

What the Holy Father Could Teach Us

The Catholic Review

A couple of weeks ago I was pleased to join in honoring Judge Frank E. Cicone, Former Chief Judge of the Circuit Court of Baltimore County, in a surprise celebration of his 50th anniversary of joining the Maryland Bar. I had known little of him except of the wide respect in which he has been held in the local legal community all these years. I did manage a number of conversations with professionals in the local justice community, however, and the overriding praiseworthy quality that was attributed to him was “civility.” Effective, objective and thorough has he been all these years, I was told, but the hundreds who gathered to surprise him that evening were there because of his unwavering “civility” – his treatment of all who stood before him with respect and dignity.

The event coincided with the death of William F. Buckley, the conservative pundit and founder of the National Review, and again that word struck me – civility. I had just read a restrained editorial tribute to Buckley in the New York Times, of all places. The Times, admitting that their position on most issues did not agree very often with Buckley’s, wrote, “Yet despite his uncompromising beliefs, Mr. Buckley was firmly committed to civil discourse and showed little appetite for the shrillness that plagues far too much of today’s political discourse...He hated much of what liberals stood for. He didn’t hate them.”

Civility and civil discourse. Descriptions of what I think we will see in person when Pope Benedict XVI visits Washington and New York in just a few days.

As the New York Times suggests, civility has far too often been absent as politicians exchange their escalating rhetoric. So too in recent months have Catholics put forth their positions on civility in regard to public and Church policy. I refer to a November 6, 2007 statement, “A Catholic Call to Civility in Public Life” by some 47 Catholic lay people. Within three months, another 96 Catholics countered with their

own response to what they call, this “Call for Civility.” Read the statements and judge for yourself the preferable version of Christian civility. (See Origins November 15, 2007 and February 7, 2008 for texts.)

Most dictionaries define civility as having something to do with being courteous and polite, so it’s hard to see how this simple word and its attractive call to virtue could become the center of controversy. But so it has become and depending upon the Catholic company in which you find yourself, you might be careful in your use of the word!

When he visits in a few days I think Pope Benedict will come to our rescue in demonstrating the definition of civility for both politicians and Church mavens alike. In comportment and speech alike, he will indeed be courteous and polite. He will be kind, sensitive and exacting. But he will give ample evidence that he has observed and listened to our culture, understands our strengths and failures. He will be honest, clear, and straightforward in presenting Catholic teaching, without pandering to cultural correctness, secular approval or editorial imprimatur.

He will be eminently reasoned and reasonable in calling our assumptions into question in light of a hierarchy of Gospel values. He will note with appreciation our American assets and accomplishments, all the while calling us to higher standards and nobler generosity.

Our Holy Father’s civility will not be demonstrated by ambiguity in matters of truth. He will define right and wrong without a syllabus of prohibitions. He will neither condemn nor shun anyone, nor will he attribute veiled or subversive motives to those in disagreement. He will propose, not impose.

All this, not because he is our Pope, but because he is a Christian, who knows and reflects the love of Christ as few others of us do. So also does our imitation of Christ call us not just to civility, but to an imitation of the Father’s love for every human being.

I have absolutely no idea, no inside information as to what our Holy Father will say or do in our midst, but I am convinced that during six days among us, he will touch many souls, change many hearts, and attempt to teach all of us the meaning of

civility. I know you will be supporting our Holy Father in prayer as he brings the Gospel message to our Country and our culture. And, as our nation welcomes him, pray also that our Catholic people, especially our younger generation, will be inspired to renew their faith and live the Gospel in hope and in joy—and, yes, in civility.