

An argument for argument's sake

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It seems that it has become very difficult to have an argument. This is a serious state of affairs, because argument—the free discussion of opposing views—has been one of the most significant ways through which Christians have come to the truth of things. At the Council of Jerusalem, reported in Acts chapter 15, the purpose of the Holy Spirit was made clear only "after there had been much debate" (15:7a). The Councils of the Church have depended upon argument ever since: at the Second Vatican Council there was "much debate" over such topics as the mission of the Church to the world, the offices of bishop and priest, the role of the laity in the mission of the Church. The very word "argument" is derived from the Latin *arguere* which means, "to make clear"; argument is for the sake of clarifying what ought to be said. The Holy Spirit illumined the judgment of the Council Fathers by making use of their arguments because, as St. Thomas Aquinas insisted, "truth and falsity are found in the judgment of propositions." Without propositions—even opposing propositions—the truth could not have been made clear.

Why has it become difficult to have an argument? I suspect that there are at least two reasons, one superficial, one profound. Superficially, we dislike arguments because they appear to be impolite: our problem is not one of principle, but of etiquette. In this vein some of us were taught never to discuss religion or politics in polite society. One might argue (excuse me: propose!) as did G. K. Chesterton that religion and politics are the only topics really worthy of discussion. At any rate, had this prohibition been followed, none of us would ever have come to believe. What would our faith be had St. Paul been more concerned with etiquette than with conversion, or had Jesus been too polite to mention God the Father?

The truth is that etiquette is essential so long as we cannot presume relationship of any kind. With a total stranger it is likely best to limit discussion to the weather or, if we are bolder, the sports page. Tolerance must always be the rule when we ourselves are being tolerated. But the moment that we begin to relate is precisely the moment in which we cease to tolerate the beliefs and opinions of another. We cease to tolerate them because we begin to take them seriously. We seek to be of one mind and heart with those who matter to us, and therefore we begin to argue—that is, to clarify together what we think and feel. To waltz around a disagreement lest we offend against decorum is unworthy of friendship. For my part, I have never rejoiced in a single friend with whom I have not argued. Argument is the very stuff of friendship.

The sad fact is that we no longer presume friendship in society; we expect an utter lack of it. Therefore we are concerned for all the niceties of anonymity: we are polite and mannerly, we tolerate everything that is said, and we condemn ourselves and others to the horror of being completely disregarded.

It is difficult to have an argument when our first social concern is to be nice. But the second reason that argument is difficult—the more profound reason—lies in a mistake we have made about authority. Having got out of the habit of arguing, we have made the fatal assumption that every proposition from someone in authority is of the same weight.

A case in point is a remark of Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, which recently received a good deal of publicity in the Catholic and secular press. The Cardinal remarked that a layperson who remains too long in a position of delegated responsibility (that is, ministerial responsibility delegated by a bishop or priest) ceases, in effect, to be a layperson. Thus, for example, a layperson who is charged with overseeing a parish in the absence of a priest might cease to be regarded as truly a layperson if he or she were to remain in that position indefinitely.

Many in this country took umbrage at this opinion. Yet, because the remark was made by Cardinal Ratzinger, it was widely assumed that his was an official position of the Church's magisterium; to argue with the Cardinal would then be tantamount to arguing with the Holy See. Yet this is by no means the case. Because of his office, Cardinal Ratzinger's opinions are significant. But they are only opinions. When the Cardinal acts in the fullness of his authority, his congregation issues an instruction, approved by the Pope, and intended for the whole Church. Such an instruction is authoritative, although not to the same degree as a Papal letter or a document from an ecumenical council. When, on the other hand, the Cardinal offers an opinion (his own opinion) in an article for the Vatican newspaper (*L'Osservatore Romano*), he does not act officially for the Church; therefore his opinion does not carry the authority of an official intervention of the Church.

I would like to demonstrate how clarity may be achieved through argument in its best sense by taking issue with the Cardinal on the point that a lay person could cease to be regarded as lay. The purpose of the argument is to clarify what ought to be said. In order to argue at all, we first have to agree on certain things. So, for example, we would have to agree that arguing for the sake of clarity is more important than avoiding it for the sake of good manners. (Inasmuch as Cardinal Ratzinger is a distinguished theologian, however, he would hardly regard an argument as unmannerly.) We would also have to agree upon certain convictions which we hold in common. (If we hold nothing in common, then argument is impossible, because in such a case we are not able to discern even where we disagree.) In this case, both the Cardinal and I accept the authority of the magisterium (the teaching office) of the Church. I also have a common relationship with the Cardinal: the Church is important to both of us, as is the following of Christ. (This is why it matters to us what ought to be said.) In this way, we can agree upon the terms of our argument.

Having set the stage of our argument within the authority of the magisterium and in the context of our relationship to Christ and the Church, I would make the following points: First, there are two fundamental participations in the priesthood of Jesus Christ: the lay and the ordained. Second, these two modes of participating in the priesthood of Jesus are equal in dignity, but *essentially* different. (These points are precisely set forth in the *Instruction* of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued on November

13, 1997. Cardinal Ratzinger, as prefect of this congregation, would not disagree with these statements. Third, I would argue that: if the difference between the laity and the ordained is essential, that is, not merely one of role or function, then it cannot be the case that a layperson would cease to be a layperson merely by the fact of holding a delegated office usually reserved to the ordained. (Here I think that the Cardinal spoke without sufficient precision.)

It is certainly the case that the principal responsibility of the laity is beyond the parish; to the laity is given responsibility for the renewal of the whole of the temporal order. It is also the case that a lay person can focus too much attention upon the parish community, to the detriment of his or her more fundamental responsibilities. (The Holy Father issues this caveat in *Christifideles Laici*.) Even so, I would argue that such a person does not thereby cease to be a lay person, anymore than a priest who gives more attention to the *Wall Street Journal* than to Scripture thereby ceases to be a priest. Rather, to belong to the laity is to possess a responsibility for the Church and for the Church's mission which is unique: the lay person always approaches the Church from the perspective of the mission of Christ *to the world*. To be ordained to the ministerial priesthood is also to possess a responsibility for the Church and the Church's ministry which is unique: the ordained always approach the Church from the perspective of Christ presenting himself *to his own community*. Whatever actual task the lay person and the priest may undertake, they never cease, thereby, to approach the Church from the unique participation in Christ's work which is their own.

To argue such a point is important. What the Church very much needs is to probe the depths of Christ's mission—both that dimension of Christ's work which is lay and that dimension which is true of the ordained. The means of our growth in understanding will be argument: a clarification of what should be said. It is for the sake of this clarification that the Cardinal made his remarks in *L'Osservatore Romano*; in other words, the Cardinal made his remarks for the sake of argument. We are neither impolite nor disobedient in taking up that argument; on the contrary, to refer our own positions to the inspection of others for the sake of argument is precisely what the Cardinal is inviting us to do.

Unity in the Church will never be achieved by a polite refusal to discuss important issues. Not will it be achieved by taking up entrenched positions which are not open to discussion—whether on the part of so-called liberals or conservatives. Rather, unity will be achieved by referring our own positions for argument, presuming the good will and investment of those with whom we argue. Argument is one of the chief means by which we will take each other seriously and, like the Apostles at the Council of Jerusalem, or the bishops at Vatican II, discern the purpose of the Holy Spirit for the life of the world.