

May 15, 2021



Dear Parishioners and Everyone on my email list,

For those of us who are Christians, we're in between: the celebration of the Feast of the Ascension when Jesus returns to the Father and the Feast of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descends on those early believers, sending them out to share the good news with those they encounter.

I hope all is well with you and those you love. I'm attaching an article from America magazine, published by the Jesuits about the importance of dialogue in the Church and the nation. Presuming that we all have friends, neighbors and/or family members who see things differently that each of us does, I hope it will be helpful when we have difficult conversations.

In this difficult time for our nation and our Church, we surely need God's guidance as we try to discern a way forward to understand and deal with the inequalities which the pandemic has exposed.

Harriet Tubman was born a slave around 1820, escaped and conducted over 300 enslaved people to freedom on the Underground Railroad. One of her guiding lights, besides the Big Dipper, was her faith and determination: "Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars, to change the world."

As we witness so much in our world which could paralyze us with fear and depression, may the Spirit of God show us what is ours to do, small though it may be.

Peace and every blessing to you and yours!

Sr. Sheral

We need to talk: healing our deeply divided church and country

Thomas J. Reese, SJ April 22, 2021

These are challenging times. Not only is our country divided; our church is as well. Such times are especially challenging for Catholic journalists, preachers, teachers and other communicators who must work and minister in this world. How does one speak to a divided nation, a divided church? How do we heal these divisions? The divisions in our country have been evident over the past year, most prominently during the presidential election, during the nationwide protests against police violence and most recently in the assault on the nation's Capitol on Jan. 6. These divisions are not going to disappear magically during the tenure of the new president. Our divisions are deep on issues like racism and economic inequality, as well as on education, cultural values and lifestyles. There are divides between the young and the old, between urban and rural, between men and women. We do not listen to the same music or the same news programs. While our pluralism is one of our greatest strengths, it is also a challenge to our national unity.

Likewise, our church is divided. We have remarkable ethnic diversity in the Catholic Church in the United States, with parishes everywhere made up of people of European, Latin American, Native American, African and Asian heritage. This is both a blessing and a challenge. The sexual abuse scandal has also caused a rupture in the church, as the laity has been rightly outraged by the hierarchy's failure in the past to deal appropriately with bad priests. Many are also upset with the hierarchy because of its political stances or refusal to advance women to ordination.

Our church is also as politically divided as the nation is. Half of U.S. Catholics voting in 2020 cast ballots for Donald J. Trump; half voted for Joseph R. Biden Jr. We have Catholics who emphasize the pro-life teaching of the church above all else; we also have Catholics who emphasize the church's teachings on justice and the environment. Some Catholics have more in common with conservative evangelicals than with their fellow Catholics, while others have more in common with liberal Episcopalians than with their fellow Catholics.

We have Catholics who want the church to change the world, while others simply want a quiet place to pray and be consoled. Nor is it only the laity who are divided; so are bishops and priests. We see bishops arguing with one another in public. Meanwhile, our parishes are run very differently by different pastors. As a result, many people vote with their feet (really with their cars) when it comes to where they attend Mass. They no longer go to the closest parish; they go to the parish where they feel at home with the priest and the community. And many more, although nominally Catholic, simply do not go to church.

Others have left the Catholic Church entirely. About one third of those raised Catholic have left that church. These ex-Catholics make up over 13 percent of the U.S. population; if they were to get together to form a church, they would be the second largest denomination in the United States, behind only the remaining Catholics.

The first task: Listen

What are communicators to do in the face of these divisions? The first job of a communicator is to listen. Listening is just as important a ministry as preaching. We must listen before we speak or write. The first lesson in Communications 101 is “know your audience.” What are their worries, what moves them, what do they love, what people and events have shaped their lives? What are their questions?

When I was a young priest, my parish had a prayer group that would discuss and pray over the Scripture readings for the coming Sunday. The participants were not theologically sophisticated, but their thoughts and reflections helped me when I sat down to prepare my homily. I could speak to their concerns because I had first listened.

Journalists also must listen to their sources to truly understand what they are saying, to know how to quote them accurately and fairly. If journalists are not sympathetic with their interview subject after the fact, then they have not asked the right questions. In the mid-1980s, when I was researching my book *Archbishop: Inside the Power Structure of the American Catholic Church*, I found that every archbishop I interviewed had something worthwhile to say, something worth quoting—even the archbishops with whom I disagreed both theologically and pastorally. If we ask the right questions and listen, we will be privileged to see into the soul of our interviewee. In this year’s message for World Communications Day, [Pope Francis tells journalists](#) to hit the streets, to meet people face to face: “to spend time with people, to listen to their stories and to confront reality, which always in some way surprises us.”

Listening is not just useful in helping us to communicate better: It is itself a healing art. Listening is a sign of respect to those who feel left out and disrespected. Many of those who are alienated in our nation and our church feel disrespected. They feel that no one cares. This applies to victims of racism when white people dismiss their concerns by saying, “But everything is so much better than it was.” It applies to workers whose factories have closed when they are told, “Just move to where there is work” or “Get retrained.”

It applies to women who ask why they cannot be priests. It applies to gay men and women who want to know why they cannot be with the one they love. It applies to undocumented immigrants and their children who fear deportation. It applies to the victims of abuse of every kind when they too often hear, “Just get over it.” But it also applies to those who ask other questions about neuralgic issues: Why do things have to change? Why are you causing confusion? Why can’t I go to a Latin Mass? Why are transgender people in the girls’ bathroom?

Smart politicians, smart clergy and smart communicators know the importance of listening. After you listen, people are more likely to listen to you. Experts have repeatedly told bishops that one of the best things they can do for victims of abuse is to listen to them. They need to be heard. They need to tell their stories. They need to be listened to. Listening is Godly. God spends most of his time listening to our prayers. Prayers are healing because we get to talk, and God listens.

Separating fact from fiction

When, after listening, we do finally speak, we need to separate fact from opinion. Journalistically, we speak of separating news from opinion. When I was younger, there was a clear separation in the newspaper between the news section and the editorial page. No more.

Two things have destroyed the news business: the internet, which took advertising revenues from print outlets, and Rupert Murdoch, who with Fox News broke down the wall separating news from opinion. When Fox News saw its ratings go up, CNN and MSNBC quickly followed its example. In the old days, opinion was a brief dessert in the newspaper after a substantial meal of facts and news. Today, news and facts are subservient to opinion. We eat dessert without the nourishment of facts. As a result, the whole country is on a sugar high. No wonder we are bouncing off the walls.

At the same time, we should not be afraid of a variety of opinions, if they are expressed sincerely and respectfully. From 1998 to 2005, when I was editor in chief of **America**, I got in trouble because people in the Vatican and among the U.S. bishops did not like some of the opinions we published. We always had articles on both sides of a topic, but that did not matter. They wanted only their opinions expressed. Theology and pastoral practice cannot develop without discussion and argument. We need to learn how to express the Christian message in a way that is understandable in the 21st century. We will not do that with 13th-century language.

Just as Augustine and Aquinas took the best intellectual thought of their times, whether it was Neoplatonism or Aristotelianism, and used it to explain the faith to their generation, so too we must take the best thought of our time to explain the faith to those who will live in the 21st century. Terms like *transubstantiation* do not have much meaning if you do not understand Aristotelian metaphysics. Saying that homosexuality is “intrinsically disordered” means one thing to a Thomistic philosopher and something entirely different to a modern psychologist.

Under Pope Francis, things have changed. At the first synod of bishops in his papacy, he encouraged the participants to speak freely, even to disagree with him. He cited the example of St. Paul, who took on St. Peter at a meeting in Jerusalem when the early disciples debated whether converts to Christianity had to be circumcised and follow Jewish dietary laws. Luckily, Paul convinced Peter and James, and the rest is history. If Peter and Paul could argue, if Pope Francis can welcome disagreement, then as Catholics we must learn how to deal with differences of opinion the way a family does, not the way politicians do.

Speaking the truth in love

Finally, as communicators we must speak the truth. This exhortation should not be needed for Christians, but we know that the truth has at times been suppressed by the church, especially when it came to sexual abuse by members of the clergy. The recently published “McCarrick Report” shows that bishops lied even to the Vatican.

Fear of scandalizing the faithful was the rationale for lying to the faithful, but the faithful were even more scandalized by the cover-up. Fear of lawsuits led to stonewalling by bishops and chanceries on releasing information about abusers, but the stonewalling motivated juries to increase payouts. Outlets like The National Catholic Reporter that tried to expose the scandal were roundly condemned for trying to destroy the Catholic Church, yet clerics in charge of the church did more to destroy it than anyone else. The church’s credibility was severely damaged by the lies and cover-up. As they say in Washington, the cover-up is worse than the crime. As Catholics, we must truly believe that “the truth will set you free.” Truth-telling can also mean speaking like the biblical prophets, challenging people with facts and opinions they do not want to hear. But how do we give people facts and opinions that they do not want?

In his World Communications Day message, Pope Francis asks who will inform people about the lack of Covid-19 treatment in the poverty-stricken villages of Asia, Latin America and Africa: “Social and economic differences on the global level risk dictating the order of distribution of anti-Covid vaccines, with the poor always at the end of the line,” he writes. “The right to universal health care [is] affirmed in principle, but stripped of real effect.” Even in the developed world, he laments, “the social tragedy of families rapidly slipping into poverty remains largely hidden; people who are no longer ashamed to wait in line before charitable organizations in order to receive a package of provisions do not tend to make news.”

Being a Catholic communicator is a vocation that requires listening, knowing the difference between fact and opinion, being open to a variety of opinions, truth-telling, courage and humility. You must have the courage to tell your listener that he or she is wrong while having the humility to know that you can be wrong too. Like a prophet, a communicator must “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” The ministry of communications is part of the ministry of the Word. Sometimes it requires a challenging word; at other times it requires words of comfort. Isaiah and Jesus knew how to do both. We can only pray to follow in their footsteps. Pope Francis concluded his 2021 World Communications Day message with a prayer:

Lord, teach us to move beyond ourselves, and to set out in search of truth. Teach us to go out and see, teach us to listen, not to entertain prejudices or draw hasty conclusions. Teach us to go where no one else will go, to take the time needed to understand, to pay attention to the essentials, not to be distracted by the superfluous, to distinguish deceptive appearances from the truth. Grant us the grace to recognize your dwelling places in our world and the honesty needed to tell others what we have seen.