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Chapter 10

TEN PRINCIPLES OF CIVIL COMMUNICATION

Here are the ten principles which helped Catholic Voices develop the mind-set needed for this work:

1. Look for the positive intention behind the criticism.

Rather than the arguments you are going to face, consider the value that those arguments appeal to. Look for the (sometimes buried) Christian ethic behind the value. Which other (Christian) values is the critic ignoring, or has he not properly taken into account? Issues become neuralgic when they are about absolutes; clashes — like wars — happen when those absolute values appear threatened. That's what produces defensiveness and antagonism.

Rather than fall into this trap, consider the various values at stake and how they are to be weighed against each other. Then consider how, very early in the discussion, you can appeal to the value your critic is upholding. This has a disarming effect and frees both of you up for a calmer, considered discussion. You're no longer a warrior in a cultural battle for absolutes, but one bringing breadth and wisdom to a contentious issue.

Sometimes the value you uncover will not be a shared Christian value, but one directly at odds with the Christian conception. In many of the discussions about the state and society, for example, you may find yourself up against an individualistic or utilitarian viewpoint. But the principle still applies: it's important to understand the value involved — and if you can, to name it — and show that there are underlying principles at stake.

The purpose of the positive-intention exercise is to be able to distinguish between primary and secondary matters; our reasoning starts from our deep-seated values and moves to secondary considerations. Being able to distinguish the two, both in our own arguments and those of others, frees both sides up.

2. Shed light, not heat.

As people of faith we want to shed light on the difficult topics — enough heat has already been generated. But we also want to represent in ourselves

and in our manner the Church we belong to and which has formed us.

If you come to the discussion to shed light rather than heat, your emphasis will be completely different. You will be a keen listener to the other's views and opinions, however much you disagree. Your objective will be to let chinks of light into the subject, to open up the discussion, to respect their views while holding your own.

Just as you can "catch" faith by witnessing the lives of people of faith who impress you, so you can catch "light" in an argument. Staying calm always works.

3. People won't remember what you said as much as how you made them feel.

Intellectuals and theologians, beware. Erudition is the opposite of communication, which uses simple words to explain complex ideas. It's not just about the lucidity of your arguments. It's about the effect that your words have on others.

Of course the truth of what you say matters. The purpose of being a CatholicVoice is above all to clarify. What we set out to do in responding to questions or criticisms is to shed light where there is currently darkness and confusion. But it is not *we* who persuade; it is the Truth. Our task is to serve the Truth the best we can. And we serve Truth best when we do not try to "defeat" those who object. Aim for civility, empathy, and clarity.

Deft rhetorical maneuvers and point-scoring can be excellent games, but they do not illuminate. A vigorous debate is unlikely to alter perceptions. The danger is that you will "win" the argument and lose the audience, whether two or (in a TV news broadcast) two million people.

Evaluate, therefore, after each exchange, according to one criterion alone: Did I help others understand better the Church's teaching or positions? And how did I make everyone feel? Uplifted, or battered? Inspired, or harried? Anxious to hear more, or relieved I stopped?

4. Show, don't tell.

This foundational principle of good writing applies to communication generally. People prefer stories to lectures, and are more convinced by experience than abstract argument. That doesn't mean you shouldn't use arguments — this book is full of them. But where you can, supplement them with illustrations: anecdotes from personal experience, or

hypothetical situations which help people to “imagine” what you are trying to say. Rather than tell someone that the Church assists AIDS sufferers in Africa, tell them about the hospitals and dispensaries in the remotest villages in the African countryside where nuns care for patients in ramshackle huts. Rather than say we need more hospices — which are vague, unknown institutions to most people — paint the picture of places where the dying are helped and reassured, and invite people to imagine what it would be like if we had more of them. Think of yourself not as the spokesman of a remote corporation, but as a delighted disciple with stories and experiences to share.

5. Think in triangles.

Discussions can be very disorganized, meandering down various blind alleys until the whole theme of the discussion is lost. Make sure your contribution is concise and clear and doesn't lead anyone else off the beaten track. Hone your thoughts down to the three important points you want to make. It's very unusual for you to be able to make them all; if you can get two out of three into the discussion you'll be doing well. But it's important for you to marshal your thoughts into the three points.

See them as a triangle. Whenever you are in a discussion think how it relates to the triangle. Then bring in your point. Don't get distracted by other people into abandoning your points; don't wait for the “right” moment to make your points; simply identify where the discussion is in relation to the points on your triangle.

Although the “key messages” at the end of each chapter are more than three, you'll find these a useful place to identify your triangle. At least one of those points should address the positive intention behind the criticism. Having made it allows you then to proceed to the other two points.

6. Be positive.

This is a baseline communication principle, and doubly important when we are making the Church's case *against* something. The Church *is* against many things, but only because it is *for* so much more — there is much it wishes to protect and enhance. Almost everything the Church says is because it wants to call people — and society in general — to fullness of life, health, and sustainable prosperity. The Church is not a grim-faced moral policeman; it is more like Mother Teresa, tending to the world's

forgotten and ailing people, and it is worth holding up that image when you speak of the Church's teaching. Experience — of prayer, reflection on Scripture, and centuries of deep immersion into humanity's deepest struggles — have made the Church an "expert in humanity." It offers a series of signposts which highlight the wrong turns and dead ends on the road to human flourishing, both in the lives of individuals and in the architecture of society.

Being positive is not about smiling and being "nice." It is about bringing the discussion back to the positive vision the Church has for people — the endless, wonderful possibilities of our freedom. Catholic Voices should be idealists and radicals, inviting society to another, better way. Pro-lifers should sound like anti-slavery campaigners, not admonishing moralists, just as opponents of assisted dying should be campaigners for hospices on every corner. Don't be a grim reaper; be the angel that points to the brighter horizon.

7. Be compassionate.

Compassion is a quality for which Christians are meant to be famous, yet which is sadly often missing in a discussion with a Catholic. The main reason is covered above, in the positive-intention point: we feel that our most treasured values are threatened. People who care passionately are often frustrated with others who appear to be dismissing or ignoring what is important to them. Yet that frustration is essentially self-centered. You are demanding that another understands and values what you regard as important. But the critic is also someone who regards what he or she believes as important, and is likely to be frustrated that you do not value that. A vicious cycle is set up.

Learning to be compassionate, even in heated exchanges, is key to breaking out of this cycle of mutual rebuke. Underneath almost all of the neuralgic issues treated in this book are deeply personal ethical questions: ones of sexuality, dying, illness, belief. It is very likely that the person you are in discussion with has had direct experience of the neuralgic issue, either personally, or witnessing firsthand; or has an experience of authority and institutions that have left them hurt. You may or may not know that they have had that experience; if not, you should assume it. God is a common scapegoat for anger, a lightning rod for otherwise unfocused frustrations. Being compassionate is about understanding this anger and hurt, and relating to it, as one human being to another.

Critics of the Church are particularly sensitive to Catholics appearing robotically to repeat what they have been "told" to think. Personal experience is opposed to institutional orthodoxy, the experience of individual victims is counterposed to the collective interest, and so on. In these contrapositions, the Catholic always comes off worse — not least because putting people before institutions is at the heart of Christianity itself. There is a prejudice that the Church operates by pumping out papal diktats hungrily consumed by people anxious to avoid thinking for themselves. But more important is the notion — we might even call it a positive intention — that it is experience that carries the greatest authority.

How to avoid appearing the cold, callous representative of a distant human institution is a constant challenge for Catholic Voices. There are many ways of stepping away from this trap: speaking from experience yourself, telling stories which also appeal to emotion, or providing counterexamples. But it may be that sometimes we simply need to be good listeners, ready to absorb the anger and hurt that some people have with the Church; that in itself is a valuable compassionate tool. If it is their first experience of being listened to by a person of faith, compassion is the most valuable witness we can offer.

8. Check your facts, but avoid robotics.

Part of good preparation is marshaling helpful facts and figures that reframe the discussion. But remember that statistics can appear abstract and inhuman, or a cover: politicians using them are usually thought to be lying. Above all avoid statistical ping-pong. If you must use statistics, keep them simple. Make sure that your figures are on the point and clear—and expressed in human, clear language: not 30 out of a 100 people, but "one in three"; and not "25 percent" but "a quarter." Use them only when they say what needs to be said, not simply as reinforcements.

Criticisms of the Church are often based on a misquotation or lack of understanding of the complete picture. So it's important to go to the sources and see where the truth has been twisted or imperfectly grasped. Remember the bigger picture: priest numbers in the United States are far lower than they were thirty years ago, but still more (relative to numbers of Catholics) than almost anywhere in the world. A fact is meaningless without context and perspective.

Remember, too, that you can't say everything; time — and attention spans — are limited. Focus on what's to the point, and important. Leave less important issues for later.

9. It's not about you.

Good communication is essentially about putting the ego in the back seat. It's not *you* that the critic is failing to value or respect; it's what you represent. Your fear, self-consciousness, and defensiveness are the products of your protesting ego. Think of John the Baptist, a fearless communicator; his strength came from knowing that he was the glass door through which people would come to Christ.

So let's nail this question of whether you are going to give a fantastic or dreadful performance. A certain degree of nervousness before speaking in public is inevitable. The adrenalin helps you focus. But excessive nervousness is often a sign of self-consciousness. Remember, people are not interested in what *you* think; they are interested in what you *think*.

The ego however tricks us into believing that *we* are the focus, which makes us alternately jittery with nerves, or puffed up with an absurd pride. If you're nervous, you might jabber, trying to get all your points out at once. Take a few deep breaths to calm down before you start and pause before you answer. The best way of stilling nerves, of course, is to prepare well.

Praying before entering the studio or a debate is vital: not just to calm the nerves and to put the ego in the backseat, but also to remember who and what this is for. Pray for the Holy Spirit to be with you and speaking through you. And try the Catholic Voices prayer at the end of this chapter.

If it does go badly, rejoice! Success has almost nothing to teach us. Ask someone you trust to go through it with you and see where you went wrong and where you could improve. This is where learning happens, and be glad of the lesson.

And remember: this is much less important than you think. And you were certainly not as bad as you thought.

You are doing God's work and trying your best. That is always enough, even if it goes badly. The ego would like to persuade us that we are either the world's greatest orator, or the most wretched creature ever to be dragged before a microphone. The truth is that we are neither, and mostly quite good. Settle for that.

10. Witnessing, not winning.

One of the journalists assigned to cover the papal trip was relaxing in a London pub after covering Benedict XVI's second day in London. At the table next to him were two young women who were looking up without much interest at the live coverage of the pope arriving in Hyde Park. Two articulate, passionate, young Catholic Voices were being interviewed and giving commentary, explaining, concisely and joyfully, what the pope meant to them, to Catholics, and to the United Kingdom; and why they regarded the trip as beneficial for society as a whole. After they had finished, one young woman in the pub turned to the other and said: "Well, I suppose they're not all crazy, then." The American journalist told us: "Looks like you hit a home run there."

The power of these reactions is not something that is easy to gauge. But many people who come back to the Church after many years away, or who decide to inquire about becoming Catholic, will often cite hearing someone or seeing someone saying something that struck them, and which nagged at them.

Mostly, though, it's not the result of a dazzling argument or a beautiful turn of a phrase. Mostly it's a "reframing": a prejudice or preconception is challenged, or even reversed. We call this "conversion." The model is Saint Paul, who turned from a persecutor of Christians to the most famous of Christ's witnesses. His conversion involved a new way of seeing. Having been scandalized by Christianity, and wanting to destroy it, he came to see that what scandalized him was none other than the Truth.

Inviting people to see the Church differently by communicating the truth about it is what Catholic Voices exists for.

In the Introduction we spoke of the way the Catholic faith "scandalizes": it causes people to react strongly and ask hard questions. We noted how a *skandalon* is an obstacle in the path. It causes people to stop and think, and question. And that can be the start of another path, one that leads, potentially, to a new way of looking at something. Or it can lead to the "turning away" which Jesus warns of. The task of Catholic Voices is to insert ourselves into precisely that moment, that moment of scandal when people have not yet turned away completely, but are indignant, or confused, or curious. Every challenge to us is an opportunity to witness: clarifying misunderstanding, shedding light where there is myth and confusion, demonstrating empathy and compassion and a deeper vision.

The enemy of such a witness is a desire to “win” and “defeat.” An attitude of rivalry and victory, of winners and losers, of “us and them,” of “right and wrong” — this is the language of battles and sieges, of war and persecution. There are not a few Catholics who want to take up cudgels on behalf of a pope they believe to be unfairly maligned on issues such as gay adoption or clerical sex abuse. But while they are right to want to defend him, and to put the record straight, they have to avoid being part of the same cycle of accusation and defense.

As a model, take Jesus in the Gospel of John: endlessly harried and challenged, he never falls into the attitude of a persecuted victim.

No one stands outside that cycle better than Pope Benedict himself. What did he do, after landing in Scotland? He praised Britain, gave thanks for the hospitality, kissed babies, and melted hearts. He had strong words — scandalous words — for his listeners; but they were words of reason, compassion, and conviction. He did not command, but appealed. He showed compassion, empathy, and real love. But because he had first witnessed, the British people were ready to listen. That was his victory, and it’s the only kind we should seek.

Catholic Voices Prayer

*God our Father,
Bless and guide all those involved in Catholic Voices.
Give us the gifts of the Holy Spirit that we need for this work,
especially wisdom, gentleness, courage, and joy.
Help us to be faithful to Christ and to his Church,
and to be open to the questions that people bring us.
Help us to love and respect all those we meet.
Support us in our difficulties and setbacks.
May our words and the witness of our lives
give you glory and help others to be more open to you.
We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us.
St. Francis de Sales, pray for us.
Blessed Titus Brandsma, pray for us.
Blessed Cardinal Newman, pray for us.*