

ORDINARY SUNDAY VIII "C"
MARCH 2/3, 2019

The Jewish wisdom writer Sirach writing some two centuries before the advent of Jesus along with Jesus himself in today's Gospel passage direct our attention to the power of speech. We live in a time when, to paraphrase an old axiom that "no thought is left unspoken" to "no thought is left untweeted." Daily we are bombarded with a flood of words and opinions on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, 24hour television news channels and the traditional newspaper. While social media, television and other media have many benefits, they are increasingly being used as a platform for forms of speech that divide rather than unite us as citizens and as a church.

Several months ago my friend and classmate, Bishop David Zubik of Pittsburgh addressed the issue of civility in an article in *America Magazine*, the Jesuit weekly. In light of today's scriptures, Bishop David's considerations invite us to thoughtful reflection regarding what the words we speak or tweet and the media we listen to, reveal about the attitudes and values that lie in our heart as Jesus states.

The virtue of civility demonstrates strength—not weakness—of thought, voice and conviction. It is a way of speaking and acting that takes seriously what I believe and what others believe. It includes robust and passionate engagement with those of differing views. Civility assumes that the ties that bind us are far more important than the differences we have on important social, political and theological issues. People live and learn in communities, including families, faith traditions, affinity groups and civil and church societies. Civility requires us to work together within and between these communities for common purposes. Civility requires a "civil tongue." When we direct insults toward another human being, we degrade ourselves even more than we degrade that person—and we display an impoverished vocabulary. Civility is a pro-life virtue. We need to recapture the sacredness of language. It is through words that we express life that we express all that we love, all that we fundamentally believe.

To help us live the virtue of civility, Bishop David proposes “Nine Rules for Civility and Integrity for Faith Communities and Everyone Else.”

1. In a healthy, civil dialogue, we listen to one another. More than just “hearing” listening requires time and energy, taking to heart the feelings, beliefs and traditions of another to build bridges rather than build or maintain walls.
2. Civil conversation presumes that we are each working for the common good. We begin by acknowledging areas of agreement rather than divergence then move to areas where our perspective differs.
3. Civil public discussion recognizes the validity of contending groups in society or the church. The goal cannot be to shut (or shout) down another voice. At the same time ideologies that demean the dignity of life and human persons based on race, creed, or origin must be condemned firmly and nonviolently.
4. Civility shows respect for the person with whom I differ.
5. Civility works for the inclusion of all members of society and is especially sensitive to minorities and marginalized persons.
6. Civility distinguishes between facts and opinions. Let facts speak for themselves where possible. The late Senator Patrick Daniel Moynihan stated it best: “Everybody is entitled to their own opinion, but not to his own facts.”
7. Civility calls for when disagreements occur over competing facts or ideas that we keep the issue as the focus and not lambast the person proposing it.
8. Civility does not assume or impugn the motives of another person. There may be, and often is, more to a person or situation than what may appear at first look.
9. Civility calls for me to be self-critical. Honest dialogue helps me to examine the roots of my own positions, leading me to clarify—and sometimes modify—my convictions.

Civility is a virtue, a habit of choices and conscience, which shapes the way we encounter others. Like all virtues it is learned through the deliberate decision to practice it daily. After all is said and done, isn't that what it means to live the Gospel? Jesus showed us how to both talk and listen. He knew how to change hearts. ***“A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, and an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil; for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks” (Lk. 6:45).***

(Nine Rules To Promote Civility: Timely wisdom from the Catholic Tradition. David A. Zubik. *America*. July 8, 2018)