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"Speaking the truth in love" ... Christian Civility

The New York Times had carried a 1998 feature about the revival of scholarly interest in manners. The etiquette espoused by Lord Chesterfield may well have been devised to protect the aristocracy from an egalitarian invasion. However, the modern pervasiveness of rudeness might make manners a neuralgic topic, and not merely a nostalgic one.

A return to the appreciation of etiquette might be a step towards restoring the much neglected dimension of *civility* to public interaction. Although civility runs deeper than the externals of politeness, politeness can foster the conditions for that deeper civility which ought to inform public conversation in a pluralistic society.

Nowadays public talk seems to be disproportionately confrontational, hostile, derisive, and insulting. Unfortunately, the phenomenon of "purple prose" and "yellow journalism" has not been confined to the tabloid media and talk radio. There is no fail-safe immunization from the risk of infection from contagious cultural viruses, even within the Christian life. In fact, the "wall of separation" between church and the secular arena at times can be porous. For some time this cultural trend has become visible within church life. It carries a potential threat to the ecclesial bonds of unity.

As a result, there is growing concern about polarization among Catholics, often

times generated by an acrimony and a meanness of spirit acted out in the name of orthodoxy. Public accusations, vilification, impugning of motives originate from the right and the left, from traditionalists and progressives without discrimination.

The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* directed Catholics to seek solutions to the issues of the day "in a spirit of mutual charity and with anxious interest above all in the common good." (GS n. 43) The conciliar document cautions against arrogating the authority of the Church to one's own opinion on controversial issues where Church teaching permits freedom of opinion.

In September 1997, Bishop Donald Wuerl of Pittsburgh issued a pastoral letter entitled "Speaking the Truth in Love: Christian Discourse Within the Church." It is a timely pastoral with a principled criticism of the destructive impact of divisive speech on the bonds of unity.

Two points expounded on by Bishop Wuerl are particularly insightful.

First, the pastoral letter lays down the foundation for Christian conversation by exploring the covenant relationships created in baptism towards God and fellow believers. It locates those demands in a New Testament ethics and in the moral catechesis presented in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (See CCC nn. 2475-2487)

Secondly, there is a recognition that the Christian life calls for a deepened conversion to the ideals of the Gospel higher than those standards of speech tolerated by society. In other words, what is legally protected by the First Amendment freedom of speech clause may well be forbidden by the Eighth Commandment of God's law. A gospel perspective at times would critique the lack of ethics in the exercise of the civil right of free speech.

Catholics need to be reminded that "legal" (v.g., free speech) is not always synonymous with "moral."

Bishop Wuerl raises a telling question about the scandal of church internecine conflict --- *"Who would be drawn to a community whose discourse is filled with rancor, mistrust, and hatred?"* Evangelization can be undermined and negated from within.

St. Paul confronted the Christians at Galatia with a similar challenge. The Apostle to the Gentiles approached the scandal of quarrels, jealousy, bad temper, factions, and malice by chiding the Galatians: *"... Instead, serve one another in love; for the whole law is summed up in a single commandment: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. 'But if you go on fighting each other, tooth and nail, all you can expect is mutual destruction."* (Gal. 5:13-15)

In this regard, the 1997 Lenten message of Cardinal Roger Mahoney of Los Angeles still contains apropos spiritual advice.

Cardinal Mahoney proposed a selected Lenten regimen derived from traditional spiritual disciplines to counteract the divisiveness caused by intemperate accusations:

--- strive to avoid judgment and condemnation of others (Fasting);

--- pray more intensely for unity and civility coupled with prayer for those who are the focus of disagreement (Prayer);

--- give reflective study to sections of Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, especially the teaching of Jesus on patience and

forgiveness (Bible study)

--- participate in the service of the poor and homeless and engage in humble outreach towards others who hold different opinions (Charitable works).

Cardinal Mahoney's call for conversion and self-discipline needed to restore a climate of trust and respect was a welcome response to an intolerable state of affairs.

Self-righteous demagoguery with its shouting, name-calling, accusations, and derision does not meet the biblical injunction to "live the truth in love." instances of the proneness to confuse intransigence with conviction or rashness with courage occur far too often.

Admittedly, there can be a parallel propensity to mistake moral or doctrinal flaccidity for "civility!" George Weigel has offered and incisive critique of what he calls "an excess of grammatical ecumenicity" which dulls the sharp edge of truth. He writes: "Flaccidity in the cause of misconceived public ecumenism has been one dimension of the decline for the academic study of religion in America..."

Notwithstanding the pitfalls of self-righteousness, a balanced appreciation of the classic civic disposition of civility will facilitate genuine dialogue which serves both the pursuit of truth and the communion that forms community.

The demand of a New Testament ethic for patience, understanding, reverence, reconciliation and forgiveness can be a broader horizon for a humanly significant quality, namely, civility. After all, grace can build on nature.

"Rather, living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love." (Eph. 4: 15-16)

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