

LISTENING, CONVERSATION AND COMMUNION

Father James Chelich – November 2021

I believe we can train ourselves in building a constructive and hopeful world. I believe that we, as Christians, are to be Children of the Light in a darkened world. Here are three ways in which we can do this. We can train ourselves to listen, to engage in a conversation, and as a result, to invite communion with each other.

Listening

To listen to another, you have to stop talking, but that alone is not sufficient. To genuinely listen to another person you have to stop thinking. You have to release what you have heard about them from others, refrain from forming a first impression, stop yourself from framing a response to something they say, and restrain yourself from forming an opinion of them or drawing a conclusion about. All of this is “mind activity” which progressively deadens your ability both to hear what they are saying, and coming to know what is behind what they are saying. You do not have to empty yourself of your values or your convictions, the things that anchor your life and define your character as a person. You can be fully “you” and still listen deeply to another. Listening is passive and receptive. The only verbal activity is to ask questions about what you hear and listen to the answers. The answers allow you to gain a deeper understanding of the person to whom you are listening.

Conversation

When listening is mutual it leads to genuine conversation. Conversation wants to discover both common ground between you and where you diverge, both as persons and in what you think. It wants to know who you are as much as it wants to know what you think and why you think it. Conversation provides you another person’s perspective of life and the world. If strong opinions are expressed that differ from your own or expressed with anger, asking questions is the best response: “You feel strongly about that. Why?” Questions express a genuine desire to know why a person holds the views they do, and to understand more completely the person that holds them. None of this implies that you share their views or their conclusions. Conversation is not “taking issue” with what someone else has said. “Taking issue” with what someone else has said puts them “on the defensive.” It draws a battle line and invites an argument. It shuts down conversation because no one is listening. There is no longer a sharing of who you are, and a deepening understanding of what is behind what you say. There are situations where you have to “express concern” with what someone has said, because what they said was in error, abusive, wanting to incite hatred or damaging to someone’s reputation. Then you need to “draw a line” and perhaps risk ending the conversation. This can be done calmly. It must be done without anger and must not leave you harboring resentment.

Communion

Genuine conversation leads to Communion. Communion is coming to know another and being known by another. It is seeing and sharing the good and the beautiful in each other, and drawing strength from it. It is wanting to encourage each other in every good endeavor and celebrating its success. It is a desire to stand by another as they seek to cast off the darkness within them or contend with the darkness around them. Catholics are called by Jesus to live in communion with

him and with each other and, as far as possible, to seek communion with others. For Catholics, living in communion with Jesus comes first and before all else. This is because in communion with Jesus we ask to see with his eyes as well as our own, to listen with his ears as well as our own, and to understand with his heart as well as our own. In communion with Jesus we ask to be shown the good that needs to be said or done. With his strength we set our mind and will, and our body to do it. For a Catholic, communion with Jesus is at the core of our conversations and our communion with others.