



Loving Our Neighbor Through Dialogue

“To speak of a ‘culture of encounter’ means that we as people should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone.”

- Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 216

Polarization abounds—it seems to be everywhere in our world today, and unceasing. We find it in our families, neighborhoods, political systems, on the news. How can we, as Catholics, respond to this division in our world? In his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis urges Catholics and all people of good will to seek “a better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good” (no. 154). In Pope Francis’ vision, we can see one another as members of one family. We can seek to encounter. We can identify common values. We can listen to understand. We can seek the truth together. In this way, we as the Church can respond to the call “to sustain hope, to be a sign of unity... to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation” (no. 276). Using the tools of dialogue can help us to do exactly this.

Dialogue as an act of love

Some might say that dialogue is too simple of a tool to create the radical change the Holy Father envisions. Pope Francis calls us

to take another look. Engaging in dialogue across the boundaries of experience enriches our life of faith at home and in the wider community. The process of encounter, which invites us to relationship, is one way that we show our love for God, neighbor, and self.

We show our love for God

when we recognize his presence in each person, created with dignity and in his image. We recognize God’s presence even in those with whom we disagree. When we open ourselves to universal love and see all people as our sisters and brothers, we express our love for the Father of our single human family. We show love for God and reverence for all whom he has created through a disposition of respect and by listening to others in order to truly understand.

We show our love of neighbor

by choosing to engage in the world around us instead of turning inward. We can cultivate the “tender love for others” that Pope Francis encourages, expressed in “love that draws near and becomes real. A movement that starts from our heart and reaches the eyes, the ears and the hands... Tenderness is the path of choice for the strongest, most courageous men and women” (no. 194). Pope Francis tells us that dialogue is the key to building communities that rise above the damage done by indifference: “Dialogue between

generations; dialogue among our people, for we are that people; readiness to give and receive while remaining open to the truth. A country flourishes when constructive dialogue occurs between its many rich components” (no. 199).

We love ourselves

when we engage in dialogue. As we prepare for dialogue, we have the opportunity to engage in formation of our consciences through prayerful reflection, study of Scripture and Church teaching, and guidance from reputable experts. We also engage in critical examination to ensure that our perspectives are rooted in truth, that our sources of information are unbiased, and that we do not open ourselves to manipulation by those who spread falsehoods for political gain. In addition, when we actively engage in true dialogue, we “grow in our ability to grasp the significance of what others say and do, even if we cannot accept it as our own conviction” (no. 203). Dialogue should be an experience of mutual growth rooted in recognition of the dignity of all people. The process of dialogue may bring to light hidden realities that require change of perspective on the part of both conversation partners, in service to protecting the inviolable dignity of all.

What does Pope Francis mean when he calls us to authentic dialogue?

True, honest dialogue commits us to love of God, neighbor and self, and helps us to deepen the experience of encounter with others. Entering into dialogue with someone with whom we might not agree can be scary or uncomfortable. That is ok. Staying in dialogue can be a way for us to grow together, finding connections and common ground where there seemed to be none (no. 244). However, staying in an

uncomfortable moment of tension or growth is different than participating in a conversation with someone who is disrespectful or who degrades others’ dignity. We must point out harmful language, and if necessary, refuse to take part if both parties are not committed to productive conversation.

Dialogue can be productive as long as both parties are committed to shared values, such as the common good, integral human development, or the basic rights that should be available to all people. Both parties must also be committed to seeking the truth: “Truth, in fact, is an inseparable companion to justice and mercy” (no. 227). Truth, justice, and peace hold one another accountable like a system of checks and balances. Without one, human dignity is often disrespected and laid aside. As a precondition for dialogue, Pope Francis writes, “We need to learn how to unmask the various ways that the truth is manipulated, distorted and concealed in public and private discourse. What we call ‘truth’ is not only the reporting of facts and events, such as we find in the daily papers. It is primarily the search for the solid foundations sustaining our decisions and our laws” (no. 208).

“Authentic reconciliation does not flee from conflict, but is achieved in conflict, resolving it through dialogue and open, honest and patient negotiation.”

- Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 244

Our Catholic commitment to human dignity is a central tenet of our faith and requires us to act in a way that honors our own God-given dignity and the dignity of others, no matter the circumstances of their lives. Seeking these truths through dialogue can be hard work and requires clear thinking,

thoughtful description of what we mean, and a sense of generosity in listening to one another.

Pope Francis recognizes and asks us to celebrate the vast gifts and richness of our world. Some fear that tolerating a diversity of perspectives means that we let go of our own convictions. Pope Francis tells us this is not the case. "Authentic social dialogue involves the ability to respect the other's point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns" (no. 203). He urges us to welcome many people to the table, and to create opportunities for encounter. Doing so can help us to overcome old barriers and to look with fresh eyes on issues that have caused us great division.

Finally, Pope Francis criticizes "destructive forms of fanaticism" which "are at times found among religious believers, including Christians; they too 'can be caught up in networks of verbal violence through the internet and the various forums of digital communication" (no. 46). We must be especially attentive to our online engagement, always remembering that an actual person, made in God's image, is on the other side of our comments, and that our engagement should be guided by love.

How can we begin?

As with anything new, it is important to prayerfully prepare and take stock of our own posture as we enter into a dialogue, ensuring we are ready and open to learning while growing in relationship.

- Before any dialogue, it can help to ask the question, "What could I love about this person?" I must remember that he or she is a child of God, whether I know him or her

personally. He or she is my sister or brother—not a challenge to overcome but rather a collaborator in the search for common ground.

- Then we must ask: "What am I hoping for in this dialogue?" "Am I seeking to truly understand their point of view? Or am I looking to persuade them?"
- If we are seeking to understand, what questions can we ask that will help us understand more? Can we be like a detective searching for clues and finding points of encounter and commonality?
- What are the values I bring to the table? How can I be open to finding common values with my conversation partner? What might we have in common? To what are we both committed?

Let us be guided by love in finding pathways to dialogue. Though it can be messy, Pope Francis urges us to go beyond "merely parallel monologues" and instead engage in true dialogue (no. 200). Let true dialogue and love for neighbor be our aim.

This resource is excerpted from the USCCB's "Civilize It: A Better Kind of Politics" initiative. Find more resources on listening and dialogue at [Civilizeit.org](https://civilizeit.org).



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