

Communicate with integrity

I recently spoke at the Supreme Convention of the Knights of Columbus. Each year there is a convention theme. This year's theme, "Knights of Columbus, Knights of Unity," was especially timely, given the anger and polarization that are sadly so much a part of our culture and now also are finding their way into the life of the church.

When members of the Church use anger and invective against one another, then, to use the famous words of Pope St. Paul VI - "the smoke of Satan has entered the church through some fissure."

To say this is not to defend the indefensible. As we all so sadly know, there are serious and abundant reasons for righteous anger, especially the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and the failure of some bishops to address this forthrightly. Anger is justifiable when church leaders fail to lead - fail to communicate the fullness of the faith in love, fail to help form consciences, fail to evangelize the culture, faith in integrity - and the list could go on.

But righteous anger is not like the bitterness and vitriol we so often see today among so many, including those who engage in personal attacks on the character of others, especially on social media. Nor is anger righteous when its purpose is merely to defend an ideology, be it of the right or of the left. Still less is anger righteous that employs evil tactics to attain its goals, specifically, the dual sins of calumny and detraction.

Calumny consists in making false and defamatory statements about others. Detraction consists in broadcasting actual faults of others for no good reason.

Winning an argument or venting on Instagram, Twitter or Facebook are not good

reasons to muckrake, to search out and publicize the faults of people one disagrees with.

By contrast, righteous anger seeks not political or rhetorical victories nor does it ever seek the destruction of persons and their reputations. Rather, in the words of St. Paul, it seeks “to do the truth in charity.” In condemning evil, including threats to human life and dignity and indeed all the ways the human heart can betray the Lord and the Gospel, righteous anger serves as a wake-up call, a wake-up call that opens up the pathways of healing, redemption and reconciliation attained not merely through human effort but through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

None of us singlehandedly can overcome the culture of hatred that has taken hold in our society and has gained a foothold in the church’s life. But as followers of Jesus, we can make a difference.

And so we rightly ask, “What can I do?” First, we can support the Knights’ Civility campaign by sending your name and encouraging others to do so to Civility@kofc.org. Second and most fundamentally, you and I must put our own house in order, beginning with our own minds and hearts that can so easily be overtaken by unrighteous anger toward others people, including those who have harmed us. When that spirit of peace which flows through Christ in the Holy Spirit lives in us, then we are equipped to lead differently, not so much by the exercise of power but by persuasive attraction of goodness. Examining our choice of words in public and private is a good place to start.

Polls consistently show that lots of people are fed up with the anger and division that runs rampant in our politics and what passes for entertainment. As the 2020 election season draws closer and the rhetoric and emotions heat up in nearly every corner of our society, may our hearts and minds be calmed by our Christ-inspired civility and a Catholic faith rooted in communion and love.