



Resolutions To Action

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Civility in Discourse: A Franciscan Approach

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EXPERIENCE

On January 10, 2011, a former Franciscan Action Network (FAN) colleague and I presented a workshop on Civility in Discourse to student leaders at Neumann University, a Franciscan institution sponsored by the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia. The training incorporated role-play exercises from the Pace Bene organization and illustrative stories from St. Francis of Assisi's life.

Students learned about ways we choose to respond to violence, such as escalating, enabling, ignoring, or non-violently resisting. They applied these approaches to analyze behavior in accounts of a dispute between the mayor and the bishop of Assisi, antagonism between the people of Gubbio and the wolf who terrorized them, and Francis' dialogue with Sultan Malik al-Kamil of Egypt.

To introduce the topic, students first participated in a "barometer" exercise. In response to a proposed situation, students moved from one side of the room to the other to indicate greater

or lesser degrees of violence. Prompts included, "A woman in a grocery store smacks her child for misbehaving," "An intruder aims a gun at the resident," and "Someone posts insulting language on another person's Facebook page." With each example, I asked a sample of students to explain their position. One student who indicated that insulting language of Facebook was not violent at all explained, "It's just Facebook!"

While a staff member and other students chimed in about the detrimental impacts that personal information made public can have on one's employment prospects, this response revealed a common misperception: that words, rather than being civil or uncivil, just or unjust, are "just words." Although we emphasized that the shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords two days prior was a result more of mental illness than incivility related to political differences, the event heightened our collective sense of the violence of US society. The workshop helped to attune students to the conversation about civility in discourse which entered the media shortly thereafter.

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Increasingly concerned about the tone of political discourse, FAN staff began developing resources to encourage civility in the late spring of 2010. In part through the legacy of Francis' life, including the stories referenced above, the Franciscan charism includes a strong commitment to peacemaking. While Franciscans are known for their presence in the Holy Land at the nexus of so much conflict, FAN perceived the need to contribute to a different form of peacemaking in the United States.

My participation in the Association of Franciscan Colleges and University's

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bi-annual symposium in June 2010 confirmed this need. In conversation with Neumann University faculty and staff about the possibility of hosting a FAN workshop, I discovered that, rather than beginning with social and political advocacy, they sought to address recent incidents of verbal conflict and incivility on campus and to train student leaders to respond effectively.

For July 4, 2010, FAN launched the F.R.A.N.C.I.S. Commitment to Civility in Discourse, a self-assessment tool for encouraging more respectful public and private conversations. The tool is in the Commitment acronym.

"I commit to:

- FACILITATE a forum for difficult discourse and acknowledge that all dialogue can lead to new insight and mutual understanding.
- RESPECT the dignity of all people, especially the dignity of those who hold an opposing view.
- AUDIT one's self and utilize terms or a vocabulary of faith to unite or reconcile rather than divide conflicting positions.
- NEUTRALIZE inflamed conversations by presuming that those with whom we differ are acting in good faith.
- COLLABORATE with others and recognize that all human engagement is an opportunity to promote peace.
- IDENTIFY common ground such as similar values or concerns and utilize this as a foundation to build upon.
- SUPPORT efforts to clean up the provocative language by calling policymakers to their sense of personal integrity."

A section of FAN's website is dedicated to the F.R.A.N.C.I.S. Commitment to Civility in Discourse and includes resources such as a white paper from

Al Merz, OFM of the Franciscan Peace Center in Nashville, Tennessee; full-size and double-sided prayer card size printable versions of the Commitment; and a way to contact your legislators electronically to inform them that you have made this Commitment to Civility in Discourse and encourage them to do so as well. You can also see a sample letter to the editor from a FAN member inspired by the Commitment and challenged by the language of political campaigns.

Other FAN members have distributed prayer cards to their secular Franciscan fraternities as bookmarks or have inserted the full-size version into the cover of a binder they use regularly as a personal reminder to practice civility in discourse. FAN has heard from various Franciscan colleges and universities about sightings of F.R.A.N.C.I.S. Commitment materials on bulletin boards and other locations on campus.

REFLECTION

In his white paper, Fr. Merz reminds us that the Franciscan tradition speaks 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." More important than our diversity of opinions is the innate dignity of each human person, rooted in the image of God. What, to whom, how, and when we speak shapes our actions and forms our character. In order to communicate in ways that build community and nourish relationships, Fr. Merz suggests reflective silence for discernment. When we fail to speak with the intention to build common ground and mutual respect, we contribute to the alienation that undermines society. In more severe cases, hostile and divisive language can sow "seeds of violence" which lead to physical harm.

In a reflection for The Washington Post on February 2, 2011, Cardinal Donald Wuerl likewise confirmed the connection between our call to community as human persons and the importance of what we say. Wuerl states that, because trust is essential in human relationships, "God explicitly protected the bonds of community by prohibiting falsehood as a grave attack on the human spirit. 'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.'" (Ex 20:16) Our obligation to speak truthfully goes beyond hard facts. As followers of Christ, we "must not only speak the truth but must do so in love." (Eph 4:15) Aware of our own profound need for ongoing conversion, and grateful for God's abundant grace, we can find the courage and the generosity to speak in ways that invite others to join us in building a civilization of love.

ACTION

1. Examine your conscience: Whom do you find it easy to criticize? In addition to praying for that person or group, how can you constructively direct your concerns? What stories of reconciliation or collaboration across differences from your own experience or others' lives inspire and encourage you?
2. Visit FAN's website to access F.R.A.N.C.I.S. Commitment to Civility in Discourse resources and to share your commitment with legislators: www.franciscanaction.org/francisccommitment
3. Review suggested guidelines for dialogue from the Catholic Common Ground Project (founded by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin): www.catholiccommonground.org/res_principles_of_dialogue.php
4. Find materials for facilitating workshops on non-violence from Pace e Bene: paceebene.org