

Pastor's Column

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Principles of Dialogue

The word “polarized” is often used today to describe the reality of our world and Church. People seem to be at opposite poles on so many crucial issues.

How do we talk to one another? How do we find solutions to our problems? How do we find “common ground?”

In my homily last weekend, I encouraged hospitable conversations—conversations that take place in an environment of hospitality.

In order for us to engage in a spirit of hospitality in all of our conversations, I share with you these “Principles of Dialogue” taken from the Catholic Common Ground Initiative. These principles can help us, I believe, structure a conversation that brings people together to find common solutions to the differences that confront us.

The Principles of Dialogue

1. ***We should recognize that no single group or viewpoint in the church has a complete monopoly on the truth.*** While the bishops united with the Pope have been specially endowed by God with the power to preserve the true faith, they too exercise their office by taking counsel with one another and with the experience of the whole church, past and present. Solutions to the church’s problems will almost inevitably emerge from a variety of sources.
2. ***We should not envision ourselves or any one part of the church a saving remnant.*** No group within the church should judge itself alone to be possessed of enlightenment or spurn the mass of Catholics, their leaders, or their institutions as unfaithful.
3. ***We should test all proposals for their pastoral realism and potential impact on living individuals as well as for their theological truth.*** Pastoral effectiveness is a responsibility of leadership.
4. ***We should presume that those with whom we differ are acting in good faith.*** They deserve civility, charity, and a good-faith effort to understand their concerns. We should not substitute labels, abstractions, or blanketing terms—“radical feminism,” “the hierarchy,” “the Vatican”—for living, complicated realities.
5. ***We should put the best possible construction on differing positions,*** addressing their strongest points rather than seizing upon the most vulnerable aspects in order to discredit them. We should detect the valid insights and legitimate worries that may underlie even questionable arguments.
6. ***We should be cautious in ascribing motives.*** We should not impugn another’s love of the church and loyalty to it. We should not rush to interpret disagreements as conflicts of starkly opposing principles rather than as differences in degree or in prudential pastoral judgments about the relevant facts.
7. ***We should bring the church to engage the realities of contemporary culture,*** not by simple defiance or by naïve acquiescence, but acknowledging, in the fashion of *Gaudiam et Spes*, both our culture’s valid achievements and real dangers.

For further information, contact: www.nplc.org/commonground.

Fr. Mike