

Grumbling & Conflict

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There is no doubt that a climate of faith and prayer is the first impetus to reconciliation.

Mother Marie-Caroline Lecouffe OSB

Grumbling can fester and grow into conflict in the parish community. The small irritations can be indulged and become a fight. What wisdom can we find from Saint Benedict?

If we are a bit literalistic in our thinking Benedict can be a danger. Corporal punishment is his last step in conflict management. Probably something we shouldn't do in our parishes!

There is however, something we can draw on from the good saint once we engage our common sense and moral judgment. Benedict does the same thing the scriptures do – provides a step-by-step process. First do this. And if that doesn't work, do this. And if that also fails, try this.

Benedict wants to deal with disobedience, stubbornness, and the grumbling that disrupts the community's harmony patiently and with care. First, we are to warn the brother privately. And if that fails, there is a public rebuke. And if must be there is the possibility of excommunication. After that he gets very 6th century with corporal punishment. (Chapter 23 of the Rule of Saint Benedict)

We see the same approach in the Disciplinary Rubrics of the Prayer Book. The paragraph that comes closest to our concern about conflict says this --

When the priest sees that there is hatred between members of the congregation, he shall speak privately to them, telling them that they may not receive Communion until they have forgiven each other. And if the person or persons on one side truly forgive the others and desire and promise to make up for their faults, but those on the other side refuse to forgive, the priest shall allow those who are penitent to come to Communion, but not those who are stubborn.

Again, a step-by-step process.

What's the step-by-step process in the Scriptures? I see four phases.

1. Timely and quickly
2. Face-to-face and one-on-one
3. Involve others
4. Forgive

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We must, then, believe in the power of this Spirit which comes into play through our weakness, our difficulty in forgiving, our animosity, in order to achieve the marvels of reconciliation

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1. Timely and quickly

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. (Matthew 5:23-25)

And

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger (Ephesians 4:26)

And

Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (1 John 4:20)

Engage the person at an appropriate time (but beware of rationalizing avoidance); seek a time that is mutually convenient; and a time that fits the circumstances. Engage these steps in love -- be gentle and patient. Be kind and forbearing.

2. Face-to-face and One-on-one

'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. (Matthew 18:15)

Face-to face! Not twitter or e-mail or Facebook.

This face-to-face meeting requires as open a heart as we can muster. It's an act of humility and courage. We may have our facts wrong. We may be making assumptions that are unfounded. If we haven't spoken directly with the person and listened with an open heart we may have a false perception of the situation and made a false judgment. That can be very distressing because then we are the ones who need to repent and ask for forgiveness.

3. Involve others

But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to

listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. (Matthew 18:16-17)

Who to involve will depend on the details of the situation – conflict management consultants, spiritual guides, people to observe and record, someone to add perspective.

4. Forgive

Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. (Luke 17:3)

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (Colossians 3:13)

and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:32)

Note the assumption in Luke – You must be prepared to forgive. You must also have completed the other phases – meet with the person, share your concern, act in love, involve others if necessary. You can't expect the person to change direction if you haven't done these things.

Sometimes we are unwilling to forgive. We seek the fight. We desire conquest. We don't know how to put down the sword and move on. We are trapped in our resentment and self-righteousness. Not open to the possibility we may have things wrong. Not open to forgiving the person we have hated for so long.

What's going on when the norms are not followed?

Human limitation and sin. In almost all cases what you'll find when the norms are not followed is human limitation or sin or a mix of the two.

The human limitation factor is usually related to the fact that all of us have a blindside that distorts our sight or it may be that we lack the emotional intelligence needed in the situation or it's an absence of training in conflict management.

Sin is that twist in each of us, in all of us, that sees the world with ourselves at the center. We, of course, see things correctly and truly. We, of course, are respecting human dignity and seeking justice. The sin we see when these norms aren't followed are – pride, envy, avarice, anger, lust, gluttony and sloth ([Seven Deadly Sins](#))

Of course, there are the exceptions. But they are rare and require more justification than offering a self-serving rationalization.

An example: There is an exception to the face-to-face norm (the Scriptures are providing a broad map of guidance not attempting to address every circumstance) – when it's a high-level conflict, when there's been a serious blow-up or a series of little blow-ups – Level 4 or 5 in Speed Leas model face-to-face may only make managing things more

difficult. It's important for you to know one or two models of useful in assessing conflict situations. For example, Leas, "Levels of Conflict" and Gallagher's "Relationship Cycle."

At this level of conflict the parties involved know there is a conflict. This isn't about when one person is holding onto resentment but will not bring it forward to the other party. In that case the other party may not realize there is anything to address. Nor is it the same as a situation in which you may know someone is bearing hatred toward you, but it is coming to you through a third party and that person will not reveal the name(s) of those wishing you harm.

The norm remains however, even at a high level of conflict, in fact, especially at such a level -- not email or text or Facebook. A skilled third party can be used to sort out the issues and seek a path forward.



It is in reliance on the Holy Spirit that we are enabled to get over lasting conflicts and patiently wait for some knot to untie itself.

Mother Marie-Caroline Lecouffe OSB

Odds & Ends

What if you're too late for "timely and quickly?"

The person has died. You no longer know where the person is? Or you've been holding onto your resentments for years.

Consider letting it go, moving on, cancelling the dept, dismissing the trespass.

How about threats?

What is the vicar to do if Mary Smith says, "I can no longer come to mass if John Hobgood is permitted to be in this parish." What is rector to do if John Hobgood says "I can no longer come to the Eucharist if the new curate continues to serve at the altar."

Consider saying, "I feel very sad about this. I will miss being in communion with you. Can I help you look at another way of handling this? I so much want us to stay connected"

What the most common mistake made that gets in the way of doing the phases well?

Making something confidential that shouldn't be confidential. You're on the vestry. Harry comes up to you at coffee hour and says,

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“I can’t stand the rector. His sermons are shallow. I want more substance. And twice in the past month he has offended me. First, he turned away from me in the middle of a conversation to talk with an older member of the parish. It was just rude. And then I overheard him making a nasty remark about my brother. And my brother has given a lot of money to this parish even if he rarely attends.”

Harry continues with this,

“I want you to say something to the rector about this. But don’t say where it came from. Okay?”

And fool you are, you agree.

When you go to the rector, he says, “Who feels that way? I’d like to talk with them.” And you say, “I’m sorry, I promised I would keep that confidential.”

We see this in parish life all the time. There’s some grumbling going on. A person carries that grumbling to the rector. The person bringing the message may have caught the disease, the angry feelings, from the first grumbler or not. When the rector asks who is it you’re talking about? The person says, “I can’t share that.” That is almost always immoral and destructive behavior. It enables hatred and stubbornness. It makes it impossible to resolve things.

What happens when the vicar or rector doesn’t follow the norms?

There was a middle size parish in a small southern city. The rector had been making changes in the liturgical style and the hours of Sunday services. He was certain these changes would make for better worship and attract new members. He didn’t do much “taking counsel” along the way. After all, he’s the rector and it’s his decision. Though to be fair, he had informally discussed the ideas with several people he thought would understand what he was trying to accomplish.

A few people went to him and expressed concerns about what he was doing and how he was doing it. He explained calmly and reasonably why these changes were a good idea. The people who had come to speak with him felt cut off and discounted. They shared their feelings with others – grumbling.

The rector learned about the “resistance” and felt hurt and angry. He sent an e-mail to two older women telling them that they would no longer be permitted to serve as chalice bearers during the Eucharist. It was something they had been doing for 15 years. He explained that these liturgical matters were his right to decide as rector. He is, of course, correct in that assertion.

The women told people with whom they were close. Their friends were furious about how they were being treated. Others in the parish picked up on, or were told by the rector, about the decision. There was now an elephant in the room. The normal exchanges of parish life were now made strange, tense, and awkward. Some assumed the two women had done something awful to merit such treatment. The more conflict

adverse tried to avoid thinking about it. People speculated. The two women felt humiliated.

Another story -- the unwillingness of clergy to ask people to act like Christians.

The vicar has told Mary that there are people displeased with her role in the parish as a lay associate for spiritual formation. They think Mary is a know-it-all. They feel upset about Mary's teaching. After all, their opinions are just as valid as Mary's! They share their resentment with other frequently.

When Mary asks, the vicar won't say who those people are. Mary feels isolated and fearful. She's now wondering if the vicar will remove her from the position.

The vicar is shaping a culture of resentment and hate. His unwillingness to insist that those unhappy with Mary be willing to move toward reconciliation leaves the parish with a kind of half life.

When the priest-in-charge of a parish doesn't follow the norms, a climate develops. Trust is lowered. Fear is increased. Relationships become anxious. The unity of the parish is fractured. And almost no one talks about it. In fact, many know something is wrong, but they can't put their finger on it.

What's the moral obligation we have?

The moral obligation of the lay person is to not collude with another's grumbling. It may be perfectly acceptable, and even useful, to listen to someone vent. Once! Maybe even twice. But then it might be appropriate to say to that person, "you really need to go talk to X. You need to let this go. If they keep coming back to you it's time for you to say "no, no, no. I'm not going to do this. I will go with you to X if that would help you."

If you're a priest, you have the same obligation as the layperson. And because you are in holy orders you also have an obligation to bring people together to try to resolve differences and to reconcile. You are to use the four steps and norms. You are to make use of the Disciplinary Rubrics by refusing to accept and enable the stubbornness and alienation of some members; it is your task to insist upon movement toward reconciliation.

What stops the abuse?

Usually it begins with one or two people who say no. They refuse to collude. For this moment their moral compass is clear and their character with its courage, perseverance and prudence is accessible – and they say no. They insist on the norms.

Maybe a warden goes to the vicar and says, "This needs to change. Your fear or stubbornness or whatever it is – is hearting some people and hurting this parish. Can we get you some help?"

What enables these abuses?

Different reasons in different situations.

Religion and politics can be fields of service, integrity and courage. They are also, at times, fields of self-righteousness, hatred, and witch-hunts. The temptation to excess and fantasies of utopias can legitimate the worst abuses. There are some people temperamentally oriented to such extremism. There are others, good people, real patriots or faithful followers, who are swept along as the nation or church tries to address some threat or great cause.

There are others driven by a lust for money, power, or sex. I recall a parishioner in a growing parish with a generally well-loved priest reading about Benedict's "no grumbling" norm. She was horrified. She saw the priest as a bully and manipulator. Someone who offered wise words about the negative effects of grumbling in a Christian community as a way of protecting himself from criticism.

There are those of the mob. Their identification with their own group gives them a sense of worth and unity. But without strong values and behavioral norms they can get caught up in evil and atrocities.

The naive or what Lenin called "useful idiots." These are people who allow themselves to be used by others for some cause that they don't fully understand. They want the priest's approval. Or they want to have influence in the parish. Maybe they want to get ordained. So, they get used.

Consequences

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. (Matthew 5:25)

Jesus doesn't hesitate to point to the consequences of our bitterness and stubbornness – prison. We create our own prison of resentment and anger, willfulness and intractability.

We are able to step into freedom and fullness of life but we cannot let go of the anger and grudges we have so long nurtured and been fed by.

If your soul's health doesn't move you, there's another possibility. It's the possibility of another court we'll face. Laity and clergy can find themselves in court facing charges of slander. Clergy can be required to endure the church's disciplinary process.

Even more painful for some is the storm set loose as individuals tweet and Facebook and articles appear in the church and local press. In our times Jesus might have said, "Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you still can, or your accuser may hand you over to the mob of Facebook and Twitter, and the "Living Church" may tell your story.

Reconciliation

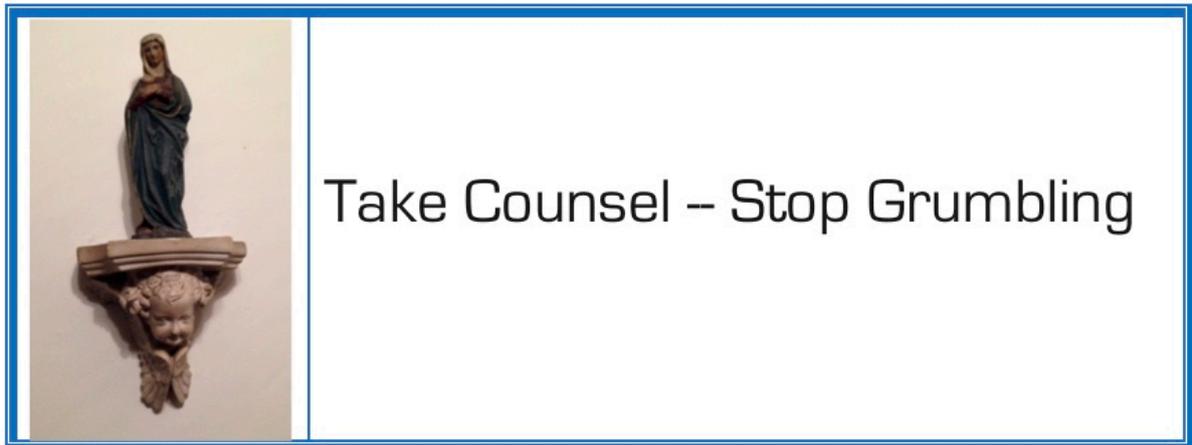
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I want to turn our attention to ... what might be called a spirituality of reconciliation. ... first to the rule of Saint Benedict, and as a corollary to the Book of Common Prayer ... The opening word of the rule is "Listen" - Obsculta! ... This sets the tone for the whole Rule and its approach to the Christian life. At the heart of reconciliation lies a commitment to listening. From this we need to learn silence, to cultivate attentiveness so that we become capable of receiving what we are not and what we do not have. Silence counteracts a rush to angry judgment and destructive words. Philip Sheldrake

There is no doubt that a climate of faith and prayer is the first impetus to reconciliation. I have just said that community is a gift of the Holy Spirit. We must, then, believe in the power of this Spirit which comes into play through our weakness, our difficulty in forgiving, our animosity, in order to achieve the marvels of reconciliation. So it is in reliance on the Holy Spirit that we are enabled to get over lasting conflicts and patiently wait for some knot to untie itself. Mother Marie-Caroline Lecouffe OSB, Monastery of Bouzy La Forêt (France)

Reconciliation is our end. It is God's holy work. The Paraclete, standing alongside us, supports us in our efforts – to be quick, face-to-face, open ourselves to the wisdom and help of others, and to forgive.

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In a few weeks you'll receive an invitation from the [Order of the Ascension](#) to "Take Counsel - Stop Grumbling"

This posting is part of that invitation into holiness of life.