



Civility: Time for a Comeback

A recent experience literally made me stop in my tracks in disbelief. While on my nightly walk, I noticed a group of grade school children arguing in a neighbor's yard. Their voices were extremely angry as they stood face to face poised for physical combat. Unmistakably, a line had been drawn about something and no one was willing to back off.

The rage escalated until a parent stepped out of the house. At the sight of the parent, half of the kids scattered in all directions. I was waiting for the parent to tell the kids to cut it out when the unbelievable happened. The parent launched verbal attacks at those fleeing. Following her lead, the remaining kids bellowed obscenities until the runners were out of sight.

Civility – oh civility, where have you gone?

Situations like this are happening all too frequently. Local, national, and international news cover daily incidents of civil unrest and disobedience. If one was to keep score, opposition has replaced kindness in the world's arena. This really concerns me and has me asking, "Is civility really out of style?"

What exactly is civility? The dictionary definition tells us that it involves formal politeness and courtesy in behavior or speech. In my humble opinion, three words need to be added at the end: *in all situations*. Civility is the ability to stay mannerly and always cultured when the circumstances are calm or escalating or out of control.



Civility is the way that we disagree with respect, seek common ground when differences exist, listen past one's assumptions, and teach others to do the same. Civility is the hard work of staying present even with those with whom we have deep-rooted and fierce disagreements. It makes it possible for us to keep God's second great commandment; love one another.

One reason civility has become a lost art is that people find it acceptable to adopt an "eye for an eye – a tooth for a tooth" philosophy if you feel belittled, threatened, or at a disadvantage. Situations such as these give you permission to engage in combative speech and react with anger. Civility can (and should) be jettisoned and replaced with rudeness if one is opposed.

This may seem like the right course of action. But it is not. When we match fire with fire, we step into the dark side of humanity.

The best way to return to civility is through parental modeling that follows a *I do – we do – you do* format. When parents expect and model civility in all situations (*I do*) they teach their children to follow in their footsteps (*we do*). Over time, the children will naturally develop the habit to be civil (*you do*).

Employing the *I do – we do – you do* model parents teach their children to discuss their differences and listen past their opinions. It sets an expectation to listen and be present to someone with a different viewpoint, to seek understanding when someone is oppositional and to explain one's position assertively rather than in anger.

Let's take a look at how the model in more detail.

- In the *I do* phase, show your children what civility looks like. Explain its importance in and outside the home. Show them how manners, listening without interruption, and speaking calmly during discussions demonstrates civility. Consider reading the New Testament that point out how Jesus and his disciples were civil – especially when opposed.
- In the *we do* phase, work on civility together. As a family, set up “civility” standards that everyone follows (e.g. saying please and thank you, no swearing or vulgarity, talking calmly during discussions, paying attention to the needs of others, asking questions before stating one's position...) Once the standards are set, put them into action. Hold all family members accountable.
- In the *you do* phase, expect your children to be civil. This is the longest phase because it takes time to make civility a habit—especially in demanding situations. Be ready to back up and repeat the *I do* or *we do* steps until civility is well established in and outside your home.

For civility to mount a comeback in society, you get to decide what type of parent you will be. Will you be a parent who rises above the civil unrest and show your family and friends how civility and politeness can be normal and attainable? Will you raise your children to be civilians and not combatants? Will you Leave a legacy of love and respect in society. Will you help civility to return?



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Tis the Season to Receive

How we receive gifts is just as important as how we give them. This lesson was driven home to me as I experienced the difference between how my wife's family celebrated Christmas and my family's tradition. My wife's family tends to form their family traditions around practical considerations, such as impatient children, efficient use of time, and the patience of adults. For Christmas gift opening, gifts are distributed amidst the excited clamor of the children. Then everyone tears into the wrapping paper at the same time. The children open their presents within minutes, adults quickly clean up the wrapping paper, and the children disappear to continue playing and roughhousing. The conversation among the adults turns briefly toward which child received which gift from which relative, tracking down the gifts for each child and putting them together so they find their way home. Then the adults return to the kitchen to play cards and enjoy dessert. The pace is fast and furious. The environment is full of energy and excitement, and it is all over quickly.

My family's Christmas tradition couldn't be more different. After a Christmas eve dinner of our favorite junk food, we gather around the Christmas tree in the living room. The gifts are distributed and piled up around each family member in an atmosphere of quiet anticipation. Then we take turns opening our presents one person at a time and one gift at a time. After each present opens a present, he or she shows it to everyone and thanks the giver. We take turns going around the room this way, opening one gift at a time until every present is opened. This tradition gives my mother's sense of humor plenty of opportunity to express itself. She loves to nest carefully wrapped boxes inside each other and cheerfully enforce the rule that you can only open one box at a time. We wonder who will receive the trick boxes each year or what variation Mom will devise. The entire process takes hours.

You would think our children would become impatient with the slow, methodical process of waiting their turn. Surprisingly, my kids tend to prefer the tradition of my family over my wife's. The entire family appreciates every gift. The focus is not only on what is received but on the people involved in the exchange. The recipient fully appreciates the giver. My children have many fond memories of being the subject of my mother's sense of humor and returning the favor to her. Last year we sent her on a scavenger hunt to find each of her gifts. I think this slow, intentional gift exchange method has some important lessons to teach us.

The best gift exchange happens when both the giving and the receiving are honored. If one of these elements is not recognized, the exchange becomes marginalized. Focusing only on the receiving makes us appear selfish and grasping. If we focus only on the giving, the event can become prideful, and we can appear ungrateful for the gifts received.

I think you will agree that we tend to spend more time getting ready to give gifts than we do to receive them. We make lists, check them twice, and enter the hustle and bustle of consumerism for the best deals.

We wrap and adorn purchases with bows and tags. We put work and effort into our gift-giving. But what are we doing to prepare ourselves to be great receivers of gifts?

Great reception begins with the understanding that all gifts express love and the gift of yourself. Your reception should acknowledge the person first and the gift second. Even if the gift is not what you want or were expecting, it is vital to recognize the love expressed. Reception is also about taking the time to attend to the exchange fully. Engage the person who is giving the gift. Ask them how they came up with the idea for the gift. Let them know how you will use it. What you say and how you say it is your gift back to the giver. Anticipation is also part of receiving well. Patience breeds gratitude and keeps selfishness at bay. It helps you focus on the true spirit of the exchange rather than on what you are getting. Patience reduces one's sense of entitlement and increases one's appreciation.

These are essential lessons to practice but also to teach our children. When our children are young, we teach them to say, "Thank you." That's a great start. As children get older, continue discussing the value of receiving gifts well. Challenge them to become better receivers. Help them to see the love behind the presents they receive. Show them how to approach the giver of the gift as a gift themselves. Guide them to say more than just the expected "thank you" by discussing what it means to make your gratitude heartfelt and authentic.

Gift-giving is an exchange of love. Jesus, the perfect gift, was the gift of self to humanity, wrapped in swaddling clothes. Uniting His divine nature with our human nature, He gave Himself to us in the perfect gift of intimacy. Jesus gave up His divine power and embraced humility. He continued to be a gift of self to us on the Cross when He perfectly offered Himself to us in death. Christmas is complete when we recognize that giving and receiving gifts point to the ultimate Gift of Christ. Can you remember this when you exchange gifts this Christmas?

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Resolve to Waste Time with your Children

A few years ago, Pope Francis sent out a challenge to parents across the globe. His simple and direct tweet said: ***Parents, can you “waste time” with your children? It is one of the most important things you can do each day.***

This mike drop tweet from our Holy Father reminds me of a story that a parent told me years ago. This father shared with me that he had made plans to attend a Badger football game one Saturday with a group of his buddies. But his wife took ill early Friday morning which meant that he had to cancel his plans to take care of his 4-year-old son. Obviously disappointed with the change, the father said that he decided to spend that Saturday sulking. He was going to sit and waste time rather than do anything productive. And that is what he did. He sat in his P.J.s until 10. He read the newspaper. And he brooded.

When the game started, he watched it on T.V. During this entire time, his son zoomed around from one toy to another. Occasionally, the son would invite his dad to play. Still sullen, the dad agreed “to play” by half-entering into his son’s fantasy world of digging trenches with a dump truck and unearthing dinosaurs that were buried under pillows. As the little boy created endless stories, the dad paid just enough attention to convince his son that he was interested in him and not the game.

At some point, out of the blue, the tiny child crawled into the dad’s lap giving him a bear hug. His son exclaimed, “Dad this is the best day ever! I love you!” With that, he was back on the floor hoping to conquer another adventure.

The dad was startled by both the gesture of love and the comment. The Father’s heart was transformed at that moment. He had no idea that his presence – just being there – would have such a profound effect on his son. He was overwhelmed that his son found so much comfort and security in his sitting on the couch, wasting his time.

This example illustrates the challenge given to you and me by Pope Francis. He encourages us to share idle time with our kids; to sit down, relax and allow life to unfold around us. He asks us to put the outside world on hold and watch our children giggle and play, imagine and question, zoom and rest. He dares us to just ‘be’ with them and let them just be with us.

Why Waste Time? What’s the Point?

Wasting time is something that our culture frowns upon. In fact, any quick Google search on wasting time results in articles and resources offering you expert advice on how to become more productive and less idle. I remember meeting a mom who felt she wasn’t doing enough. So, she decided to begin

each day by asking herself three daily questions; why sit if you could stand; why stand if you can walk; why walk if you can run? She said that her goal was to maximize every moment of every day. When I asked her what her family thought about this philosophy she responded, “they just roll with it because like me, they don’t want to miss out on anything either.” As I walked away, I wondered how over busyness would impact this family’s happiness and fulfillment. Would they become more or less attached with each other?

If you take Pope Francis’ tweet to heart, you know that he urges you to slow up and enjoy the life God has given you. He wants you to know that God created downtime for a reason. Times of rest allow a family to rejoice in the fruits of its labors, create shared memories and experience the joy of one another.

In a recent message the Pope said, “Children are the joy of the family and of society... Children are a gift. Each one is unique and irreplaceable; and at the same time unmistakably linked to his/her roots. In fact, according to God’s plan, being son and daughter means to carry within oneself the memory and hope of a love which was fulfilled in the very kindling of the life of another...”

Harmony and Hope. That’s the reason that we waste time together. Harmony—the ability to be in sync and be at peace. Hope – the confidence that the world is going to be o.k. and that we are going to find joy in who we are. Both of these elements grow when we spend time with our kids doing nothing more than just being. Hope flourishes when we stop racing around and catch our collective family breath. Harmony expands when we allow ourselves unhurried time to unwrap the gift of our children and when they get to sneak a peek at the gifts that are hiding within us.

Consider looking at your calendar for the next two months. As you do so, ask yourself what percentage of your non-working hours is available to your family? Could you use this time to just be with your family? The end game is to find time each day to be together as a family. Even 10 minutes here or there can make the difference and meet the challenge given by Pope Francis. That’s doable, right?



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True Joy Comes from Self-Control and Striving

Where do your children find joy? I teach at a Catholic school whose motto is "Joyfully Catholic." Students will sometimes claim that we are not living up to our motto because we hold high standards for them. We give our students homework and expect them to complete it. We expect them to come to class prepared, to pay attention, and to participate. We demand that they care for the school environment, treat each other respectfully, and obey the rules. We designed these high standards to teach our students self-discipline.



People don't like self-discipline. We have a natural aversion to things that take extra effort. Learning about truth and doing what is right is difficult, so we assume they are unrealistic expectations. Wouldn't children be happier if we gave them more freedom and didn't expect so much of them?

Paragraph 1731 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that freedom is the power to shape our own life. It's a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness. And our freedom reaches its perfection when we direct it toward God and the happiness that God has planned for us.

That's the truth I want to teach as a parent and a teacher. We are capable of self-restraint and self-possession. Greater joy comes from striving to know the truth and to live in God's goodness. The thrill of acting on our impulses does not last.

I also want my students and children to grow in virtue. As a teacher, I focus on guiding students in the intellectual virtues. My message to students who have natural intelligence is that they won't be equipped to use their intelligence well without virtue. My message to students who struggle in school is that intellectual virtue can bolster their learning. I want all of my students and my own children to know that intellectual virtue helps them to embrace the truth and moral virtue helps them live in goodness. Growing in virtue is difficult, but it's worth the effort.

Finally, I want my students and children to learn that anything worthwhile is worth striving for. Children who get what they want too easily, whether it be grades or gadgets, don't learn to value things. Being willing to strive and work hard also helps them discern what is truly valuable. I would love my children to choose the Iliad over Tic-Toc because ultimately, I want them to choose Jesus over the world.

These choices are not easy. They require self-discipline. They are attained only by those willing to strive through difficulty to receive what is of greater value.

So how do we teach our children that they don't need to act on every impulse or desire? Here are some ideas.

1. Encourage your children to practice self-control in more manageable areas to build the moral muscle to handle challenging situations. Does your child like to play video games as much as mine does? My son claims that if he had the freedom, he'd do nothing but play video games "24-7." I tell him that's precisely why he can only play for 30 minutes. While he still has a hard time shutting it off when his time is up, he doesn't realize that this is just practice for the more difficult things in life he'll have to balance.

2. Encourage your children to make sacrifices for Advent and Lent. The Church gives us seasons of sacrifice for a reason! Help your children fully enter the meaning of the seasons of sacrifice by encouraging them to make their sacrifice for the good of someone else and pray for that person.

3. Make sure your children see you practicing self-control! If we tell our children to turn off the video game while our face remains glued to our smartphones, our actions will crowd out our words. Model self-control and self-possession by practicing balance and self-denial in your own life. It's also OK to show your children that you're doing so. But make it a statement of solidarity. "Boy, I'd love a second piece of desert too. But let's both be satisfied with just one piece."

These lessons in self-control will teach our children that they are not slaves to their physical desires. They can make choices about the kind of people they become. And ultimately, they have the power to choose God and the goodness that God has planned for them. It will also teach them that true joy comes from striving for higher goods.

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Making Sense of the Gender Debate

There are two things that really frustrate me: being confused and not being told the truth. That is why the culture's campaign on gender is difficult for me to understand. Can you relate?

The term *gender* confuses many people because it *used to mean* the same thing as “male” or “female” (a biological reality). However, today's culture defines gender as a belief rather than a physical reality. Gender today is defined as how you feel about yourself as either a male or a female. This means that one's bodily sex (being born either male or female) is irrelevant because a male on the outside can be a female on the inside or vice versa.

Changing the meaning of the word gender makes it difficult to know what is truthfully foundational and what isn't. Because these two definitions are oppositional, our thinking can be challenged. How can we figure out what is the truth? Let me suggest that we tackle this issue by going back to the first stories of mankind that are found in the Bible.

The very first chapter of the Bible clearly tells us that God created human persons in only two forms: male and female. It explains that the sexual difference is a gift to us from our Creator. The Bible also reveals that being male or female is very good because it makes it possible to create new life and form bonds of deep love.

The Bible also shares that the human body has great meaning and dignity. It is not a “thing” we possess, like a car or a laptop. It is much more than a container for our soul. The body allows us to make visible that which is invisible inside us. It speaks a “language” that should express the truth of who we are created by God as either a male or female.

In God's plan, each person is designed to be matched biologically inside and out. In fact, science confirms that it is scientifically impossible to be born in the wrong body because there are just two sex chromosomes: X and Y. Females have two X chromosomes and males have one X and one Y. Evidence of being female or male is found throughout the body.

It becomes easier to wade through the puzzling gender debates when you begin with this information. Yet, some of you may ask, “What about the child who is born with ambiguous genitalia? Isn't this proof that there could be another option beyond male or female?” When this happens on rare occasions, medical and genetic tests can discover the biological sex (XX or XY) and the nature of the defect involved.

If these facts are true, why are we hearing so much about LGBTQ and being told that we need to let everyone – especially our children – identify themselves as they prefer? That is a great question that I can't fully answer in this newsletter. But I can share with you a few quick facts from research that might dispel the confusion.

- The gender debate began in the 1960s when psychologist named John Money decided that people should identify themselves by their social preferences and behavior rather than their biology. This opened the door for boys who liked dance to think of themselves as girls or for girls who prefer trucks to think of themselves as boys.
- In the last 10 years, the trend to identify as transgender has dramatically increased after exposure to the concept by peers or social media. This ‘social contagion’ is called Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria. Simply, youth who say that they question their gender identity receive extra attention and support and that often encourages them to continue the questioning.
- Youth who are allowed to explore the concept of transgender, rarely find that they are more mentally stable and happy in the long run.
- Up to 98% of youth who struggle with their sex as a boy or a girl, outgrow this condition by adulthood.

Preparing Yourself for Necessary Conversations about Gender

Clearly, gender ideology is a hot topic in society today; one that must be dealt with respectfully and intelligently. Here are several suggestions to help you become more informed and equipped to faithfully translate God’s plan to your children.

- Teach your children about the Theology of the Body which beautifully describes God’s plan for us. Check in with your parish to see what resources they have.
- Check out the resources at the [Person and Identity](http://personandidentity.com/) website at personandidentity.com/. This site offers substantial and practical resources and guidance for parents and those working with youth.
- Remember, all persons deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. All youth, even those who suffer with gender confusion, deserve the same educational opportunities and resources. They also deserve to know the truth about God’s plan. This means that we need to share the truth in clearly and with charity.



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Guide Your Family Through Future Generations with Family Rituals

What do you think of when you hear the word "ritual"? Does your mind turn to liturgy and prayer or formal ceremonies? You might be wondering what ritual could have to do with parenting and family life. The answer is that family rituals can be potent tools for building your family community, teaching family values (and virtues), and celebrating your family. Even more powerfully, the rituals you establish with your children now could pass down to your children's future families, potentially affecting your family for generations to come. One of my favorite rituals from my childhood was Sunday dinner. My mom would always make a large, festive lunch. Especially as we got older, Sunday dinner became a treasured time for conversation and support. This ritual meant so much to me that I tried to continue it with my wife and children with Sunday brunch.



What is a ritual? A ritual is a repeated action with deep significance, positive emotional meaning, and active participation within defined roles. My mom and dad gave our Sunday dinner significance by making it more than a typical meal. We had many meals together as a family, but Sunday dinner was our Family Meal. It always included a fully set table, usually with our nicer dishes. It always included family discussions about the week behind us. It always included delicious food and often a lot of laughter. Even when we grumbled about the work, my sisters and I recognized that being asked to set the table and wash the dishes gave us a role in preparing the meal. Rituals don't have to be long or complicated. Many of them can be very simple. Let's look at various rituals you might establish in your family.

Greeting Rituals

Greeting and leaving rituals can be the simplest form of ritual to establish. The idea behind these rituals is to communicate your care for each other as your part and come back together. Such rituals can be as simple as giving each other hugs as you come home from school and work. Parents can offer their children blessings as they leave for school or part with a prayer for each other. The key is to set the daily expectation for these rituals. As they take hold of your family, you'll find your children seeking them out themselves.

Meal Rituals

Because of the importance of family meals in general, meal rituals are especially potent. Meal rituals can take the form of special meals, such as our Sunday dinners and brunches. You can also set up smaller rituals for every family meal, such as giving each family member an age-appropriate role to play in preparing the meal and cleaning up afterward. Another great ritual to establish for meals is a special way to celebrate family members. My wife purchased a decorated plate with the word "Celebrate!" printed on it. We give this plate to a family member to celebrate an accomplishment, birthday, good deed, or just to celebrate the person.

Prayer Rituals

Prayer rituals can be fun ways to instill the habit of prayer in your children. Come up with a light way for each member to express gratitude to God. Take advantage of young children's love for rhyme and song. With older children, create a ritual around reading and discussing Scripture that gives them opportunities to ask questions about the Faith. Another great ritual is for parents to bless their children.

Family Community Rituals

Finally, you can establish rituals around the community life of your family. These rituals may include regular playtime. You might create a comfortable space and time for extended, uninterrupted conversations with older children. The key to community rituals is to allow for extended moments when you can come together and lose track of time in each other's company.

Establishing rituals in these various elements of family life is a great way to impress upon your children the importance of family. It can also nudge them toward putting the good of the family before their own good. Even something as simple as giving hugs when they come home before doing their own thing is a small but constant reminder to think of others, providing fertile ground for virtue and charity. All of that in exchange for a bit of planning and effort.



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