

Sunday, November 6, 2016
EXPRESSIONS by Father Ed

Decency

Most of us are tired, if in fact not worn out, by the present election campaign season and cannot wait for it to end. The mean spiritedness, even violence, the ill-will, the divisiveness, racism, the deception and outright lies have exposed a nasty and negative demeanor, contrary to our usual American spirit of optimism and decency. It has been dismaying not only to many within our own country but to millions across the world who look to us for inspiration and example. How could such a dramatic change come over America? There are many reasons. It is not limited, however, to just politics. These same negative features are present in our personal lives as well. There is always a causal connection between public and private behavior.

The media is partly to blame. Certain news outlets, for instance, instigate and sanction partisan and hostile attitudes, demeaning any opposition or dissent. Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of modern communication encourage an unfettered exchange of ideas and opinions. When people are spontaneous, however, the results can be surprisingly disturbing. I was on Facebook the other day and saw a post from an acquaintance of mine, an easy to like guy, always full of smiles. Uncharacteristically, he used some really shocking language to articulate a personal grievance, introducing an unexpected violent tone on his web site. Facebook, however, is a public forum, not just a private conversation between friends. Some individuals have lost their jobs because they told the boss they were sick when, in fact, they went on a holiday. Another Facebook example is the person who wished that President Obama would be killed – a potential crime. She was immediately interrogated by the FBI. Thinking stupidly often leads to unfortunate consequences.

Nowadays, too many people think they can say out loud anything they want, regardless of how crude or outrageous it may be. This goes for both intelligent professional persons or the simple common individual. I believe, however, in civil, courteous discourse. As a society, we no longer can ignore, tolerate or condone conduct that is inherently disrespectful or malicious. If this is unacceptable for children, it is even more so for adults. It does not justify personal opinions or points of view but distorts them. Instead of vilifying others who disagree with us, we could try to understand their perspectives, at times even recognizing them as legitimate. This is particularly necessary in politics which deals with large groups of people, not just single individuals. We must learn to live with diversity, even when it conflicts with our own personal, even religious, beliefs. A large part of today's intolerance is the demonizing of other individuals, ideas, or preferences. We must give up labels which too often do not fit the realities of our times. Above all we must be honest in our choices but cognizant that those with different interpretations may be just as honest as we are. Truth has many claimants.