

# Love is both tolerant and intolerant

**By Bishop Robert Barron**

Every community, inevitably, has a value or set of values that it considers fundamental, some basic good which positions every other claim to goodness. For most of the modern liberal democracies, for example, freedom and equality play this determining role in the moral discourse. In Communist societies, economic justice, construed as the elimination of the class structure, would provide such a foundation. In the context of German National Socialism, the defense of the Fatherland and the will of the Führer anchored the moral system, however corrupt. There is a rather simple means of identifying this ultimate value: in regard to any particular moral or political act, keep asking the question, “Why is this being done?” until you come to the point where you find yourself saying, “Well, because that’s just a good thing.” The “just a good thing” is the value that your society or culture considers non-negotiable and which in turn determines all subordinate values.

As a liberal society, ours has been, as I stated above, largely shaped by the values of liberty and equality, but in recent years, the ground has shifted a bit. Even a casual survey of the contemporary cultural scene reveals that the non-negotiables, the values undetermined and all-determining, seem to be inclusivity, tolerance, and diversity. If you asked most people today, especially the young, why should you be inclusive, tolerant, and accepting of diversity, the answer, I imagine, would be a puzzled, “Well, those are just good things to be.”

And here I would like to draw a contrast with the community of the Church. Within a properly Christian context, the ultimate value, which positions and determines any other value is neither tolerance, nor diversity, nor inclusivity, but rather love. I’ll admit that things can get confusing at this point, for the fundamental goods of the secular society today do have much in common with love, which is indeed often inclusive, tolerant, and encouraging of diversity. But not always—and thereupon hangs a tale.

To love is to will the good of the other as other. It is to break out of the black hole of one’s own self-regard and truly desire what is best for another. Therefore, to be sure, love is inclusive in the measure that it recognizes the essential dignity of each individual; love is tolerant, inasmuch as it respects the goodness of even those who hold errant points of view; and love encourages diversity, to the degree that it eschews the imperialistic imposition of one’s own ego upon another. However, sometimes love is exclusive, intolerant, and unaccepting of diversity—precisely because it wills the good of the other.

To illustrate this counter-intuitive proposition, let me begin with a rather ordinary example. Suppose you are the coach of a college baseball team, and you are presiding over tryouts. You survey a number of players of varying skill levels, and you are compelled to make your selection of, say, twenty players out of a hundred candidates. Your choices will exclude far more than they include; they will sow unhappiness more abundantly than joy. But if you are a good man, they will be done out of love. You will be willing the good of those advanced players who can and should practice their skills through heightened competition and who will delight the fans who will attend their games; and you will be willing the good of those less advanced players who should not be permitted to compromise the integrity of the team and who should probably enter into some other arena of endeavor. In a word, both inclusion and exclusion will be acts of love, which proves that love is a more fundamental and positioning value.

Now a somewhat more elevated example. The Church of Jesus Christ is radically inclusive, for its ultimate purpose is to draw all people to the Lord. The Bernini Colonnade in St. Peter's Square, reaching out like arms to embrace the massive crowds, is evocative of this aspiration. Jesus said, "Go and teach all nations," and "declare the Gospel to the ends of the earth." Thus, inclusivity is without doubt one of the dimensions of the Church's love. However, the Church is also exclusive and intolerant, for it discerns that certain forms of behavior are repugnant to its own integrity. Thus, for a variety of reasons, it excludes people from receiving communion, and in extreme cases, it formally excommunicates others. It solemnly declares that those who are in the state of mortal sin are not worthy to approach the eucharistic table unless they first receive sacramental absolution. And it unapologetically asserts that the Christian life has a formal structure, which by its very nature excludes certain styles of life that are incompatible with it. These discriminations, judgments, and exclusions are, if I might put it this way, modes of "tough love." Though they seem harsh, they are ways of willing the good of the other.

A song that has been widely played in Catholic circles these past twenty years or so includes the line, "All are welcome in this place." Cardinal Francis George once archly remarked, "Yes, all are welcome in the Church, but on Christ's terms, not their own."

Real love both includes and excludes; real love is both tolerant and intolerant.

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