

The case for the virtue called civility

A few weeks ago I was in a small coffee shop for breakfast. There was only one overworked waitress for this cafe and she rushed from customer to customer to keep everyone served with coffee and various breakfast orders. What impressed me was that she was cheerful and without panic in the middle of the demands of time-conscious and hungry customers.

The waitress, by her own approach to her job and toward her customers, had a positive and calming effect on everyone in the restaurant. It was fun being there; the food was good, the coffee was not Starbucks but it was hot and not too weak; and then there was the contagious enthusiasm of the waitress.

The polite friendliness she showed is sometimes called civility, a basic virtue upon which we are able to build other virtues. Therefore it is in itself a virtue that we should never take lightly. Society needs civility in the relationships between people as one of those given traditions of behavior that makes possible an atmosphere of present respect and the prospect of future friendships.

Just as our bodies need good water and non-polluted air, our souls need an atmosphere of respect and civility. If we



From Your Pastor

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intend that human encounters in schools, stores and workplaces are places where present respect and future friendships can happen, then we must teach civility in others and expect civility in ourselves.

We should first of all expect it of ourselves as one of the ground-floor character ingredients upon which other vital qualities of character are

built. People, whatever their age, do not work or learn or play as well in settings where language is crude and disrespectful.

Words that mock the human body or human sexuality or profanely use the name of God always create isolation and alienation instead of friendship and encouragement. Also, words that may appear and sound proper but that nevertheless

ridicule or diminish another person have the same isolating and discouraging result.

St. Paul had this in mind when he gave his advice on the way we talk and act. "Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders...Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt" (Colossians 4: 5,6). Salt in the first century is always understood first of all as a preservative, therefore I think St. Paul is saying this: Let the way you speak be kindly. Let the way you speak sustain relationships so they can last a long time.

But what is the cure for those of us who have overheard our own voices using the words of disrespect that discourage ourselves and others? Here are two suggestions that can help:

- First, let me become a listener of my own words in order to watch their result by St. Paul's test. Then let me listen to people who are encouragers so that I can learn from them.

- Secondly, let me establish my own tradition in favor of the positive language of civility. I've discovered that kindness in our words usually leads to kindness in our actions.

And I can say for sure it definitely improves your appetite, as I learned in one small coffee shop!