



The Catholic Voices ‘Ten Principles of Civil Communication’

In the endless debates, interviews, and discussions we’ve done in studios, these are ten “principles” we have found helpful to remember -- especially when the heat is turned up. Taken together, they add up to a “mindset” needed for this work.

1. Don’t get mad. Reframe.

To recap: Rather than consider the arguments you are going to face, consider the value(s) they appeal to. Look for the (sometimes buried) Christian ethic behind the value. Which other (Christian) values is the critic ignoring, or has not properly taken into account? What are the frames involved? What role has been cast for the Church in this scenario, and how can we step outside it?

Reframing tells a different story from what’s out there. It only works if you are substituting a false picture for a more authentic one. “False ideas may be refuted indeed by argument,” said Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman, “but by true ideas alone are they expelled.” Reframing means, above all, preparing well.

2. Shed light, not heat.

The purpose of our communication is illumination. We are not seeking to convert anyone, or persuade by the force of our arguments (if that happens, thanks be to God!) but to help them understand what the Church stands for and why. We are looking to open up new ways of seeing. Our aim is understanding.

Just as you “catch” faith by witnessing the lives of people of faith who impress you, so can catch “light” in an argument. Stay calm, and illuminate.

3. Think in threes.

A time-honored way of preparing for any discussion is to boil your messages down to three key ones. You won’t necessarily get the chance to make them all -- or you’ll have time to make other ones. But the mind finds three easy to remember -- which is why Pope Francis usually makes three points in his homilies. If ever you get lost or taken down a blind alley, they are three friends you can always return to. And if ever things get really bad, you can always say: “Can I just make these three points?” If you’ve reframed well, the first point will usually speak to the critic’s positive intention, and the other two will broaden out the horizon.

4. People don't remember what you said as much as how you made them feel.

The best communication takes place when people feel valued and safe. They bend into each other, seeking to understand and share. It's not just about the lucidity of your arguments but the effect your words have on others. It is not *we* who persuade; it is the Truth. Our task is to serve the Truth the best we can. And we serve that Truth best when we aim for civility, empathy, and clarity.

It is easy to win an argument while losing the chance to communicate. Evaluate, therefore, after each exchange, according to one criterion alone: did I help create a "culture of encounter" that allowed others better the grasp the Church's teaching or positions? How did I make them feel -- uplifted, or battered? Inspired, or harried? Anxious to hear more, or relieved I stopped?

5. Show, don't tell.

This foundational principle of good writing applies to communication generally. People prefer stories to lectures, and are more convinced by experience than abstract argument. Make your points clearly and lucidly, but where you can, supplement them with illustrations -- anecdotes from personal experience, or hypothetical situations which help people to "imagine" what you are trying to say. Rather than tell someone that the Church assists AIDS sufferers in Africa, tell them about the hospitals and dispensaries in the remotest villages in the African countryside where nuns care for patients in ramshackle huts. Rather than say we need more hospices -- which are vague, unknown institutions to most people -- paint the picture of places where the dying are helped and reassured, and invite people to imagine what it would be like if we had more of them. Think of yourself not as the spokesman of a remote corporation, but as a delighted disciple with stories and experiences to share. Before each interview, discussion, or talk, ask yourself: What's my story? Then think about the best way of telling it, trying to be concise, punchy, graphic, compelling.

6. Remember to say "Yes."

This is a baseline communication principle, and doubly important when we are making the Church's case -- as so often in contemporary society -- *against* something. The Church *is* against many things, but because only because it is *for* so much more -- what needs protecting and enhancing. Experience -- of prayer, reflection on Scripture, and centuries of immersion in humanity's deepest struggles -- have made the Church an "expert in humanity." It offers a series of signposts which highlight the wrong turnings and dead ends on the road to human flourishing, both in the lives of individuals and in the architecture of society. The Church says no in order to say yes. Remember always to say what we say "yes" to.

The Church is not a grim-faced moral policeman; it is more like Mother Teresa, tending to the world's forgotten and ailing people, or Pope Francis, freewheeling around St. Peter's Square with a big grin on his face. Keep those and other images dear

to you in mind when you speak of the Church's teaching. That way you won't a grim reaper, but an angel pointing to a brighter horizon.

7. Compassion counts.

Underneath almost all of the neuralgic issues treated in this book are deeply personal ethical questions: ones of sexuality, dying, illness, belief. It is very likely that the person you are in discussion with has had direct experience of the neuralgic issue, either personally, or witnessing firsthand; or has an experience of authority and institutions that have left them hurt. You may or may not know that he or she has had that experience; if not, you should assume it. God and the Church is a common scapegoat for anger, a lightning rod for unfocused frustrations. Being compassionate is about understanding this anger and hurt, and relating to it, as one human being to another. The Church, as Pope Francis says, is above all a mother, not a policeman or a moral scold.

Because the contemporary frame often pits the Church as an unfeeling institution against the experience of the individual, it is common to find yourself expected to fill that role, step away from that frame by appealing to experience rather than abstraction. Demonstrate your empathy, and be a good listener, ready to absorb the anger and hurt. Sometimes, compassion is the most valuable witness we can offer.

8. Numbers aren't everything.

Statistics can appear abstract and inhumane, or a spin: politicians using them are usually thought to be lying. Never rely on facts and figures, but use them to illustrate your main point. When you do, speak in human, clear language: not 33.5 percent of people but "one in three."

9. It's about witnessing, not winning.

People who come to a new way of seeing the world find that a prejudice or preconception is challenged, or even reversed. The universe looks different. We call this "conversion." It often begins with a prejudice or conviction coming up against a reality that contradicts it; generally, that reality is a person rather than an idea. Think about the frames contemporary society projects onto the Church, and be the contradiction. Every challenge to us is an opportunity to witness.

The enemy of such a witness is a desire to "win" and "defeat." Rivalry and victory, winners and losers, us and them -- this is the mindset of the world; Jesus shows another way. Watch him in the Gospel of John: endlessly harried and challenged, he never responds with aggression or the attitude of the persecuted victim, but stands firm, planted in love. Be what you represent.

10. It's not about you.

Your fear, self-consciousness, and defensiveness are products of a protesting ego. Think of John the Baptist, a fearless communicator; his strength came from knowing that he was the door through which others could come to Christ.

Nerves help; adrenalin keeps you focused. But excessive jitters may be a sign of self-consciousness. The ego tricks us into believing that *we* are the focus. Prayer beforehand is vital (Catholic Voices say the prayer at the end of this chapter), to remember who and what this is for. Ask the Holy Spirit to be with you and to speak through you, and for the grace to be a witness.

If it goes badly, rejoice! Success has almost nothing to teach us, and failure destroys the illusion that it all depends on us. You are doing God's work; it doesn't hang on a good or bad performance. Evaluate, learn, and get back up.

Catholic Voices Prayer

God our Father,

*Bless and guide all those involved in Catholic Voices.
Give us the gifts of the Holy Spirit that we need for this work,
especially wisdom, gentleness, courage, and joy.
Help us to be faithful to Christ and to his Church,
and to be open to the questions that people bring us.
Help us to love and respect all those we meet.
Support us in our difficulties and setbacks.
May our words and the witness of our lives
give you glory and help others to be more open to you.
We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us.

Saints John XXIII and John Paul II, pray for us.

Blessed Titus Brandsma, pray for us.

Blessed Cardinal Newman, pray for us.