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The need for civility

Tony Magliano | Sep. 3, 2012 Making a Difference

A friend of mine who is a nun and fellow journalist asked me to write a column on civility. But my immediate response was that civility didn't really apply to the social justice and peace theme of my column.

But then the obvious hit me.

I thought, How can we hope to build a world where everyone has a fair share of the goods of the earth, has his or her human rights fully respected, and where violence surrenders to nonviolent love if we cannot even talk and act with civility to each other?

So just like the schoolboy I once was at Our Lady of Pompeii, I said "Yes, sister!"

Webster's Dictionary defines civility as politeness; kind attention; good breeding. Just the sound of these words makes one begin to feel good, peaceful and hopeful.

But it is sad to note that in our society, rudeness and even downright meanness is now more common than civility.

It has become the norm to be disagreeable, and disagreeable in a nasty manner, at that.

The art of respectful dialogue has all but disappeared in serious private and public discourse. From the intractability in Congress to talk radio to the family interaction, consistent respectful discourse has become almost nonexistent.

I once heard the late President Gerald Ford respond to a heckler by saying we must learn to disagree without being disagreeable.

Even in the Catholic church, civility is often lacking.

I have worked at various levels in five dioceses and have found genuine politeness and kind attention to be less than common among many employees -- both clergy and laity.

And over the years, my social justice and peace column has generated many mean-spirited responses.

This rudeness and unkindness is hurtful not only to individuals, but to the whole body of Christ. And it greatly weakens the church's ability to proclaim to the world the justice, peace and love of Christ the savior.

In his book *Choosing Civility* [1], P.M. Forni, director of The Civility Initiative at Johns Hopkins University, says an important aspect of civility is the art of being agreeable.

He writes:

> One major area of everyday life to grace with agreeableness is that of conversation. Respect for others entails having an essentially welcoming attitude toward the words they address to us. This means, among other things, that contradicting for its own sake should be banned as utterly uncivil. There are two fundamental abilities to cultivate in order to be agreeable in conversation.
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> - The ability to consider that you might be wrong.
> - The ability to admit that you don't know.
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> At any given moment, on any issue, there is the possibility that you might be wrong and someone else might be right. Keep that possibility in mind. Then, if you realize that you are wrong, find the strength to acknowledge it openly. Do so graciously, without harboring resentment toward the person who happens to be right.

A humble, honest search for the truth, with knowledge that none of us possess the whole truth, is a virtuous journey all of us should be on.

St. Paul's words to the Colossians ring as true today as they did almost 2,000 ago: "But now you must get rid of ... anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language. ... As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."

Amen.

[Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist.]

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