

Conversation Groups on Being Human Together as Christians
NORMS FOR CONVERSATION GROUPS
SAINT RAYMOND CHURCH
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Norms for engaging in conversations about racism and privilege are not the same norms used when you are meeting to discuss budget or other issues at your Parish. These norms are designed to intentionally counter some of the norms that commonly exist when people discuss race. When setting up the norms for any meeting you are telling participants what is to be expected, in some cases, what are “normal” experiences they are likely to have before this meeting? Norms are essential for setting the tone and letting people know what to expect in themselves and of one another.

Stay Engaged

1. It's important that you try to stay present in the room. Pay attention to when you are shutting down. Discomfort and anxiety are normal parts of courageous conversations
2. If you find yourself needing to stand up, please do so. If you find yourself drifting, use strategies that will help you stay present.
3. Stay with the topic. When you feel discomfort it's easy to take the conversation someplace differently. Resist the urge to change the topic to another “ism”. One reason it's hard to stay on the topic of racism is that it can bring up issues of guilt, shame, and anger. However difficult it may become, we want you to stay engaged in the race conversation.
4. If you feel like checking out of the conversation when it becomes uncomfortable, ask the Holy Spirit to renew you with the gift of courage.

Speak Your Truth

1. The purpose of having these conversations as Christians is to be able to speak the truth of our experiences. If not here, where? If not now, when? This must be the work of the Body of Christ.
2. We often avoid speaking our truth for fear of what others might say. It's important that we create an environment where everyone is free to speak openly so that learning can occur.
3. Keep in mind that people are in different places in this work. In order for us to grow, it is important that people are able to share their thoughts in a way that's comfortable for them.
4. When we share our thoughts, it often creates an emotional reaction from others. Being able to speak your truth may mean that people will respond emotionally. Be prepared to experience the discomfort that race conversations bring.
5. Speaking our truth does not mean stomping on each other's heads. Before speaking, think about what it is that you want others to know. How can they best hear you? Whose interests are being served? When speaking, are you creating enemies or allies? When you speak, are you speaking to put others down or put them in their place, or are you speaking so that new learning can occur for others in the room?
6. Remember that everyone does not communicate in the same way that you do. If someone gets loud in the room, it doesn't mean they are angry. If they are angry, it doesn't

necessarily mean they are angry with you. If they are angry with something you said, it doesn't mean that that person no longer has a relationship with you. Oftentimes these conversations bring up a lot of emotions from past and present experiences. Try and allow others to experience their emotions without shutting your emotions down.

7. One tendency in difficult conversations is to speak as if you represent all people's perspectives, rather than your own. We call this the "universal you" as in, "You know how we enjoy chocolate?" The universal "you" also allows you to say something without taking personal ownership of your opinions. Try to avoid the universal you and instead speak for yourself by making "I" vs. "We" statements.

No Fixing

1. It is human nature, especially as Christians, to want to fix other people's pain and discomfort, particularly when they are crying or are clearly distressed. However, it's important that we let each person in the room experience their own discomfort and not fix it for them. This is a part of their learning.
2. Sometimes people will want to "fix" each other by reassuring them about their lack of stereotypes or racism. This is often the case when they share that identity with the person who is acknowledging their biases. For example, a person telling another person he/she is not prejudiced or that he/she did nothing wrong. If you find yourself wanting to fix someone, explore what might be coming up about your own beliefs.

Experience Discomfort

1. As Christians, we know that all redemption happens through the Cross. These conversations may, at times, be difficult. Bring that discomfort to the Cross of Christ.
2. One way to think about this is, learn to become comfortable with the discomfort. In other words, being uncomfortable is to be expected.
3. At times, you may not feel a sense of discomfort while others do. Perhaps, ask yourself, are you fully engaged? Are you giving yourself fully and taking risks?
4. Many people confuse safety and comfort. You can have perfectly safe conversations where people are very uncomfortable.
5. Members of the Body of Christ have been hurting because of prejudice and racism for generations. The issue is real for many people in our Church. These conversations do not "create" a problem but seek to "create" a path to understanding, empathy, charity and resolution.

Take Risks

1. The more you are willing to risk, the more potential you have to learn. Be courageous as you speak (if you are afraid, ask the Holy Spirit)
2. By staying silent out of the fear of saying something wrong, avoiding conflict, or making someone else uncomfortable, you miss the opportunity to authentically engage with one another. You also miss out on the opportunity to grow in your understanding.

Listen for Understanding

1. Try and understand where another person is coming from as best you can. Remember, understanding is a gift of the Holy Spirit. You can do this!

2. Be careful not to compare your experiences with another person. This often invalidates or minimizes a person's experiences.
3. Listen to the person speaking. Stay present in their pain and your discomfort as you listen. There will be time to share what you are thinking and to respond.
4. If someone is pointing out how what you said left them feeling, try not to respond defensively. Respond as a sister or brother in Christ. For example, sometimes it's necessary to just say, "I didn't realize what I said was inappropriate," or, "I didn't mean to hurt you, I'm sorry."

Expect and Accept Non-closure

1. In our society today, we often want to feel some sense of closure, regardless of the issue. There will be fortunate situations where you will be able to resolve something between you and another person but more times than not it will feel unfinished. Sometimes you will have to circle back around at another time reconcile differences, other times you will have to sit with non-closure, other times we will need to bring our feeling and ideas to prayer, and other times we must wait for God to do His work in the life of another.
2. Engaging in race conversations means there will be times of no closure (things will not be fully resolved). This is on-going work that does not necessarily leave one walking away feeling like everything turned out the way you hoped. Be willing to take risks and accept that much of this is about changing yourself, not others.
3. Throughout history, God has revealed His plan and brought it about slowly. God knows the human person well. Our conversations lead to greater awareness which leads to future changes.

Adapted from Singleton, G.E., Linton, C. (2006) Courageous Conversation about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving

It is vital that those participating in our Conversation Groups have a common definition for terms that are often used in conversations like these. With that in mind, we agree to the following:

Our Definition of Prejudice

Prejudice is when a person negatively pre-judges another person or group without getting to know the beliefs, thoughts, and feelings behind their words and actions. A person of any racial group can be prejudiced towards a person of any other racial group. There is no power dynamic involved and could be limited to thoughts or words, but no actions. Prejudice may be unconscious in the person.

Our Definition of Bigotry

Bigotry is stronger than prejudice, a more severe mindset (it has become a choice) and often accompanied by discriminatory behavior (words and actions). It's arrogant and mean-spirited, but requires neither systems nor power to engage in (the bigoted person can act alone).

Our Definition of Racism

Racism is a sin; a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be

children of the same Father. Racism is the sin that says some human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior because of races. It is the sin that makes racial characteristics the determining factor for the exercise of human rights. It mocks the words of Jesus: "Treat others the way you would have them treat you." Indeed, racism is more than a disregard for the words of Jesus; it is a denial of the truth of the dignity of each human being revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation. Racism is not merely one sin among many; it is a radical evil that divides the human family and denies the new creation of a redeemed world. To struggle against it demands an equally radical transformation, in our own minds and hearts as well as in the structure of our society.

Brothers and Sisters to Us, U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1979.

Our Prayer for a Healthy Conversation

Lord, in the Letter of Saint James, you command that we be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger/ Give us the grace we need as we begin this conversation. Send your Holy Spirit in a generous way Lord God. Allow your Spirit to convict and convert us where needed. Allow you Spirit to make us courageous instruments of healing and hope in our families, our Churches, our neighborhoods and our workplaces. We do this through Your inspiration and for Your Glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen