



Transformative Conversations to Bridge Divides

“Whenever people listen to one another humbly and openly, their shared values and aspirations become all the more apparent. Diversity is no longer seen as a threat, but as a source of enrichment.”

-Pope Francis in Sri Lanka, January 13, 2015

We live in a polarized society, with parties and ideologies creating divisions and complicating relationships between people with differing beliefs. Even religion has been used to drive us apart. Political conversations stir up strong emotions, and as a result many of us avoid engaging in tough conversations with people we disagree with, especially with loved ones or those we see on a daily basis.

Yet, Pope Francis urges people of faith to go outside the peripheries and “create a culture of encounter, of a fruitful encounter, of an encounter that restores to each person his or her own dignity as a child of God, the dignity of a living person¹.” Rather than avoiding these difficult conversations, it is essential to engage and be in relationship with those with whom we disagree.

By talking with and listening to those with differing beliefs, we can enter into a conversation that could mend the relationship with loved ones. However, transforming someone’s worldview and mending the relationship will take more than one conversation. This is a long-term commitment to be in conversation with those we disagree with. **While difficult, it is through these multiple meaningful encounters that we can begin to mend a broken relationship and grow in that relationship through understanding, respect, and love.**

As we strive to mend the economic and social gaps in the United States, we recognize that it is essential to encounter each other and mend the gaps in our relationships. At NETWORK, we are inspired by the lives of Catholic women religious, especially our founders.

Sisters teach us to value community as well as contemplation, and demonstrate how to deepen relationships with others through compassion and solidarity. Learning from their witness, we believe our commitment to being in relationship can ultimately transform our politics and society through the mending of broken relationships and the practicing of civility and love.

¹ “Pope Francis Daily Meditation: For a Culture of Encounter.” September 13, 2016. The Vatican.

Steps to a Healthy Conversation

Be Curious: Inquire openly. Try to understand why your counterpart thinks what he or she thinks. Ask open-ended questions and seek to learn as much as possible about the other person and their point of view. Remember to be respectful and open-minded when asking questions.

Listen: Listen fully and attentively, without interrupting, trying to see the world from the other's perspective. Attempt to drop assumptions about your counterpart and listen with an open mind. Use active listening: look at the speaker directly, put aside distracting thoughts, nod occasionally, offer short verbal affirmative comments, and do not mentally prepare a rebuttal. Acknowledge body language. Make sure your body language (facial expressions, posture, and voice) is open and affirming. If you notice that your counterpart's body language seems to be cold, disinterested, or closed off, suggest to have the conversation another day.

Review: Let the other person know that you heard what they shared. Ask them if you understand what they said correctly, or ask any clarifying questions. This shows that you've actively listened and understood what they said.

Validate: Acknowledge what your counterpart said even if you interpret things differently. Affirm the validity of their personal feelings, and confirm their feelings. It's important to remember that what they have shared is true to them, and true to how they feel, regardless of your own personal feelings

Express: Share your truth by sharing some of your life experiences and tell personal stories. Use "I" statements to let the person know how you feel and why. "I" statements are statements that begin with "I feel" and are followed by an emotion. While expressing your truth, do not try to equate your experience with theirs. All experiences are individual and may lead to different assessments of the same situation. Just speak your own truth.

Other Tips

- Approach the conversation with curiosity, compassion, and humility.
- Be authentic, honest, understanding, and respectful.
- Seek to find common ground. Build off of a shared belief to establish initial understanding.
- Make it personal. Share experiences to appeal to the emotions. It's difficult to refute people's feelings.
- Acknowledge how painful this process may be. It's difficult when a loved one disagrees with you on an issue that you care about, but it is important to commitment long-term to mending the relationship through continuous conversation.



ADVOCATES FOR JUSTICE, INSPIRED BY CATHOLIC SISTERS

Moral Reframing

When having a transformative conversation, it is important to remember that the person you are talking with often has very different experiences, psychological makeup, social background, motives, and even values. One of the reasons why difficult conversations tend not to go anywhere and people tend to agree to disagree is because people don't speak each other's language. Prominent research from political scientists Matt Feinberg and Robb Willer indicates that if you want to persuade people, you should frame your points using your counterpart's moral framework, known as **moral reframing**.

A conversation for change through moral reframing is something that will only come with time, after multiple conversations with the loved one and after the relationship is in a healthier place. A completely mended relationship is not going to happen with just one conversation, but if you and a loved one get to a point of mutual understanding and stability in the relationship, then it may be a good time for you to advocate for an issue you feel strongly about.

With moral reframing, people tend to fall back on the moral frameworks of their own side when making arguments. When you can frame the discussion in such a way that speaks to your counterpart's moral framework, you are far more likely to persuade your counterpart on a particular policy issue.

By being in relationship and conversing with people about their beliefs and social backgrounds, you can begin to understand their moral framework and, in turn, construct the conversation in a way to appeal to their personal values. Again, moral reframing is a lifelong commitment and is not something that can be accomplished through one conversation. Through mending relationships and practicing moral reframing, we can begin to advocate for political and societal change.

- **What is moral reframing?** Moral reframing involves putting aside your own ideas about why an issue is important and instead thinking about the values of the person you're conversing with. If you want to begin to change someone's mind, you should base your argument on an understanding of their values, not your own.
- **What are these values?** Care for people and creation, fairness and equality, liberty, loyalty and patriotism, authority, and moral purity and sanctity.
- **Why is this important?** We need to recognize that we all have different values, know what those values are, understand them well enough to be able to understand the moral perspective of those we converse with, and be willing to use those values as part of a political conversation.

Example of Moral Reframing:

When talking with someone about immigration who values patriotism and loyalty, you might say:

"Refugees and immigrants who are coming to the United States are like our ancestors who came to achieve the American dream and find a better life. The American dream is what drives people from across the world to come to this land, a land of opportunity. This dream is what our nation was founded on, and it's this dream that immigrants and refugees want to be a part of, just like our grandparents and great-grandparents."