

Getting to Unity-in-Diversity

The dignity of the human person as the divine image-bearer must be our starting point for dialogue. We hear this statement so often in Catholic circles that it can become a cliché we may zoom right past without thinking about it very much. Sometimes we fail to think about the dignity of those with whom we are having a difficult conversation—even when the disagreement is over what the dignity of the human person means or demands! Speaking as a dyed-in-the-wool Cubs fan, one of the most difficult things my faith teaches me is that even Cardinals fans are made in the image and likeness of God.

And very often it goes well beyond losing sight of the dignity of our perceived opponent; sometimes their dignity is the very thing explicitly being questioned or attacked. Descriptions of fellow Catholics as “monstrous” or “diabolical” are, unfortunately, a dime a dozen in what passes for Catholic discourse today in the United States.

But here’s an uncomfortable truth: it can be extremely difficult to keep the inherent dignity of the person with whom we profoundly disagree at the front of our minds. Though fear and anger can blind us to our own biases and cut us off from a real exchange with someone else, there may be good reasons to be profoundly angry with a fellow Catholic. This should be

fully honored, while at the same time acknowledging that the fundamental reality of the person in front of us is the starting point for any serious exchange. No matter what they think, how they treat us, or where their baseball loyalties lie, they are made in the image and likeness of God.

And this demands something of us—regardless of how uncomfortable it may be.

Love First

Again, one thing should give us confidence going into this: the Church has been dealing with these kinds of challenges for two thousand years and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, has developed a huge arsenal of spiritual and practical tools. Some are as simple as they are powerful.

When I'm caught in the midst of a difficult exchange, one in which I'm prone to forget that the person with whom I'm engaging is a Temple of the Holy Spirit, I remember the great gift the Focolare has given me in the following exhortation: *Be the first to love*. While this plays upon my unreasonably competitive nature, it opens up space for genuine dialogue across difference. Loving first is important at a foundational level because it is what we owe anyone who bears the image and likeness of God. In a very real sense, when we choose to reduce, attack, and demean the dignity of the person in front of us, we choose to attack and demean God's image as well.

That is true regardless of which human being we fail to love. But very often the victim is a fellow baptized Catholic. Again, the contemporary world very often trains us to see fellow Catholics first as allies or foes in relation to secular political goals. Is this a MAGA person, or are they a “social justice warrior”? Is this person an LGBTQ+ ally, or are they “homophobic”? And so on.

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to allow the grace of Christ and of his Church to shape us into those who are the

first to love our perceived opponent. That can happen only when we see them through a very different kind of lens. Before we identify a person in any other way, we must first see them as a family member—a brother or sister in Christ—whom we are called to love before we are called to do anything else.

This, to say the least, is not rewarded in the secular world and especially not on social media—both of which obscure the dignity of those we are taught to dismiss as merely “the other side.” In both political and virtual discourse (and *especially* in virtual discourse about politics), our perceived opponents are depersonalized such that we are almost never confronted with their humanity.

Remember being called into the principal’s office of a Catholic school? (Bonus points if that principal was a nun or priest!) What I’m about to say may feel similar to that, though if it makes you feel any better, I don’t exempt myself from the criticism I’m about to make.

As Catholics we should know better—but very often we don’t do better. Especially on social media, our first reaction is often to attack, disparage, and define by opposition—when we ought to demonstrate respect and even reverence for the shared humanity of our perceived opponents. One way to resist the world’s practices here is to be super intentional about following Christ’s command to genuinely pray for them. It may feel (temporarily) good to “own the libs/cons”—to get the high fives and bro-love from “your side.” But it should go without saying that the very thing that is implied in owning someone in this sense does not start with their dignity as a fellow being created in the image of God. And it almost never arrives at a mutual sense of shared dignity arising from a Gospel-centered love.

But even when we manage to think explicitly about our conversation partners as fellow family members in the Church, the challenges do not magically disappear. Indeed, in

some ways they become more complex. The fact that “familiarity breeds contempt” is one reason there are so many challenges in family life—and this is certainly the case with our Catholic family. We may feel anger or even rage that makes it difficult to imagine how an exchange might go. Or we may not want to validate someone who holds views we abhor by engaging with them.

But, again, they are dignified in the same way “our side” is, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. They are dignified in the most profound way possible: they bear the divine image and are temples of the Holy Spirit. This is an essential and fundamental truth of the Catholic faith.

Do you find yourself getting in your own way when it comes to being the first to love?

Well, good news: there’s a virtue for that.

Listening with Humility

Most of us can think back to a time when we held opinions or views quite different from those we do now. (At one point in my life, for instance, I used to think that wearing spandex shorts was a good idea.) It is overwhelmingly likely that, at some point in the future, we will see some things quite differently than we do now as well. This insight should be enough for us to reserve the right to change our minds in light of a genuine exchange with someone who thinks differently.

When we look back at how we have changed, often we can point to a particular encounter with a person that led to that change. Usually, that encounter was unexpected: God has this way of putting people on our path to lead us where we need to go on our journey of faith.

Not everyone we encounter is such a person, however. (Whichever person in junior high convinced me to wear the spandex shorts was definitely *not* doing this.) In fact, as anyone who looks back into their dating past usually knows all

too well, we are often terrible judges of character. We may think we know everything that's relevant and important about someone we are dating, but more often than not, we don't. That's why we must engage in careful, prayerful discernment about whether a given person is in fact leading us closer to God.

Authentic discernment requires cultivating the virtue of humility by listening to God through prayer, listening to our own hearts (which God often reveals to us through prayer), and listening—genuinely listening—to the human person with whom we are engaging. Only then can we put our own biases, agendas, and expectations aside and allow God's Holy Spirit, through the person we are encountering, the freedom to work in our lives.

As Jesus said to Nicodemus, “The wind blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn 3:8). We need the kind of humility that opens up a space for God and God's image-bearers to move us, sometimes in an unexpected—and perhaps uncomfortable—direction.

Too often, however, the kind of listening we usually do is akin to the way my teenagers “listen” to my explanations for why I'm cutting their screen time. They are listening for weakness or contradiction. “But Dad, you had a different standard just last week!” “But Dad, you use your phone way more than we do!” “But Dad, you say you are doing this for my benefit, but how can it be for my benefit *if I have no friends?!?*”

The current discourse (especially on social media) trains us how to listen for a mistake or gap to name and exploit. This is the opposite of listening with the humility that makes it possible for us to love first, to allow the encounter with the person to bring us closer to God and God's will for us. What we've become accustomed to doing reinforces our own biases

and closes us off from having them genuinely challenged and allowing those challenges to change our minds.

I'm all for a good argument. Having an exchange about gaps in logical reasoning is super important. Plus, in the right context, a good argument can be fun and build bonds of love between people who already know and trust each other. But this is not the place to *begin* an encounter with another person. A productive argument is possible only after one has acknowledged and committed to respect the fullness of another's humanity.

Especially when it comes to discourse on sensitive topics and ones that typically happen on social media, a lack of listening (again, related to a lack of genuine encounter with the fullness of a real person) leads us to reduce a point of view to something we don't like about who they are. For example, "His view about Y says so much about his white privilege." Or, "Her view about X comes from her trying to justify her own lifestyle!"

Still less should we build fences by using thin and flat labels to describe our perceived opponents. It may give us a quick dopamine hit to score a rhetorical point, especially online, and watch the affirmation from our side flow in. But using phrases such as "anti-science" or "pro-birth" boxes someone into a thin caricature that can then be dismissed as obviously wrong or even evil. And while the substantive issues gestured at by references to lifestyle, privilege, science, and the significance of birth may end up playing a role in a love-centered exchange of different ideas, we must never, ever reduce a person into a thin caricature. Doing so misunderstands and even disrespects the kind of creature God created them to be.

Instead, we must strive to listen with the kind of humility that allows a "thick" story of who a person is and why they

hold the views they do to emerge—even though this may challenge (rather than simply confirm) our biases.

Thick Is Greater than Thin and Dimensional Is Greater than Flat

It's often a struggle to genuinely engage the fullness of another human being. It can be difficult to be open to the "thickness" of his or her perspective because it forces us to go beyond a quick and dirty label and enter into the reality of someone we may feel more comfortable dismissing as obviously wrong or evil. Recall the flattening out of complex people into "woke social justice warriors" or "alt-right white supremacists."

But another major reason it can be difficult to avoid substituting caricatures for people is that it takes hard work over a period time to build a real relationship, not just a virtual one, with strangers we will never meet, and not merely an acquaintance with fellow parishioners. Building a relationship of encounter and hospitality with someone else is the only way to get the thick and multidimensional version of who they are. Over time, we learn the answers to the kinds of questions that give us a deeper understanding of who they are. What is their history? What have they been through? What experiences have they had that we have not? Might they have reasons for taking a position that we disagree with or haven't thought about? Is their view on one issue (where we disagree) connected to their view on another issue (where we agree) in ways we couldn't see before?

Again, there is an important place for hashing out arguments and evidence, for speaking and writing precisely and carefully. But there is something uniquely important and revealing about an embodied, in-person encounter. And making a physical place for someone, perhaps even in one's home or other personal space in the spirit of hospitality, increases the capacity to thicken the encounter in ways I don't think we fully understand or appreciate. Phrases like "the eyes are

the window to the soul”—along with references to “vibe” and “body language”—hint at some of what goes on in an embodied encounter. In an embodied encounter, we have much more access to the fullness of who someone is (and they to us!)—and in ways that surely elude us if all we have are words on a page or screen or if we see them only through Zoom or video platforms. Ultimately, though we experience it countless times in our lives, what happens in an embodied encounter is a mystery that defies rational explanation.

And there is something deeply theological here. The Father sends the Son to us through the Spirit *not* by means of words on a page or even as an image. As important as words and images can be, God came to us *by means of a physical, embodied encounter*. Catholic life is an ongoing encounter with a God who became a human being in the flesh through the Blessed Mother Mary. The first Christians got to encounter Jesus in a special way in history, but Christ left us a way to experience him by means of another kind of physical, embodied encounter: the Eucharist. Because of the Eucharist, we connect to Christ in a deeper, more authentic, and more intimate way.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Catholics felt distant from our faith, not just because many couldn't attend Mass but also because we missed the physical, embodied, sacramental encounter with the Lord through the Eucharist. The intense feeling I had going to Mass (and especially getting in the Communion line) after so many months of not being able to be present was unlike anything I had ever experienced. It was so clear that I had missed this embodied experience on a fundamental level. Though I had watched it many, many times on a virtual live stream, the mysterious difference of the embodied encounter was as real as it gets. Again, it is a mystery, but as with other kinds of physical, embodied encounters, we just know there is something different about that kind of relationship.

Our world is pushing us away from these kinds of embodied relationships. Our faith, however, is drawing us toward them. Again, the temptation here is for us to see others as perceived opponents and dismiss them without ever having to take them seriously as people. But we must push back against a throwaway culture that discards people and insist instead on a culture of encounter and hospitality that reveals the thickness and fullness of another's perspective—especially when we don't see eye to eye.

The Cost of Encounter

I want to emphasize that mere “happy talk” accomplishes nothing. We should be clear-eyed about what I've just proposed might mean for us: radical discomfort. It might mean engaging with a Catholic who voted for Donald Trump or one who identifies with they/them pronouns. It might mean singing a few Mass responses in Latin or calling young children into the sanctuary for the homily at the “family Mass.” It might mean cultivating precisely the kinds of difficult encounters from which our sorted, categorized culture is designed to shield us, and not only with the intention of scoring points or changing others' points of view.

But as I recently wrote in my “Purple Catholicism” column for the Religion News Service, the Focolare Movement reminds us that Christ-centered love means dialoguing into the pain of “Jesus forsaken,” that is, the dying Christ who felt the terrible pain of being abandoned by the Father while on the Cross.¹ It means choosing the self-emptying love required to have difficult encounters and to make those encounters fruitful. It means being vulnerable to the reality of someone with views that not only offend us but also make us deeply uncomfortable. Uniting ourselves with Jesus forsaken by living out a culture of encounter and hospitality can blast apart the protective shells guarding our safe spaces and open us to

the fullness of the reality—often a painful reality—of those with whom we find conversation difficult. It can also blast apart those same barriers in the person we are engaging in dialogue.

And this need not be only or even mostly a fearful or negative experience. I can't help but think of Pope Francis recently urging us to live with the *joy* of someone who has the stigmata.² Yes, the kind of exchange and dialogue I'm proposing here can be deeply uncomfortable, but with the right attitude, it can also be joyful, life-giving, and exciting.

This kind of Christian adventure requires us to cast out into the deep. Here I'm moved to invoke J. R. R. Tolkien and especially his image of Bilbo Baggins finding the courage to leave the safe space of his hobbit hole and embrace the "Tookish" side of himself. Tolkien describes it this way in *The Hobbit*:

Then something Tookish woke inside of him, and he wished to go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine-trees and the waterfalls, and explore the caves, and wear a sword instead of a walking stick.

Far too often, US Catholics find ourselves trapped by our comfortable, safe, sorted lives. And while there is nothing wrong with being comfortable, safe, and sorted, when that kind of life becomes a dangerous idol—one that keeps us from being able to encounter the fullness of our fellow Catholics—then it is time to burst out of the door of our hobbit holes, make for the Inn of the Prancing Pony, and see what adventures God has in store for us.

Paying Attention to Power

Mike Tyson is not traditionally invoked as a font of wisdom. But perhaps the most powerful puncher in the history of boxing did get one thing profoundly correct when he was quoted as saying, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the

mouth.” In a variation on that theme, we might also say that it is all well and good to have the kind of plan I’ve articulated thus far—but if we fear being punched in the mouth or have been punched in the mouth in the past, then maybe the plan isn’t worth all that much.

We must pay close attention to how power is functioning in our relationships. Power is often at the heart of why someone articulates the view they do—and also, significantly, why someone may be afraid to articulate a more authentic position. A good dialogue must think about power in the life of our conversation partner, in our own lives, and in the relationship between them and us. And it is only when we enter into the fullness of their “thick” reality—only when we start with loving them as a child of God and brother or sister in Christ—that we can really discern how power is functioning.

And here we can start with a few questions for ourselves:

- Do we feel free to say what we really believe to be true?
- What orthodoxies are present that we do not feel free to challenge?
- Who might, through the use of power, enforce these orthodoxies in ways that could harm us or those close to us if we do not conform?
- How might our answers to these questions limit our ability to really listen and engage?

We can then ask similar questions about the person we’re engaging and think about how it might impact their ability to listen and engage:

- Are we getting the full and unvarnished truth?
- Might there be important things that aren’t being said or important context that isn’t being offered?

And then there’s the power dynamics of the relationship between us: