

## Real dialogue is messy, hard, and necessary

Isabella R. Moyer | May. 2, 2014 NCR Today

I try to focus on the small-c catholic part of our faith, the part that describes our wholeness and universality. In the novel *Finnegans Wake*, James Joyce famously suggested that the Catholic church means, "Here comes everybody." What a great image of inclusivity, of sinners and saints representing a glorious mess of diversity and individuality while uniting in our core beliefs. And yet, the reality of that glorious mess can too easily challenge visions of unity amid diversity.

Recently, I gave a presentation to a group of young adults on the need for dialogue in our church. I shared my experience as a blogger and columnist, giving examples of the nastiness that one can encounter in online discussion boards, in letters to the editor, or in some blogs. I spoke glowingly of the *National Catholic Reporter* and the *Prairie Messenger* [1], two publications I am proud to write for because of their commitment to dialogue and discussion in the church. I spoke of the need to address the challenging questions in our church and in our world. I shared my belief that black-and-white answers do not always address the gray realities of life.

I soon realized that I was not preaching to the choir. The dialogue on dialogue morphed into a passionate defense of all the moral teachings of the church with no exceptions or room for grayness. I'm a promoter of dialogue but found myself at a loss for words. Each example of a real-life moral dilemma that I raised solicited a catechism quotation as proof there was no dilemma. The truth, for some in the group, was black and white. No exceptions. Period.

My first reaction was that this was not a true dialogue. It was more an argumentative debate. But was it? There was passion but no anger or disrespect. There was a desire to better understand and defend the teachings of the church, and we need a well-informed laity who can defend the core of our beliefs.

Was I put off by my own discomfort? I was, after all, expecting a nice chitchat on issues that we all agreed on. What I got was a real dialogue with all its messiness.

Dialogue is easy to talk about with sweet words and platitudes. Real dialogue is challenging and hard. Our words, whether spoken or written, expose our beliefs. Speaking the truth that is in our own hearts can be risky. For me, there is trepidation every time I press the "send" button with an article to an editor or to publish a blog post. How is it going to be received? Who will end up reading my words? Will they be accepted or attacked or both?

True dialogue requires that all voices have a chance to be listened to. We need the voices of those who are passionately orthodox, for they remind us of the church's teachings and traditions. We also need the questioning voices that nudge us to ponder the real-life issues behind the teachings. And we need the voices that preach the need for compassionate justice and love in all things. All of these voices can be found in *NCR* commentaries, articles and especially in the discussion boards. Yes, these discussion boards often get messy, but they provide the courtyard outside of the church walls for all to gather and be heard. And few Catholic publications have such a lively courtyard!

In August, Pope Francis [spoke to a group of Japanese students about the need for dialogue](#) [2]:

"All wars, conflicts and troubles we encounter with each other are because of a lack of dialogue," he said.

Pope Francis said there is always a danger that two people with firm identities and an inability to be open to the other will fight instead of dialogue.

"We dialogue to meet each other, not to fight," he said.

Dialogue involves asking the other, "Why do you think this?" or "Why is that culture this way?" then listening to the response, he said. "First listen, then talk -- that's meekness."

"If you don't think like I do ... and you can't convince me to think like you do, that's OK. We can still be friends," he said.

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**Links:**

[1] <http://www.prairiemessenger.ca/>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-francis-japanese-students-dialogue-what-brings-peace>