;
- 4) The importance of building trust in the community – thus we would be able to function together;
- 5) The significance of respect and civility in communication – thus we could maintain a positive atmosphere for creative progress.

Paul Newman had a line in an old movie called **Cool Hand Luke**. In a standoff with the police he yells out: “What we have here is a failure to communicate.” May I paraphrase this and say: “What we have here is a failure to communicate civilly.” We have nothing to gain and a lot to lose if we do not do something about it.

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