

Go and Do Likewise (IV): Called to Listen

In a world where communication holds significant importance and it's just a click away, genuine dialogue can become increasingly difficult to achieve. Here too, Christians have the example of Jesus, who actively engages with those who hold different beliefs, embracing individuals irrespective of any disagreements or errors.

The Gospels recount a number of Jesus' dialogues with people, although we can imagine many others. One of the most moving is when He is alone with the Samaritan woman at the well. The apostles are astonished when they return to find Him talking with a woman, and one who had to go to the well alone in the heat of midday, rather than with the other women of the village at cooler times of day. She herself is shocked that He would speak to her, since, as the evangelist explains, "Jews, of course, do not associate with Samaritans" (Jn 4:9). But in this scene Jesus teaches us to be interested in everyone. With a touching refinement, He gently guides her towards the truth. He does not ignore her erroneous beliefs or her sinful actions, but neither does He condemn, accuse or even pressure her. Acknowledging the beliefs they have in common and listening to her explain what she believed, He simply

witnesses to the truth of revelation and above all, to the dignity and value she has in his eyes.

A one-to-one conversation

You may also have had a similar experience: being listened to and really taken seriously by someone, although they didn't actually agree with you. Maybe, they gave you time to express yourself and explain your thinking, listening thoughtfully to your point of view, without interruption or impatience. Perhaps they asked a question that, although somehow challenging and clearly coming from a position of disagreement, was phrased with real respect and genuine interest, and which demonstrated that they had been paying attention all along.

What might have struck you was their readiness to be enlightened, to learn from what you had to say; how they had their own ideas but held

onto them with a certain grace and humility that invited a climate of mutual esteem. It's not that your interlocutor didn't have an opinion on the issue, or that they changed their opinion to match yours, rather, it was that they showed such a high opinion of you. Whether they convinced you of nothing else in the whole exchange, they showed that they value you as a person. This kind of affirmation could even have given you new courage, not only to form and voice your own judgments, but also to allow your beliefs to be confronted by those of others. By listening to you, they encouraged you to listen to others. True dialogue is contagious.

Perhaps the discussion was about something benign, like whether a particular series is worthwhile. You are a big fan, but with exquisite tact, they were able to delicately express their distaste without you feeling

rejected. On the other hand, it could have been something more serious, like politics or economics. There are many valid ways of organizing society: developing and promoting a position in what we could call the “temporal” sphere is a good sign of healthy human maturity, but being able to listen and learn from the position of others is better still. There are some issues that transcend the temporal, like religious or ethical issues. If this was the centre of your conversation, then there was an objective truth at stake. But somehow your partner managed to not only maintain a calm disagreement but also a thoughtful consideration for what you had to say.

Whatever the topic in question was, this person has communicated to you the most important of all truths - that you are important, that you have value, that you are loved. “We are

not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”^[1] The fact that each person is individually “loved into existence” by God is the first truth that we are all called to embrace, and the first truth we are called to share with others. Speaking about this beautiful reality of human dignity, the constitution *Gaudium et Spes* explains, “For if people exist it is because God has created them through love, and through love continues to keep them in existence. They cannot live fully in the truth unless they freely acknowledge that love and entrust themselves to their creator.”^[2]

Dialogue: together towards the truth

True dialogue is when two people speaking to one another are both

seeking the truth. Each comes with their own perspective and experience, and even if this has solidified into a strong conviction, dialogue does not build walls around this belief; instead it is characterised by an openness to the other and a desire to learn from them. This is because genuine dialogue is motivated by wanting to draw ever closer to the truth, and if possible together.

We do not engage in dialogue to defend our opinions or to convince others, but to walk together to reach the truth. As Pope Francis said on World Communications Day, “We need to resolve our differences through forms of dialogue which help us grow in understanding and mutual respect. A culture of encounter demands that we be ready not only to give, but also to receive.”^[3] That means being open to receive whatever light can come

from engaging with the other person, whether it be something that contributes positively to our knowledge, or something that reveals a new gap we hadn't thought of before. "And in striving to understand others, to grasp their point of view, we discover aspects of the truth we hadn't seen before. Our suggestions are better aimed and we become more 'understandable' to others. If, in contrast, the work of communication ignores others' questions and perplexities, monologue supplants dialogue."^[4]

Interestingly enough, the first commandment, both in Jewish law and in Jesus' teaching to Christians, begins with an imperative verb: "Hear, O Israel" (Dt 2:4; Mk 12:19). Love of God and love of others necessarily involves opening our ears, being attentive to God's word and to the needs of those around us.

If truth itself is our highest motive for dialogue, then we can never neglect one of the greatest truths of all: God's love for the person we are dealing with. No matter how much good we hope to do by convincing someone of the truth about any particular issue, we cannot do so at the expense of the truth about their dignity as a person. Regardless of what is in debate, our respect for others cannot depend on their agreeing with us. How we treat people speaks louder than any argument, and it should testify to their personal dignity as a child of God. "Human personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27)." ^[5]

Freedom: a responsibility

This same reality of human dignity is the very basis for freedom, including that of opinion and expression, and that of religion and conscience. It is because each person is created by God as a unique individual, and also with their own human liberty, that we differ from one another in what we hold to be true. It is wonderful that this freedom results in a great diversity of opinions and approaches to things; evidence that the human being is somehow transcendent, and is not determined by some base drive or instinct that we all have in common. “When the value of freedom is fully understood and the divine gift of freedom is passionately loved, the pluralism that freedom brings with it is also loved.”^[6]

Diversity is something to be celebrated inasmuch as it is an expression of freedom, because

freedom itself is something to be loved and protected.

Paradoxically, this freedom, which arises from our human dignity, is a freedom that we are obliged to use by our very same nature, as “beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility.”^[7] We both can and should take a position in the many “matters which God has left to the free discussion of men [...] For example, decisions referring to different philosophical or political views, to different artistic or cultural trends, or to the problems of professional and social life.”^[8] In these questions, St. Josemaría always insisted that we defend the “personal freedom of every layman to take, in the light of principles given by the Church, all the concrete, theoretical or practical decisions which he considers most appropriate and most

in agreement with his own personal convictions and aptitudes.”^[9]

Whilst this is a freedom everyone enjoys, it belongs in a special way to lay people, whose diverse personal vocations have in common the mission of sanctifying the world from within. To us, God speaks his truth through the ordinary circumstances and relationships of our daily lives, and we share this truth with others through our conversations, friendship and work, and so bring Christ to the pinnacle of all human activities. And yet these activities of the secular sphere, by their nature, can be carried out in many different ways, and insofar as they are compatible with truth, they are all equally valid. “All Christians... must recognize the legitimacy of different opinions with regard to temporal solutions.”^[10] Or, as St. Josemaría liked to repeat, “there are no dogmas in temporal affairs.”^[11]

Wherever God has placed us, we can be sure to find many good people, fellow Catholics or not, who have different but also legitimate solutions and approaches to promote the common good. This definitely doesn't mean we should simply take up the ideas of the next man without thinking, or worse still, adopt no position at all. This would be to hold our own freedom in contempt and would deprive the world of the contribution we could make.

Moreover, if we do not add to the great diversity of views that are in line with the truth, those which miss the mark may become the loudest and most popular voices. "We children of God, who are citizens with the same standing as any others, have to take part fearlessly in all honest human activities and organizations, so that Christ may be present in them. Our Lord will ask a strict account of each one of us if through neglect or love of comfort

we do not freely strive to play a part in the human developments and decisions on which the present and future of society depend.”^[12] At the same time, whilst we are free, and indeed have a personal responsibility to take part in the debates of the world around us and to establish and promote our own position, so is our neighbour.

Freedom and falsehood

This freedom finds a place in the dialogue between any people, even when the truth is in question, simply because each stance is held by a member of the human race. We are fortunate to be free and intelligent beings, yet “unfortunate” in that our intelligence is limited. Consequently, when confronting contingent or challenging matters, or those dependent on time, space, or human sensitivity, the outcome yields a wide array of opinions.

Freedom is what allows us to believe that vanilla ice cream is better than chocolate, or that a republic is better than a monarchy. However, it also allows us to believe something objectively false, like that revenge is justified or even that God does not exist. Ignorance and error can have the use of freedom at their root, as we can misuse this great gift. In this way, the differences in what we know and believe are not only an expression of freedom, they can also be a manifestation of human limitation and sometimes of sin.

That's why it is not difference itself that we love, but the freedom behind it. Should we really defend freedom even when we know it might lead to error and even sin? God Himself has loved our freedom to such an extent, that He gives us the freedom to cling to error voluntarily as it were.

It's important to distinguish that the essence of freedom does not lie in the

possibility of making mistakes. We might even be tempted to do the opposite of what we know is good in an attempt to assert our independence. However, true freedom is found in seeking the truth and acting accordingly. The opposite would be to become bound by our passions or mistakes.

Therefore, loving and defending this freedom of each person, not only to have an opinion we don't share but also to hold on to an erroneous belief, is not the same as loving or defending falsehood itself. Moral relativism is when we pretend that there is no truth and so it doesn't really matter what one believes, or that everything one holds to be true is equal and what matters is that one believes it. We may be tempted to think that the loving thing to do in the face of difference is to be indifferent - to adopt the attitude of, "you have your truth and I have

mine.” But real charity is never indifferent. Charity seeks the good of the other.

Because we love others, we don’t just want to grow closer and closer to the truth ourselves, we want this for them as well. We know that the truth will make them even more free (cf. Jn 8:32). And so, without denying others their freedom, we are willing to do what we can to help them, always being open to receiving help from them as well. “Truth [...] is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth. Moreover, as the truth is discovered,

it is by a personal assent that men are to adhere to it.”^[13] By virtue of our human dignity, each of us is free in the pursuit of the truth, and what we choose to believe is our own free choice, but we depend on one another, on dialogue and freely engaging and accompanying each other in the search.

Children of God

Commenting on Jesus’ words that “The truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32), St. Josemaria elaborated, “How great a truth is this, which opens the way to freedom and gives it meaning throughout our lives. I will sum it up for you... It is the knowledge that we have come from the hands of God, that the Blessed Trinity looks upon us with predilection, that we are children of so wonderful a Father... Do not forget: anyone who does not realise that he is a child of God is unaware of the deepest truth about

himself.”^[14] This is our most fundamental identity, deeper than the position we establish on any issue. And no matter how different our opinions, this is true of our interlocutor as well. We can live out and transmit this truth when we engage in dialogue in the spirit Christ has taught us.

Thus, we gradually identify with Christ, who, being God, was infinitely free. Not because he could choose evil, but because he delighted in goodness. Angels and saints have also preceded us on this path of freedom. Each one, according to their character, preferences, interests, work, era... united in love for God and others.

You may have had an experience in which someone refused to listen to you. Or gave the impression of listening, albeit impatiently, when

actually they were just eagerly waiting for you to stop talking, preparing themselves, like a lion getting ready to pounce, so they could spring to attack, tearing apart each of your points, one by one. Maybe you felt your instincts coming into play, as your heart began to pound and tension began to build in your chest, and you felt the urge to shout out and defend your position. Perhaps they were really aggressive, or somehow made it personal. The last thing you probably felt like doing was trying to be understanding. But charity calls for understanding in all circumstances, an understanding that communicates God's love. If you feel like this is beyond you, you are right. "For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same" (Lk 6:32-33). To dialogue with those who

think like you, to listen to those who will listen to you - this is natural. But sometimes to be understanding is really supernatural - a testimony of God acting in us as His instruments, bringing His tenderness and affection, “for He Himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked” (Lk 6:35). It is by treating others according to their dignity as children of God that we ourselves “will be children of the Most High” (Lk 6:35).

^[1] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at Mass on the Occasion of the Beginning of his Petrine Ministry, 24-IV-2005.

^[2] *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 19.

^[3] Message of Pope Francis for the 48th World Communications Day, 1-VI-2014.

^[4] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Closing Address, 11th Professional Seminar for Church Communication Offices Pontifical University of Santa Croce Rome, 19-IV-2018.

^[5] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Economic Justice for All,” no. 28

^[6] *Conversations*, no. 98

^[7] *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 2

^[8] *Conversations*, no. 12

^[9] *Conversations*, no. 12

^[10] *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 75

^[11] “The Riches of the Faith,” published in ABC, Madrid, 2-XI-1969.

^[12] *The Forge*, no. 715

^[13] *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 3

^[14] *Friends of God*, no. 26

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