

Handling Minor Disagreements, Complaints, and Conflicts in Church Life

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1. Introduction

Disagreements, complaints, and conflicts are an inescapable part of Parish life. They are what inevitably happens when a diverse mix of people come together in community. We will never all see eye to eye on every issue. Our priorities will differ. Our personalities will clash.

The Apostle Paul described this situation in Romans 14.

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarrelling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them... One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God (Romans 14:1-6).

The consequence of expressing differing viewpoints, perspectives, and personalities is that some can take offense or be hurt. The only way to avoid this possibility is to embrace the ascetic tradition, live in complete isolation, and not have relationships with anyone. Of course, that can create a different kind of pain. Assuming we don't want to take that path, what's the best way to respond to the relational challenges of Church life? I would suggest that three keys are a godly mindset, curiosity about others, and self-awareness.

2. A godly mindset - the "love" principle

As part of a passage dealing with those who deliberately caused harm to others within the Church, Jesus told this very simple story.

If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that

wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off (Matt. 18:12–13).

On the surface, this is a simple story about a lost sheep and a seeking shepherd. In Judaea, it was very easy for sheep to go missing. The terrain was rough. There were no fences. Pasture was sparse. Sheep would wander, looking for grass, and it was easy for them to get trapped in a gully or on a ledge, unable to get up or down, where they could starve to death. But beneath the surface, it is a lesson about the love of God and his response to those whose actions have caused him hurt and pain.

Let me say five things about God's love. First, the love of God is an **individual** love. All sheep look the same to me. If I see a hundred sheep in a field, I can't tell them apart. And even if I counted them carefully and worked out that one was missing, I wouldn't have the faintest idea which one it was. This shepherd could. He knew that one sheep that belonged with him was missing. He knew which one it was. And he wouldn't rest until he'd found it and brought it home. That's how God responds to those who hurt him. He doesn't write anyone off as an acceptable loss but deals directly and personally with each individual, seeking to restore the relationship.

Second, the love of God is a **patient** love. The lost sheep in this parable had no one to blame but itself for getting lost. We may not have much patience with foolish people who get themselves into trouble. "It's their own fault." "They brought it on themselves." God's not like that. The lost sheep might have been foolish, but the shepherd still risked his life to save it. We may be foolish, but God still loves us, even if we have no one but ourselves to blame for our sin.

Third, the love of God is a **searching** love. The shepherd was not content to wait for this missing sheep to find its way back. He proactively searched for it. Jesus is God, come into this world, for that express purpose. He said, "*...the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*" (Luke 19:10). God is not, and will never be, content to wait for us to find our way home. He goes out and searches for us no matter what the personal cost.

Fourth, the love of God is a **rejoicing** love. When the lost sheep was found, there was only joy. There were no recriminations. There was no receiving back grudgingly, or with anger, or with contempt, or with a sense of superiority, or with strings attached. There was only joy. The human way is to never forget the past and to always hold people's sins against them. Not so with God.

And finally, the love of God is a **protecting** love. It's a love that wants to protect us from harm, despite the harm we may have caused. It is a love that desires what is best for us, and our ultimate good is a restored relationship with him.

If this is how God deals with those who have offended him, rejected him, or caused him hurt and pain, how can we do any less with those in our church community. If our starting point is seeking the greatest good for those with whom we disagree, seeking to protect them from harm, and longing to restore the relationship, we will never simply be trying to win the argument or prove ourselves right and the other party wrong. It's very hard to think badly of another when we are actively seeking their good.

3. Curiosity about others

Be curious about others and what motivates them to act in the way they do.

a. What is their intent?

From my observations over the years, I would say that while people can say some very hurtful things, they are rarely malicious in intent. Usually, they are just self-absorbed, thoughtless, and insensitive and don't consider the impact of their words and actions on others. Malice and thoughtlessness require very different responses. The former is a matter for Church discipline along the lines proposed by Jesus in Matthew 18.

¹⁵ If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector (Matthew 18:15-17).

However, where there is no malicious intent, we should instead strive to determine their actual motivation and challenge them to see the impact of their words on others. How would they feel if such things were said about them?

b. What baggage do they bring?

We expect people to behave rationally and maturely and make decisions on the merits of the information in front of them and are surprised when they don't. The reality is that the historical and emotional baggage a person brings with them carries as much weight, if not more, than our rational arguments. Once again, be curious. Ask questions. Why do they hold this particular view? The more we can learn about their history, the more they will feel heard, and the better equipped we will be to reach a resolution that everyone can accept.

The best way to find answers to these questions is to sit down with the other person or persons and ask.

c. Constructive criticism

When we find ourselves in the position where we do need to challenge a person's words or actions, we should be:

- **Compassionate** – Based on the “love principle,” we should always act and speak in a way that indicates our care for the other.
- **Specific** - Our response should specifically address the elements in the words or actions of the other that have caused hurt and offer specific guidance for more appropriate behaviour.
- **Sensitive** – Our response should respect what we have learned about the intent and history of the other party.

4. Self-awareness

We also need to be honest about the part that we might have played in a conflict or disagreement. It takes two to have a difference of opinion.

a. Take criticism seriously

To assist with our self-awareness, every church seems to have someone with the “gift of criticism”. Some are doubly blessed with the ability to press all of our buttons, making it very hard for us to remain calm and rational and discern whether their criticism or complaint has merit. The complaint may be completely misguided, it may seek to do harm, or it may be well intentioned. In the case of the latter, we may need to do need to do something differently or we may have failed to do something that we should have done. We need to do our best to honestly evaluate the complaint, possibly with the help of an objective third party. Is it constructive or destructive? Are they seeking our good or do they have another agenda? Never be too proud to admit fault and be quick to apologise if we are in the wrong. *“I understand I haven’t lived up to your expectations in this matter. I’m sorry. How can I do better next time?”*

b. Failure to communicate

What we take as a personal attack or rejection may actually be the result of our failure to clearly communicate our expectations. We assume that because we know and understand what is needed, everyone else does as well. They, in turn, have their own assumptions about us and what we know. The reality is that, as the minister, I’m often the last to know things. To understand a conflict, we need to understand our own assumptions and those of the other parties, what we think has been communicated and what has actually been heard. Once again, it comes down to asking questions.

c. Respond quickly but calmly

Do not respond in the heat of the moment. It is important to respond as quickly as possible as the Parish rumour mill will ensure that word of a dispute spreads quickly. What is communicated will almost always be a distortion of the truth so, if possible, we need to get ahead of that. Hoping the problem will go away doesn't work. Cover-ups don't work. The longer we avoid the issue, the further it will spread and the more distorted the message will become. Trying to correct misinformation takes an enormous amount of effort. However, words spoken in a state of heightened emotion are often regretted and are hard to take back. Take the time to calm down and prepare a considered response. Just don't take too long.

5. In conclusion

Conflict is an unavoidable part of life in community. When dealing with disagreements, complaints, and conflicts, we should:

- Respond in love, actively seeking the good of the other party.
- Respond quickly.
- Respond calmly.
- Seek to understand the motivation and the history of the other party.
- Only give constructive criticism that is compassionate, specific, and sensitive.
- Be honest about the part we play in any conflict by our actions or inaction, be quick to apologize for our failures, and act promptly on constructive criticism.