



# POLARIZATION IN THE PEWS

**Division and discord are nothing  
new in the Church.**  
Three experts

**offer ways to find common ground.**

*By Dan Morris-Young*

The increasingly uncivil polarization of public discourse in the United States and elsewhere has been generating concern in many spheres: political, academic, business, social, media, and religious. The Catholic Church has hardly been immune. Strident and extremist self-proclaimed Catholic organizations, blogs, and websites on both the far right and left often demonize anyone—including the pope—who does not meet their one-sided definition of Catholic.

The spillover affects all levels of Church life—from the Vatican and bishops' conferences to chanceries and parishes. Catholic communities can find themselves at odds on myriad issues, from celibacy to holding hands during the Our Father. More often than a worshipping community might like, the resulting tensions can generate ad hominem invectives or denigration of those who are not like-minded.

What can be done? What should be done?

Three experts—Father Joseph Chinnici, OFM, a historian; Father Dan Lackie, OFM, an author/retreat master; and Maureen Day, PhD, an assistant professor specializing in Catholicism in American public life—shared their insights with *St. Anthony Messenger*.

#### 'LOVE OUR ENEMIES'

Father Chinnici suggests that Catholics seek a 2,000-year perspective along with a studied acceptance of pluralism and work to “love our enemies” even where a middle ground seems impossible. Division and discord have been

part of Church life since its infancy, says Father Chinnici, president emeritus and professor at the Franciscan School of Theology in Oceanside, California.

“The history of the early Church is one of great conflict, as the Church came to understand itself, its connection to and separation from Judaism, its confrontation with the Roman Empire. The diversity was very pronounced and the divisions and violence at the early councils evident,” observes Father Chinnici.

“History depends on how you look at it, and the history of the Church to some extent has been sanitized. The struggle for communion has been constant,” says the scholar, who addressed similar themes in his 2010 book, *When Values Collide: The Catholic Church, Sexual Abuse, and the Challenges of Leadership*.

He cites several examples of deep Church divisions throughout its history, including the Reformation, theological battles over grace, and struggles over “control internal to the Church among the religious orders: Dominicans, Jesuits, and Franciscans. All of these battles had political, jurisdictional, legal, and theological dimensions,” the historian explains, drawing a parallel with Church life today.

An appreciation of the faith, struggles, and triumphs of those who came before us can provide needed perspective, he says. Catholics today could take great hope from historical figures “who struggled with faith, who endured their enemies, who saw in a fellow disagreeable member of the body of Christ not an enemy but a brother or sister,” says Father Chinnici.

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What is different now, he says, “is the intensity of the battles, the money involved in pressure groups, the political advocacy, and the prevalence of social media sites.”

### BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

Given those realities, it can be easy to lose sight of what’s at the heart of our faith, says Father Dan Lackie, a popular retreat master who is also editor of *The Way* magazine and a member of the Franciscan St. Barbara Province leadership team. He advises Catholics to be on guard against “the wider societal dynamics that can get inside us, and move us in some subtle ways to adopt language and perspective that is counter to our own Gospel vision.”

Like Father Chinnici, Father Lackie is troubled by what he terms “fragmentation that might result from disconnecting from our roots, our history as American Catholics and as a Franciscan family. Even at the parish level, stories and memories can get lost in the rush of time and change and activity.”

Factors contributing to discord, the priest observes, include “the desire to place ‘the perfect’ over ‘the good’ and the desire to be ‘right’ trampling over the desire for unity and beauty,” which can be exacerbated by a lack of historical grounding. Declaring that common ground can be found in the “dynamic tradition” of the Church, Father Lackie says historical models can light a path. He points to St. Francis de Sales, St. Francis of Assisi, Cardinal John H. Newman, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, St. Clare of Assisi, St. Catherine of Siena, and Julian of Norwich. He points specifically to the example of St. Francis of Assisi, who “counsels patience and a radical acceptance of life and others as it is, as they are.”

“We have spiritualities that speak to the development of a virtuous life, of holiness,” he says. “This is an artful endeavor, aimed at making the world more beautiful.”

### FINDING COMMON GROUND

Maureen Day advocates strategies similar to those described by Fathers Chinnici and Lackie to address divergent stances within the Church. All three underscore patience and a sincere desire to understand others’ views based on “a commitment to the deeper realities identified in the Scriptures, the Creed, the *sensus fidei* [sense of the faith], and the magisterium of the Church,” in Father Chinnici’s words.

Day also throws trust, hope, desire, courage, and humil-

ity onto the table. She argues that dialogue underpinned by “a willingness to be uncomfortable” and sincere listening are key to approaching any kind of real communion. A process toward mutual understanding, if not agreement, starts with “authentically encountering individuals,” says Day, who teaches pastoral theology at Franciscan School of Theology and has written about the intersection of Catholicism and public life.

“For a moment, bracket differences and find common ground in your communities,” Day advises. “It’s there. We just have to put in the effort to find it. Once you have established shared values, then move to the differences, but as friends, as fellow Catholics.”

Are there situations where a middle ground is impossible? “I don’t think there are situations in which there is no middle ground,” Day responds, “but I think there are many individuals who are more concerned with concrete, immediate results than with the hard work of listening, consensus building, and thinking of ‘third ways.’

“We live in a world where everything happens so quickly,” she continues. “But just because you can get a product shipped to your door in two days does not mean that the most intimate and relational aspects of human life fall into similar time frames. I think we should take a moment to rest in the process and contemplate the dignity and faith we share before we take next steps.”

Day’s advice: “Get to know the person. Once your first questions become, ‘How’s work? How’s your dad doing? The kids?’, then you can ask questions about beliefs. But only ask with sincerity, with a desire to learn their perspective, not to win a debate. If you’ve created a friendship, the other person will return the questions, and you’ll both be better people and closer friends when you’ve listened well to the other.”

“I have relationships with people who have very different beliefs from mine, and I’d like to think that I’m enriched by it. Homogeneity isn’t Church; it’s an echo chamber.”

Day knows firsthand about “the dirty work of dialogue,” having served as a theological adviser to the diocese’s October 2016 synod on Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation on marriage and family, “*Amoris Laetitia*.” The synod convened a cross section of the diocese—by age, culture, language, education, geography, socioeconomic—who participated in a months-long, grassroots process leading to the synod.

“I think the seriousness with which Catholics took this task offers a promising model for healing and bridge-building . . . and the American Church needs this desperately,” Dr. Day said at the time. “I have no doubt that these same people, who waded through muddy waters, would have been able to do this on many ‘hot-button’ issues that are especially prominent.”

The San Diego synod “worked because everyone knew why he or she was there,” Day says. “We put differences aside for the sake of a common goal. If parish leadership wants to bring communities together, it cannot just be, ‘Let’s throw a picnic at it!’ It has to involve handpicking patient, humble leaders who are willing to pour time and energy into the cause. And, as for facilitation, contrary to the democratic impulse, it needs to be fueled by both the ‘top’ and the ‘bottom.’” While the Church can lead with pastoral letters, councils, and synods, “Catholics on the ground” will be instrumental in bringing about a culture of dialogue and mutual respect. “Catholicism is experiencing many changes right now, especially ethnically and politically. These shifts are real and serious,” observes Day.

“If Church leaders and Catholics in the pews ignore fissures, they could become irreparable lacunas,” Day says. “If we build bridges rather than walls, we can address the fears and even emerge a stronger, more vibrant Church.”

Dan Morris-Young is a correspondent for *National Catholic Reporter* and has previously written feature articles for *St. Anthony Messenger* and many other Catholic publications.

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