



## Catholic Social Thought and Civil Discourse

Many of us breathed a sigh of relief when the last election ended. We have come through long months wishing, as our bishops have written, "In public life, it is important to practice the virtues of charity and justice that are at the core of our Tradition."<sup>1</sup>

Cardinal Donald Wuerl named the problem five years ago, "Increasingly, there is a tendency to disparage the name and reputation, the character and life, of a person because he or she holds a different position."<sup>2</sup> The Cardinal enumerated some repeated defaming words: hate mongers, traitors, unpatriotic, anti-Catholic bigots, racists, and homophobic. These words, he wrote, "speak more about political posturing than about reasoned discourse."<sup>3</sup>

In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity.

Wuerl asked, "Why is it so important that we respect both our constitutional right to free speech and our moral obligation that we not bear false witness against another?" His simple but profound response is that "we do not live alone."<sup>4</sup> People live in community, and communities of all kinds—including nations—require mutual trust. The Eighth Commandment spells this out: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."<sup>5</sup>

Our freedom of speech is not about saying whatever we want about others, but "only what is true."<sup>6</sup> "Spin," internet rumors, and gossip are all forms of untruth that damage other human persons. According to Wuerl: "Irresponsible blogs, electronic and print media stories, and pulpit and podium people-bashing rhetoric can be likened to many forms of anonymous violence."

### *Changing the Discourse*

Moral theologian Jim Keenan, SJ, authored essays on six "Virtues for Civil Society"<sup>7</sup> needed to change public discourse. *Civility* is about proportionality, about an "enduring sense of good or appropriate and measured responses" to others. *Tolerance* calls us to be open to understanding, willing to listen and

learn, trying to understand others' opinions, and appreciating diversity and pluralism as ways "to promote a better society." *Humility* acknowledges the limits of what people do know and that "what they need to know, they could learn from others."

The promotion of *justice*, Keenan continues, is the entire purpose of civil society. Society's future depends on civic discourse that promotes the ethical search to develop the common good of our society and fairness for all. *Mercy*, defined as "the willingness to enter into the chaos of another," "decenters" us in ways that change our understanding of the world, ourselves, and God. Lastly, *solidarity* calls us to move from the sidelines of society into solidarity to guarantee the rights of all those who are excluded or oppressed; and, until we do so, they will need to break through our comfort, ease, innocence, and complacency.

### *Church Discourse*

The same virtues are needed within the Church, where disputes are sometimes even more heated. It is well then to remember these words of Pope John XXIII:

Far from jeopardizing the Church's unity, controversies, as a noted English author, John Henry Cardinal Newman, has remarked, can actually pave the way for its attainment. For discussion can lead to fuller and deeper understanding of religious truths; when one idea strikes against another, there may be a spark.<sup>8</sup>

Pope John continued, "But the common saying, expressed in various ways and attributed to various authors, must be recalled with approval: in essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity."<sup>9</sup>

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, November 2015, no. 60.
- <sup>2</sup> Cardinal Donald Wuerl, "Civil Discourse: Speaking Truth in Love," Archdiocese of Washington, 2011.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Exodus* 20:16.
- <sup>6</sup> Wuerl, *op. cit.*
- <sup>7</sup> Keenan offered six essays on these virtues between June 26, 2016 and July 23, 2016, cf. <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/users/james-f-keenanhttps://www.commonwealmagazine.org/users/james-f-keenan>
- <sup>8</sup> John XXIII, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, June 29, 1959, no. 71.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 72. The saying, sometimes attributed to St. Augustine, seems to have originated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.