



A BETTER KIND OF POLITICS

Civilize It

Skills for Dialogue: Practicing “a Better Kind of Politics”

In Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis calls for “a better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good” (no. 154). This vision is only possible if we are open to authentic experiences of encounter (no. 50). Learning and practicing the skills of dialogue are essential in the work of encounter for the common good.

This brief article overviews how we approach dialogue as people of faith. It also teaches important skills for dialogue that are essential for anyone who seeks to engage in “a better kind of politics.”



Cultivate rich “soil” for dialogue

As people of faith, the parable of the sower, the seed and the soil (Mt 13:1-23) can inspire our approach to dialogue.

In this parable, the seed is the Word of God. The sower is a first century farmer who spreads the seed from the back of a donkey without regard for whether the soil is hard, rocky, shallow or thorny. The fertile soil is that which produces a “hundred-fold” harvest (Mt 13:9).

The forms of soil in this parable are a great analogy for listening. As we approach the task of dialogue, we must cultivate fertile soil in our hearts. In order to truly listen, we must be fully present in the moment, and we must seek to listen in good faith and with empathy. In doing so, we cultivate soil that is rich, listening with open eyes and ears, open hearts and minds, and ready to fully grasp the thoughts and emotions of the other party. We prepare our soil to become more receptive to the perspective of others and thus to enter into dialogue.

Overcome barriers to listening

We seek to have hearts with fertile soil—but many barriers can cause hard, rocky, or shallow soil. Research shows that if we are trying to multi-task, and one of those tasks is listening, we are not really listening. Our soil is not fertile. Our conversations will not bear fruit. To really listen means we also open our minds to consider new ideas, our hearts to empathize with the emotions of our conversation partners, and our will to change our behavior based on what we hear.

A second barrier is the extreme polarization of our culture where we tell, sell and yell. To prepare our hearts to have fertile soil, we need to “ask and listen”: listen to God, listen to the Holy Spirit, and listen to each other.

We are polarized in the Church today in many ways that reflect our secular culture. The partisan differences in our Church, which seem to become more acute during election seasons, are often framed as pro-life versus pro-justice. Yet a genuine reading of church teaching reveals that this is a false dichotomy. Pro-life means we



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recognize the dignity of each human person. To be pro-life is to be pro-justice, and vice versa. Like Jesus, we stand up for all those who are lost, hurting and vulnerable and support systems that help communities to thrive.

unaware that they are doing precisely the same thing. They are treating others the opposite way that they want to be treated. This is the *golden rule in reverse*: Doing unto others what you don't want the other to do to you.

"Approaching, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these are summed up in the word 'dialogue.'"

– Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 198

Follow Pope Francis' approach

Pope Francis' call for a synod on synodality reminds us of the importance of listening. He writes: "Approaching, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these are summed up in the word 'dialogue.' If we want to encounter and help one another, we have to dialogue" (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 198). Families, communities, churches and society can heal their divisions with what Pope Francis calls "authentic social dialogue" (no. 203).

Understand dialogue (vs. debate)

Dialogue is *not* the same as debate. Debate is often an aggressive exchange with both parties making their points, warding off attacks, competing for airtime, attributing the worst of motives to the other side, advocating their own positions and beating the other side down to reach a conclusion that is usually unsatisfactory to both parties.

Ironically, most people wish the combatants on the *other* side of a debate would pay more attention to their side. Each side sees the other as pushing their own point of view. The paradox here is that in most cases, both people seem

Unlike a debate, dialogue is not about winners and losers. The Greek word for "*dialogue*" means to gather in search of new meaning. The Greeks understood that new meaning could only be discovered *collectively*. Dialogue is a conversation by people in relationship who are committed to search for a deeper sense of meaning.

Follow these steps for authentic dialogue

Step 1: Be still and focus. The first step to authentic social dialogue is to still your own heart and mind, to live fully in the present moment, and to be open to the thoughts and ideas of others. To be still is to prayerfully separate yourself from the noise, to silence your own thoughts so you can find your focus in a conversation. It is only when you are quiet that you can truly listen.

Step 2: Ask an open-ended question—then listen. The best way to open a dialogue is with an open-ended question. After selecting an issue, you might ask: "*What values motivate your thinking about X?*" or "*Tell me what you think about X.*" Open questions allow the other person the ability to be truly open about their thoughts and feelings.



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Once you ask an opening question, your job is to listen. Listen for understanding and not to judge, not to solve a problem. Listen to the words and the emotions behind the words. To listen is to *tune into* someone else. Listening helps you to connect with others. It builds trust. It shows that you care. It opens the door for an honest exchange.

Listening is an investment that takes time and patience. Given the rapid pace and perpetual nature of change in the world today, most people tend to speed everything up, including conversations. Listening is a single-minded activity that ensures open, honest and effective communication.

inquisitive tone to your summary allows the other person to correct your summary if necessary.

A summary does not have to be long. It acknowledges what you have heard. It demonstrates respect and interest. Once the other person clarifies what you may have missed in your summary, you ask another open question that probes more deeply into the other person's thoughts. Once again, you summarize. This process continues until the other person feels completely heard, and perhaps may ask you to share your ideas.

Just as important as what you include in your summary is what you exclude: your thoughts, judg-

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Step 3: Summarize. Empathize. Attune.

Listening during a dialogue does not mean simply staying quiet. Listening involves *mentally summarizing* what the other person is saying, *empathizing* with their emotional pain and eventually, *asking* the right questions, with a facial expression and tone of voice that tunes into the other person. This is called *attunement*, which literally means you are "*in tune*" with the other person(s). Attunement raises receptivity. Your next question should stay *within their story*, instead of changing the subject. Your goal is to allow your conversation partner(s) to express their thoughts, feelings and ideas, and to probe further for meaning, not to project your thoughts, feelings or ideas onto them.

One way to demonstrate that you are listening is to summarize what you are hearing. By summarizing their ideas, you not only show interest, you offer the other person the opportunity to clarify their meaning. Using an

ments and opinions. The human tendency is to respond quickly with your views. We also tend to make suggestions that are disguised as questions, such as, "Have you tried talking to that person?" or "Have you written to your elected official about your concerns?" These are suggestive questions because they suggest what the other person should do. Your job is to listen and to understand, not to state your ideas or to test whether the other person agrees with your ideas.

Step 4: Hear their entire story. Try not to hijack their story by telling your story, making suggestions, changing the subject, or asking leading, loaded or closed questions that suggest a solution or steer the person toward what you think, or what you think the other person should think, do or say. You will get your chance to express your views later, after you hear their full story.



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Inadvertently or not, some of the questions you ask might shift the focus to *your* point of interest or steer the conversation in *your* direction. Leading questions are statements about your ideas put in the form of a question, such as “*You like John’s idea, don’t you?*” or “*You’re with me on this one, right?*” These are questions that fit your narrative or swing the attention of the conversation toward your ideas and interests. When you ask an open question, try to refrain from judging how it fits into your narrative, until you have heard the entire story.

If you (1) humbly ask questions, (2) show interest in the other’s point of view, (3) summarize what they are saying and (4) show respect and appreciation for their perspective (without necessarily agreeing with it), that increases the *receptivity* of the other person or people in a conversation. Eventually, they might say, “*You understand what I think about this... What do you think we should do?*” At that point, they are much more receptive to your ideas and much more likely to listen and understand your viewpoint as well.

Step 5: Share your own viewpoint. When it is your turn to share your own viewpoint, try not to use divisive language, political jargon or exaggerations. Begin by sharing something that the other person said that you agree with, such as a core value they mentioned which is also important to you. Be clear about what you see as the area of disagreement. Be clear about your beliefs without being critical of the other person’s beliefs. Talk about your core values and why they are important.

Avoid *flat assertions* such as statements that use *always* and *never*—e.g. “This political party always stands up for the little guy,” or “That politician never tells the truth.” Be kind to your conversation partner(s). Recognize that your job is not to persuade but to clarify where you agree and disagree. When they begin to summarize

your statements, give them honest feedback to make sure they understood you.

Step 6: Build the relationship. One dialogue such as this will not de-polarize our church or society. What it can do is build bridges across polarized lines. Once your first healthy conversation with this person is complete, think of other questions you could ask to continue the dialogue. As Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “Time is greater than space” (no. 222). Relationships are built over time, not in one sitting; there is value in the act of encounter even when its fruits are not immediate. To build relationships over time, show curiosity in the other person’s views.

Read articles or listen to talks that represent different perspectives than yours. Be clear that understanding someone else’s point of view does not mean agreement. Nor should it shake your own core beliefs. A commitment to truth and the ability to learn from others are both possible at the same time. Dialogue is essential to living together as the Body of Christ and to pursuing the common good. Authentic social dialogue helps you see the dignity of the other person. It also helps you grow as a person and as a missionary disciple living in apostolic times.

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See also: Leadership for the Greater Good: A Textbook for Leaders, by Dan R Ebener and Borna Jalsenjak, Paulist Press, 2021.

Dive deeper into Pope Francis’ invitation to “a better kind of politics.”



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