

## 7 STEPS TO BETTER CONVERSATIONS

# Getting Started

**OUR WORLD HAS GROWN INCREASINGLY UNCIVIL.** When people disagree, conversations can rapidly degenerate into name-calling, profanity, and lies. Cyberbullying has become commonplace. “We live in an atmosphere polluted by too much verbal violence, too many offensive and harmful words, which are amplified by the internet,” Pope Francis says. “Today, people insult each other as if they were saying ‘Good Day.’”

A recent study showed that 93 percent of Americans admit that incivility is a problem. Seventy-four percent say civility is worse today than it was a few years ago. Eighty percent claim to have personally experienced uncivil behavior. Although many Americans express deep concern about incivility in our society, 60 percent also express hope that this negative dynamic can change.

More than hope is needed, however. People who are concerned about incivility must ask themselves: Is it possible to carry on good conversations among people with whom I disagree? What am I willing to do to improve civility? What do I need to change in my own life? How can I help others to become more civil?

In this little booklet you can explore these questions on your own or as part of a discussion group. It includes Scripture passages, reflection questions, and prayers that are designed to help create opportunities for mutual understanding and respect—even if you still have differing opinions.

Pope Francis offers us much wisdom on this topic, and you will see him quoted throughout this booklet. Reflecting upon and discussing ways we might engage in more civil conversations is the beginning of creating a new, more peace-filled parish, community, and world.

**TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS**, a division of Bayard, Inc. One Montauk Avenue, Suite 200;  
New London, CT 06320 • (860)437-3012 or (800)321-0411 • [www.23rdpublications.com](http://www.23rdpublications.com)

Copyright © 2020 Lorene Hanley Duquin. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission of the publisher.

Write to the Permissions Editor.

ISBN: 978-1-62785-548-8 • Cover illustration: Shutterstock.com / artyway • Printed in the U.S.A.

# Creating a Firm Foundation

**A FOUNDATION IS THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLE** upon which we build our relationships with other people. Think for a moment about your interactions with other people—especially people you don't know or people with whom you disagree.

When we build our conversations on a foundation of love, we recognize that despite our differences we are all children of a loving and merciful God. We acknowledge that our feelings, our experiences, our attitudes, and our opinions may be different, but we choose to treat each other with respect and courtesy.

“The world will recognize the disciples of Jesus by the way they love one another,” Pope Francis tells us. “Love, in other words, is the Christian's identity card, the only valid ‘document’ identifying us as Christians.”

## **WHEN THE FOUNDATION IS NOT LOVE**

Unfortunately, not everyone builds relationships on a foundation of love. People who build foundations on fear tend to see others as a threat. People who build foundations on hate tend to see others as an enemy. People who build foundations on indifference tend to disregard the needs and the feelings of others. People who build foundations on selfishness tend to focus only on themselves.

Pope Francis explains that when we don't choose a foundation of love, it is not that we are bad, but rather that “we are weak and sinners.” He warns that it is often easier to “resolve a situation with an insult, with slander or with defamation instead of resolving it with good means.”

## **CALLED TO LOVE**

Jesus was very clear when he said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34–35). Jesus even told us that we need to love not just the people we know and like but also our enemies (Luke 6:3–35).

When we choose love as our foundation, we recognize that other people have the same kinds of feelings, frustrations, strengths, and weaknesses that we have. We may not see eye to eye on every issue, but we can stand shoulder to shoulder, united by the belief that we are sons and daughters of a loving God.

## **GOD IS LOVE**

Saint John tells us that God is love (1 John 4:8). We are capable of loving other people—even those we don’t like—because God created us in his own image and likeness. St. John assures us that “if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:11–12).

God loves us with a deep, abiding, unconditional love. God constantly invites us to enter more deeply into the mystery of his love by loving him and by loving our neighbor. We are free to accept or refuse God’s invitation. If we accept, we become increasingly aware of God’s immense love for all people. If we refuse, God continues to invite us with the hope that we will eventually respond.

## **SEEING GOD IN OTHER PEOPLE**

It’s not always easy to recognize the image and likeness of God in someone we don’t like or someone who holds different opinions or beliefs or behaviors. In her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, St. Thérèse of Lisieux admitted that there was one sister in the convent “who has the knack of rubbing me up the wrong way at every turn; her tricks of manner, her tricks of speech, her character, just strike me as unlovable.”

But St. Thérèse knew that God loved this nun, so she decided to act as if she loved this nun too. St. Thérèse started to pray for her, smile at her, and be nice to her. Whenever St. Thérèse was tempted to

say something unkind, she changed the subject instead.

Before long, St. Thérèse began to recognize the presence of Jesus in the other nun. One day the other nun asked St. Thérèse why she was so nice to her. “Well, of course, what really attracted me about her was Jesus hidden in the depths of her soul,” St. Thérèse admitted. “Jesus makes the bitterest mouthful taste sweet. I could only say that the sight of her always made me smile with pleasure—naturally I didn’t explain that the pleasure was entirely spiritual.”

When we recognize God’s presence in other people, everything changes. Like St. Thérèse, we may still dislike another person or the things that another person does, but we can treat that person with kindness and respect. We can recognize that we are all brothers and sisters because we were created by God, who loves each and every one of us. There are no exceptions. No one is excluded.

### ***Questions for Reflection***

1. In what ways have you experienced conversations with people who built a foundation on love?
2. In what ways have you experienced conversations with people who built a foundation that was not loving?
3. In what ways have you recognized the presence of God in other people?
4. How can we help people in our families, our parish, our workplaces, and our community build a foundation of love?

---

*Lord, open my eyes to the humanity of other people. Help me to see that even though we may have different attitudes or ways of doing things, we are all loved and valued by you. Give me the courage to establish a foundation of love in all of my relationships. Amen.*

## STEP 2

# Removing Stumbling Blocks

**IF WE ARE GOING TO HAVE GOOD CONVERSATIONS** with other people, we need to be aware of anything that erodes our foundation of love. There have probably been times when we acted in ways that are not loving. Here are some of the major stumbling blocks that people encounter.

- We judge and condemn other people.
- We express opinions or behave in ways that are arrogant or self-righteous.
- We spread gossip or say unkind things about others.
- We post nasty comments on social media.
- We behave badly because we feel angry or resentful.
- We refuse to admit that our attitudes or behaviors might be insensitive or hurtful.
- We refuse to ask forgiveness from people we have hurt.
- We refuse to forgive those who have hurt us.

Most of us will recognize that there were times when we have not acted in ways that were loving. No one is perfect. “We are all masters, professors of self-justification,” Pope Francis says. “No, it wasn’t me, it’s not my fault, maybe yes, but not so much ... that’s not the way it is ...”. We all have an alibi to explain away our shortcomings, our sins, and we often put on a face that says, ‘I do not know,’ a face that says, ‘I didn’t do it; maybe someone else did,’ an innocent face. This is no way to lead a Christian life.”

Whenever we recognize that we have not chosen the path of love, we can seek forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation. “The for-

giveness we receive is not the result of our own efforts,” Pope Francis explains, “but is the gift of the Holy Spirit reconciling us to God and to each other.”

Now is the time to promise God and ourselves that we are ready to change. We can ask God to help us, “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13).

With God’s help we can reach a point where we can say, “*I used to say or do things in that way, but I was wrong, and now I try not to say or do those things anymore.*”

### ***Questions for Reflection***

1. What is the greatest stumbling block that you face?
2. How do you strive to overcome stumbling blocks?
3. In what ways has the sacrament of reconciliation helped you to forgive yourself and other people?
4. How can we help people in our families, our parish, our workplaces, and our community become more aware of stumbling blocks?

---

*Lord, help me to remove the stumbling blocks in my life.*

*Give me the courage to change for the better. Pick me up whenever I fall.*

*Show me with the grace I need to start again. Amen.*