

Conversations in Conflict: A Resource for Post-Election Conversations

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One-on-one conversations where two people may passionately disagree are opportunities to build empathy and understanding. We often see conflict as something to be avoided, but conflict with other people is a completely normal part of life. Learning and trying new skills while holding conflict is a way to build Gospel nonviolence into our everyday lives. With post-election energy, the potential for escalation can be even more heightened in our polarized context. It might be prompted by a neighbor's comment while standing in line at the market, an off-handed remark by a family member, or getting pulled into a polarizing conversation at work.

Catholic Social Teaching's core value of reverencing human dignity provides valuable insight into how we hold interpersonal conflict. Pope Francis writes:

"If we are to share our lives with others and generously give of ourselves, we also have to realize that every person is worthy of our giving. God created that person in [God's] image, and he or she reflects something of God's glory. Every human being is the object of God's infinite tenderness, and [God]'s self is present in their lives."

Whether you are expecting to find yourself in conflict with someone or not, it helps to practice. One technique that we recommend is called CLARA. It's important that it be considered more than just a technique or trick to win an argument. In reality, it's not about winning. It's about recognizing the situation, listening, and de-escalating. The goal is to build a relationship in that moment—the type of relationship (or at least an interaction) where the other party feels heard, not judged, and, to the degree possible, understood or accepted for who they are and how they are in that moment.

Practice is the key. It helps build a form of "muscle memory" that allows you to respond in the moment, even when conflict is unexpected. Practice also allows you to be genuine, to focus on the other person, and to go through the components of CLARA without having to think about it consciously. Think of the professional basketball player who has to make a free throw at the end of a game. She can maintain her composure, focus, and make the shot despite the opposing fans trying to distract her because she has honed the skill to de-escalate herself first.

CLARA: A Listening Skill

CLARA has four steps: Calm and Center, Listen, Affirm, Repeat or Respond, and Add. There can be the tendency to want to start with step four, especially when feeling attacked or vulnerable, but starting with step one allows us to move from a space of openness rather than defensiveness.

- **Calm and Center:** Internally and externally center yourself. For some people, this may mean physically adjusting your body. For example, uncrossing your arms, distributing your weight equally between your two feet, standing up straight, and taking a deep breath. Internally, this may look like bringing your attention to your breath, offering a brief prayer, or calling to mind a memory where you felt safe and cared for. Taking a moment to calm and center ourselves allows us to “reset” our fight-flight-freeze-fawn responses so that we can respond from our higher selves, not react from a place of fear.
- **Listen:** Listen not only for what the other person is saying but more importantly, what lies at the core of their concern. What is the feeling that their words are conveying? It may be frustration, fear, anger, uncertainty. As St. Benedict describes, “Listen with the ear of your heart.” What are the undercurrents, moral principles, experiences, or feelings that they are sharing?
 - Listening in CLARA is distinctly different from listening to debate or to prove the other wrong so that we can belittle that person or prove ourselves right. In CLARA, we listen to acknowledge the human dignity of the other and their capacity to transcend ignorance, greed, and selfishness. Listening in this way also gives us the opportunity to tap into our own humanity and the ways in which our humanity is interrelated. We listen with the ear of the heart so that we can connect with the other person.
- **Affirm and Align:** Affirmation does not mean agreement. It communicates that you are listening and hearing what the other person is saying. Aligning is similar. You are saying or communicating that you hear what the other person is saying. You are relating to their perspective as much as possible. And you’re doing so sincerely, to the best of your ability. It does not mean that you agree with them. You are connecting with their humanity, finding common ground, and embracing their experience with as much empathy as you can muster. To truly affirm or align with someone, the focus must be on them, their feelings, and their experience, rather than your own. The person feels supported by you as a human being and is not concerned about being attacked by you.
 - Some helpful phrases might include: I agree with you about... ; ____ is a concern of mine, too; We see a lot on the news about that. ; I respect you for ...; or I’ve felt [scared, sad, angry] too.... ; Thank you for being honest with me about... ; and Thank you for sharing that....

- **Repeat or Respond:** Respond to the issue the other person raised; agree or disagree or say “I’m not sure about that,” but whichever way the conversation may go, convey that you are not afraid. In some cases, it may seem that the other person may not want information at all, but their goal is to attack or frustrate you. Responding with a spirit of respect and showing that you refuse to belittle or attack them back is a form of resistance to a win-or-lose culture. Some helpful phrases that can be helpful in this step include: “I see things differently...” or “I wonder what other perspectives might say about this...”
- **Add information:** You may not ever get to this part of the conversation. If you do, it is an indicator that the previous steps were effective. This is the point in the exchange where you add more information about the topic at hand. Not only are you continuing to listen, but the other person demonstrates a willingness to hear what you’re saying. It’s not an argument. You may still disagree, but there is an exchange whereby each of you are sharing and listening. There is hope that change or learning might take place. You may even reach a point where you are sharing resources and encouraging each other to read or research.
- ***Sometimes, we may engage in what we call “LA-LA-LA-ing.” If the emotions are aggressive or if the chance of escalation is high, we can repeat “Listen-Affirm, Listen-Affirm...”** Remember that affirming is not agreement. Affirming says, “I am not the enemy, and I don’t see you as the enemy, either.” In Matthew 5, this is what Jesus means when he mandates us to love our enemies and do good to those who persecute. When we resist the model of either-or thinking and connect to our common humanity, it is difficult to see anyone as my enemy!
- **RECAP:** CLARA is only one of the many tools that can be used in one-on-one conversations to de-escalate a highly charged or potentially violent situation. The more tools we have in our toolbox, the better equipped we will be to respond from a place of love and empathy, always seeking to affirm the human dignity of the other and, in doing so, reaffirm our own capacity to act in peaceful and peace-filled ways. When we choose to honor the dignity of others, we actively choose the way of nonviolence.

The Nonviolent Lifestyle

It may also be worthwhile to study principles of nonviolence. Again, the concept of practicing nonviolence—adopting a lifestyle that calls for living by nonviolent principles—can help approach conflict with a certain attitude. Here are some principles to consider.

Principles of Nonviolence according to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

- **ONE: NONVIOLENCE IS A WAY OF LIFE FOR COURAGEOUS PEOPLE**
Nonviolence is a positive force confronting the forces of injustice, and utilizing the righteous indignation and the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual capabilities of people as the vital force for change and reconciliation.
- **TWO: THE BELOVED COMMUNITY IS THE FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE** The nonviolent concept is an overall effort to achieve a reconciled world by raising the level of relationships among people to a height where justice prevails and persons attain their full human potential.
- **THREE: ATTACK FORCES OF EVIL, NOT PERSONS DOING EVIL** The nonviolent approach helps one analyze the fundamental conditions, policies, and practices of the conflict rather than reacting to one's opponents or their personalities.
- **FOUR: ACCEPT SUFFERING, WITHOUT RETALIATION, FOR THE SAKE OF THE CAUSE TO ACHIEVE THE GOAL.** Self-chosen suffering is redemptive and helps the movement grow in a spiritual as well as a humanitarian dimension. The moral authority of voluntary suffering for a goal communicates the concern to one's own friends and community as well as to the opponent.
- **FIVE: AVOID INTERNAL VIOLENCE OF THE SPIRIT, AS WELL AS EXTERNAL PHYSICAL VIOLENCE.** The nonviolent attitude permeates all aspects of the campaign. It provides a mirror-type reflection of the reality of the condition to one's opponent and the community at large. Specific activities must be designed to help maintain a high level of spirit and morale during a nonviolent campaign.
- **SIX: THE UNIVERSE IS ON THE SIDE OF JUSTICE.** Truth is universal, and human society and each human being is oriented to the just sense of order of the universe. The fundamental values in all the world's religions include the concept that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice. For the nonviolent practitioner, nonviolence introduces a new moral context in which nonviolence is both the means and the end.

Additional Resources

Pax Christi USA:

- [Nonviolence resources](#)
- [Vow of Nonviolence](#)

[Catholic Nonviolence Initiative](#), a project of Pax Christi International

Meta Peace Team - metapeaceteam.org

[Finding Confidence in Conflict | Kwame Christian | TEDxDayton \(youtube.com\)](#)

Getting to Yes by Roger Fisher and William Ury

Getting Past No by William Ury