

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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A CHRISTMAS GIFT: CIVILITY IN PUBLIC ARGUMENT

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

Anyone familiar with the recent election campaign or with the “reader comments” that accompany editorials and news articles knows that civility is often the first casualty in debates today. Nearly anyone who makes a public argument finds his intelligence questioned, his motives impugned, or his basic decency assaulted. Some critics will even doubt the patriotism or Americanism of their opponents. Others call their opponents bigots or racists.

Sometimes a debate among Catholics includes yet another ugly twist. A disagreement over public policy is accompanied by the suggestion that one’s opponents – whether they argue from a conservative or a liberal perspective – are not being true to their faith.

We can and should do better.

This Christmas season is a time for gift-giving. This season offers Catholics an opportunity to offer such a gift – that of civility in public argument.

We Catholics can resolve to contribute to public debates by elevating them. We can represent our tradition not only by the content of our argument, but by the manner in which we express it.

In so doing, we bear witness to the dignity of life and of every human being. For, if we accept that every human being is sacred, how can we justify degrading them in argument? Conversely, how can we not treat our opponents with respect – even when they don’t respond in kind?

Near the end of his life, Cardinal Bernardin reminded us that civility should be central to our advocacy.

He warned against fixating on the weakest part of someone’s argument in order to discredit them. It is much better, he suggested, to address the legitimate or sincere concern that might underlie even the most poorly expressed statement. Giving someone the benefit of the doubt in this way fosters common ground instead of breeding resentment, which is often behind so much fierce rhetoric.

More recently, Cardinal Wuerl suggested that Christian discourse depends on both truth and love.

“We are called to a higher level of respect for the truth and for each other than is often witnessed on some radio and TV talks shows. The intensity of one’s opinion is not the same as the truth. Speaking out of anger does not justify falsehood. Frustration or

disappointment does not condone a lack of charity. The *Catechism* reminds us, ‘respect for the reputation of persons forbids every attitude and word likely to cause them unjust injury’ and calls ‘rash judgment,’ ‘detraction,’ and ‘calumny’ offenses against the truth.”

Behavior, whether good or bad, is contagious. Setting a good example can inspire others to be better. On the other hand, modeling what is harmful entices others to be less than they can be.

The beauty of a democracy is that we get to determine what sort of debates we have. If we bring civility, charity, and reasoned argument to the public square, our community will reflect those virtues. If we don’t, our community will reflect the lack of them. It is up to us.

As the largest single religious community in our nation, we Catholics have an opportunity and responsibility to influence the quality and content of our national character. Offering the gift of civil discourse would be a wonderful Christmas present to our Republic.

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