

## Civility vs Reverence

The current political and social climate has become toxic. At least this is the impression one gets from watching the news and reading the newspaper.

There has been a significant coarsening of the language politicians and commentators are using in the service of *ad hominem* attacks against opponents. And this has led to calls, by many, for a return to “civility” or “civil discourse” in the public square.

Civility is an interesting word. One definition has it “as formal politeness and courtesy in behavior or speech.” Being polite is all fine and good but, as you might expect from the title, our faith calls us to something deeper. I think that the word “reverence” captures the essence of this higher righteousness. Reverence is defined as *honor or respect felt or shown: deference; profound adoring; awed respect.*

I would frame the difference between these two ideas in the following way:

**Civility is to Reverence**  
**As**

**Toleration is to Love**

Of course, the Bible offers us some guidance with respect to this. The Apostle Peter expresses it the following way: “*Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When he was insulted, he returned no insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten; instead, he handed himself over to the one who judges justly,*” (1 Peter 2:21-23)

Of course, many passages in the New Testament would seem to restrict reverential behavior, (inclusive of values like patience, hospitality, and compassion) to the members of the Christian Community. However, in the broader context of the Gospels, we must include **all** the people we encounter. This must be so if the Lord is keen to instruct us to “love your enemies,” (Luke 6:27). Perhaps a passage which comes closest to speaking of the “public” would be another from the First

Letter of Peter: “*Give honor to all, love the community, fear God, honor the king.*” (1 Peter 2:17).

Based on the Gospel we hear every Sunday, it seems like mere “civility” is too superficial. “Reverence” for the person is a conscious effort to see the person with the eyes of God. It is to affirm the inherent dignity of the person from the outset of any engagement. Whereas, “civility” seems to have a purely pragmatic motivation such as to say, “*Things will move much more smoothly if we just avoid name calling, harsh words and raised voices.*”



As I write these words, I fully expect some to dismiss them as “pie in the sky.” And, in fact, they do present a very high ideal. But so too does “love your enemies.” If we are not the “high ideal people”, then who will be. And, as it is, are we not concerned about what is happening to our society as more and more antagonism and polarization creeps into the public square via politicians, radio hosts, social media, etc.?

Pope John Paul II’s words provide a summary: *The love which the Apostle Paul celebrates in the First Letter to the Corinthians—the love which is “patient and kind”, and “endures all things” (1 Cor 13:4, 7)—is certainly a demanding love. But this is precisely the source of its beauty: by the very fact that it is demanding, it builds up the true good of man and allows it to radiate to others. The good, says Saint Thomas, is by its nature “diffusive”.[36] Love is true when it creates the good of persons and of communities; it creates that good and gives it to others. Only the one who is able to be demanding with himself in the name of love can also demand love from others. Love is demanding. It makes demands in all human situations; it is even more demanding in the case of those who are open to the Gospel. Is this not what Christ proclaims in “his” commandment? (To Families, 1994, #14)*