

The Year of Tolerance

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The United Nations has declared 1995 to be the International Year of Tolerance. Bravo. In 1994 alone, the number of violent deaths in Rwanda, Bosnia, Algeria, Sudan, and Israel—precisely as a result of intolerance—reached into the millions. Anything that can be done to assuage conflicts and promote peaceful relations between different religious, ethnic, racial and political groups is a step in the right direction.

Yet still very fresh in our memories is the U.N. Year of the Family celebrated in 1994, with the push for abortion as a means of population control, for the legitimization of homosexual marriages and their adoption of children, and attempts to redefine the family without reference to its basis in the permanent institution of marriage. We can't help but ask ourselves if this year dedicated to tolerance won't somehow be twisted into a year of intolerance. Pope John Paul's unequivocal words put us on guard against similar aberrations: Unfortunately, we must note, precisely in this *Year of the Family*, initiatives promulgated by a considerable part of the mass media, which, in substance, are anti-family.¹

Tolerance is an ambivalent term and can easily be turned into a weapon against those who are intolerant, especially on sensitive issues. A particularly illustrative example are the continuous attacks leveled against Pope John Paul II as intolerant because of his staunch position on birth control, abortion, homosexuality and similar themes. On January 22nd, 1995, the national evening news gave ample coverage to Bishop Jacques Gaillot's last Mass in his diocese of Evreux, in Normandy. After the Holy Father had thrice invited Bishop Gaillot to avoid giving scandal, he is an outspoken supporter of artificial contraception, married clergy and homosexual marriages, he was finally asked to step down.

At one moment the television cameras focused in on a painted sign carried by one of the bishop's supporters, which bore the slogan: *AL=ignorance tue, l=intolerance aussi* (Ignorance kills, so does intolerance). This was an obvious reference to the Pope's teachings as somehow being responsible for the death of AIDS victims, as if opposition to homosexual practices were the cause of the disease (instead of a very effective remedy). As regards the accusation of intolerance, what is to be responded? Is the Pope indeed intolerant? Is intolerance always to be avoided and tolerance always to be embraced?

Tolerance: an Absolute Value?

Tolerance in and of itself is neither a virtue nor a vice. It depends entirely on who is tolerating what (or whom). There is no universal standard because the applications and extension of tolerance depend on the relationship of rights and responsibilities that exists between persons or groups. The tolerance that the State must apply towards citizens is not the same as that exercised by parents towards their children, the Church towards the faithful, teachers toward their students or spouses towards one another.

With regard to the above case, because the Church has the obligation both to her Founder and her members to conserve and pass on in its integrity the deposit of faith, she would be negligent if she were to tolerate a member of the hierarchy who gave public scandal and was the cause of doctrinal confusion to the faithful. For the good of the flock the Church may not tolerate heterodox teaching from her pastors (and never has) because it undermines her unity and the essence of her mission. To stand for everything is to stand for nothing.

The closer we look at tolerance and the more intently we strive to apply it across the board, the more we realize that it is a grossly insufficient principle to govern society. Even if it were possible to achieve total tolerance (which it is not), it would be exceedingly undesirable and counterproductive to do so. G.B. Shaw wrote: We must face the fact that society is founded on intolerance. There are glaring cases of the abuse

of intolerance; but they are quite as characteristic of our own age as of the Middle Ages... we may prate of toleration as we will; but society must always draw a line somewhere between allowable conduct and insanity or crime.²

Modern society (and especially airline companies) is becoming ever more intolerant of smoking in public. Brigitte Bardot and other animal rights activists are intolerant of fur coats, alligator-skin purses and cramped traveling quarters for livestock. We are intolerant of racism, child abuse, acid rain and oil spills. In short, absolute tolerance—an anything goes mentality—is a chimera that immediately evaporates when it attempts to descend from the soap box to the arena of social intercourse. The simple fact of the matter is that not everything *ought* to be tolerated and in practice society is rightly intolerant of many situations and forms of human behavior.

Though tolerance is often appealed to ideologically as a universal value, recently it has come under fire, even publicly. In a recent *Newsweek* article entitled *The Return of Shame*, writers Jonathan Alter and Pat Wingert affirm that breaking through to a clearer sense of shame may require nothing short of *intolerance*, a word that has received a bad rap in recent years. Shame means being intolerant of certain types of behavior that are either illegal or simply destructive to the social contract, on Wall Street or Bourbon Street.³ The February 18 issue of *The Economist* cites Mr. Rushworth Kidder, president of the Institute for Global Ethics in Camden, Maine, as saying that too much tolerance has left people looking for a foundation on which to base values. A society is finally saying, in small ways, that tolerance without standards isn't the answer.⁴

From the above it becomes clear that to speak of tolerance as a value or a virtue, we must greatly reduce its scope.

Building on Sand

Why do we, after all, accept other people with their different beliefs and practices? What is the foundation of legitimate tolerance? One historical answer to this question (and probably the most famous) is the pragmatic-skeptical view artfully propounded by John Locke in his famous *Letter Concerning Toleration* of 1689. The pragmatic side of his argument centers on the need for peace between peoples: since religious intolerance so often begets bloodshed, we should be tolerant of others in light of the greater good of peaceful coexistence. This is an acceptable argument as far as it goes: peace is a great good and must be actively promoted.

Yet this line of reasoning easily lends itself to abuse and is an unsatisfactory foundation for tolerance. For instance Locke himself, for the sake of public peace, did not deem Catholics worthy of tolerance. To worship one's God in a Catholic rite in a Protestant country amounts to constructive subversion.⁵ And in this regard the political theorist John Dunn reflects that almost any form of overt religious behavior could under some circumstances constitute a threat to public order.⁶ Conspicuous by its absence is any reference to a positive liberty of conscience, the fundamental right to the practice of religion.

Locke takes his case a step further, into the realm of epistemological skepticism. Though he was no relativist, the seeds of relativism are already latent in his thought. The lack of belief in the existence of any one true church led Locke to the conviction that all Christian churches should be tolerated (except, of course, the Catholic Church). Nor is there any difference between the national Church and other separated congregations.⁷ The fatal step from tolerance of *persons* to tolerance of *ideas* or beliefs laid the groundwork for modern relativism and much of the confusion surrounding tolerance today.

Nowadays tolerance for persons and tolerance for ideas are generally lumped together under the general heading of *tolerance*, but they are far from being the same thing. Ideas must *earn* respect, persons *deserve* it because of their dignity as children of God. Ideas come in all shapes and sizes: true and false,

ridiculous and compelling, brilliant and commonplace, diabolical and divine. While every human person is worthy of respect, ideas are to be unhesitatingly evaluated on their own merit. Some are acceptable, others should be rejected as untenable. Keeping this distinction clear is a great help for discerning between true and false tolerance.

This confusion is often used against those who hold fast to their convictions. In an article printed in the Madrid newspaper *El Diario* (December 1994) Pedro Miguel Lamet asserts the following: "Tolerance begins with an act of personal humility: the acknowledgement that the human person does not possess absolute truth... From this thesis a profound respect for the ideas, opinions and attitudes of others is born." Shortly afterward follows the natural application of this principle, used against the Church: "Even churches, which preach love and the equality of persons, are often incapable of accepting in their bosom dissidence, pluralism or even constructive criticism."⁸ Apparently, the attitude of the Church—that she does in fact possess the truth—is somehow unworthy of the profound respect that others enjoy.

A second historical response to the question of tolerance can be found in the Illuminist philosopher Voltaire. In his well-known and influential *Traité sur la Tolérance*, Voltaire—a Mason and vehement anti-Catholic—proposes tolerance as a primary and quasi-absolute value. Voltairian tolerance implicitly requires the abandonment of personal convictions, or at very least, keeping one's convictions to oneself. Voltaire posits as the condition for the establishment of a true tolerance the disappearance of theological controversy, which he describes as a plague and epidemic illness.⁹ In chapter 9 "Concerning the Martyrs," he defends the actions of the Roman Empire in the persecution of Christians and blames the Christians for their martyrdom, for not keeping their religion to themselves. He goes so far as to blame the Christians' death on their own intolerance. "We are obliged to recognize that they themselves were intolerant."¹⁰

Thus Voltaire, building on Locke's arguments, arrives at relativism's logical end: indifference. Live and let live. Not only should we tolerate others' behavior and beliefs, we should do nothing to try to change them. In this way he subtly attacks an essential element of Christianity: its missionary spirit. "Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19). In this regard St. Pius X wrote: "Catholic doctrine teaches us that charity's first duty is not in the tolerance of erroneous opinions, sincere as they may be, nor in a theoretical or practical indifference toward the error or vice into which our brothers or sisters have fallen, but in zeal for their intellectual and moral improvement, no less than in zeal for their material well-being."¹¹

As can be seen from the polemics that surround moral issues of our own day, this view of tolerance as indifference is still extremely widespread and constitutes one of the great obstacles to the acceptance of a truly Christian understanding of tolerance.

Solid Ground

Tolerance needs a firmer basis and foundation than skepticism, relativism and indifference. To be authentic, tolerance must not be conceived as a practical concession of the State, but as a necessary response to the inherent dignity and freedom of the human person.

Pope John Paul II has been a tireless defender of the rights of the human person, and the corresponding duty of the State to respect those rights. In a brief address in 1990 the Pope declared: "Man is the center and pinnacle of all that exists in the created universe, and has in his personal dignity the most precious good; the good that makes of him a value in himself and of himself, and requires from others that they consider and treat him always as a person, and never as a thing, object or instrument. The dignity of the person constitutes, moreover, the foundation and expression of equality among men, as well as of participation and solidarity."¹²

This dignity carries with it practical consequences that affect the way persons should treat one another. The Pope has repeatedly condemned discrimination, war and the use of violence. The origin and divine destiny of man are the foundations of his dignity. No one has the right to look down upon another human being, especially the weakest. There is no justification for discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sex or social situation: each person is to be respected.¹³ This view of the person is central to the Church's teaching on human rights. Its anthropological foundation is completed by the Gospel message of Christ's identification with man: Insofar as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me (Mt 25:40).

Tolerance, then, is not derived from practical considerations for the smooth government of society, nor from a lack of personal conviction as regards speculative or moral truth, nor from indifference toward the temporal and eternal well-being of our neighbor, but from a profound respect for his dignity and personal liberty. Man as an essentially religious being experiences the need to live out his faith, to worship God in spirit and in truth. The State must respect this right and promote conditions for its free exercise.

Tolerance and Proselytism

In discussing tolerance a particular area of debate is the question of proselytism, missionary work and preaching the Gospel. Those opposed to these activities assert that tolerance towards other ways of thinking and respect for freedom of conscience necessarily exclude efforts to convince others of Christian truths. In the case of government employees, even wearing a crucifix or wishing someone a merry Christmas is now construed as an act of intolerance towards those who do not share one's beliefs.

On careful examination, however, we find that here once again tolerance is confused with indifference. Behind cries for tolerance one can often discover a thinly-veiled prejudice against the Church. For her part, the Church has vigorously responded to these accusations. In his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, the Pope writes, The new evangelization has nothing in common with what various publications have insinuated when speaking of *restoration*, or when advancing the accusation of *proselytism*, or when unilaterally or tendentiously calling for *pluralism* and *tolerance*. [...] *The mission of evangelization is an essential part of the Church.*¹⁴

An analogous example may shed some light on the matter. Western society strongly favors education as a universal good, to the point that many countries mandate school attendance up to a certain age. (This could easily be restated in the inverse: Western society is by and large *intolerant* of ignorance, and does its best to root it out by the means at its disposal.) Few if any object to these education programs because they are viewed as a service, a positive good offered to citizens. Similar arguments could be presented for health care programs and other government services.

For convinced Christians, man's highest good is knowledge and love of God, and salvation through Jesus Christ. Christian charity obliges us to do good to others, and the greatest good we can offer our neighbor is to help him reach this truth. To adopt an attitude of *laissez-faire* indifference towards the eternal good of our neighbor is patently un-Christian and reproachable.

If a doctor were to discover a cure for cancer and not disclose it publicly, he would be guilty of a true crime against humanity by omitting the performance of a good work. How much greater is the guilt of a Christian who possesses the treasure of eternal life and refuses to share it with those around him! Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who has devoted her entire life to spreading the love of Christ, expresses her motivation with the utmost simplicity: I want very much for people to come to know God, to love Him, to serve Him, for that is true happiness. And what I have I want everyone in the world to have. But it is their choice. If they have seen the light they can follow it. I cannot give them the light: I can only give them the means.¹⁵

Many in today=s world are still religiously and spiritually ignorant: they have not been exposed to the faith or in many cases Christianity has been presented to them in a distorted fashion, so that what they reject is not Christianity but a deformed caricature of the Gospel message. Freedom is enhanced through education. The more clearly we perceive our alternatives and their consequences in our lives, the better prepared we are to make wise choices. To claim that preaching the Gospel is an offense to liberty of conscience is to equate freedom with religious ignorance.

In this regard the Holy Father wrote the following words in 1990 in his encyclical letter *Redemptoris missio*: AProclaiming Christ and bearing witness to him, when done in a way that respects consciences, does not violate freedom. Faith demands a free adherence on the part of man, but at the same time faith must also be offered to him, because the >multitudes have the right to know the riches of the mystery of Christ.=@¹⁶ Further on he adds, AThe Church addresses people with full respect for their freedom. Her mission does not restrict freedom but rather promotes it. *The Church proposes; she imposes nothing*. She respects individuals and cultures, and she honors the sanctuary of conscience. To those who for various reasons oppose missionary activity, the Church repeats: *Open the doors to Christ!*@¹⁷

As is evident in the Holy Father=s words, tolerance does, of course, have its place in proselytism. But here it does not refer to the *nature* of the activity (missionary work, for example) but rather to the *way* this activity is carried out. Once again, in place of tolerance a more appropriate term would be *respect* for the human person and the consequent obligation to treat him in a way that corresponds to his essential dignity as a child of God. The use of force—be it physical, economic, or moral—in efforts to lead others to the truth is inherently evil and violates human dignity. The Gospel is to be preached, Apresented@ with clarity and conviction, but it is up to each individual to embrace the faith in his or her own heart. This corresponds to the nature of faith in God. Here, too, the pope reminds us, AMan cannot be forced to accept the truth. He can be drawn toward the truth only by his own nature, that is, by his own freedom, which commits him to search sincerely for truth and, when he finds it, to adhere to it both in his convictions and in his behavior.@¹⁸

Beyond Tolerance

Tolerance is indeed necessary for the common good, yet Christians ought not see in tolerance a sort of civic goal, as if tolerance were a good in and of itself. Religion is not an evil to be tolerated, but rather a positive good for society. A short time ago, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Secretary of State of the Vatican, emphasized this truth in his address to the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen: ARespect for believers does not consist in mere tolerance. Rather its aim should be to enable believers to contribute to society=s development with the religious inspiration which is their most valuable possession.@¹⁹

The Holy See, under the leadership of Pope John Paul, has made the Catholic position clear. In his pronouncement at the 51st Session of the United Nations= Human Rights Commission, which took place in Geneva, Switzerland on February 10, 1995, Archbishop Paul Tabet declared: AIn this year, which the United Nations has decided to dedicate to tolerance, it is essential that reflection on the role of religion in society and on the rights of believers should be seen in a positive light, in order to teach individuals and peoples to promote what is most precious to them, and to set up the juridical and practical means to guarantee effective respect for freedom of conscience and religion.@²⁰

If tolerance is used as an ideological weapon to attack personal convictions and advance politically correct agendas, the Year of Tolerance could easily degenerate into the Year of *Intolerance*. If, on the other hand, we are able to eliminate some harmful ambiguities and attain a tolerance based upon deep respect for the human person, this year could prove to be a moment of true progress towards the civilization of justice and love.

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 2. G.B. Shaw, *Saint Joan*, in *A Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 59, p.56.
 3. J. Alter and P. Wingert, *The Return of Shame*, *Newsweek*, February 2, 1995, p. 19.
 4. R. Kidder, as quoted in *The Economist*, February 18, 1995, p. 58.
 5. H.R. Fox Bourne, *Life of John Locke*, 2 vols., (London: 1876), I, p. 187.
 6. John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1990, p. 32.
 7. Fox Bourne, *John Locke*, I, p. 33.
 8. Pedro Miguel Lamet, 1995, Año Internacional de la Tolerancia, *El Diario*, December 26, 1994, p. 16.
 9. cf. Voltaire, *Traité sur la Tolérance, à l'occasion de la mort de Jean Calas*, in vol. II of *Nouveaux Mélanges philosophiques, historiques, critiques*, Paris, 1772, p. 64.
 10. cf. Voltaire, *Traité sur la Tolérance*, p. 80.
 11. St. Pius X, Ep. *Notre charge apostolique*, August 25, 1910: AAS 2 (1910), pp. 621-622.
 12. Words given by Pope John Paul II in the welcoming ceremony at the Osvaldo Viera international airport of Bissau, Guinea, January 27, 1990.
 13. Words given by Pope John Paul II in the rectory of the Cathedral of Ziguinchor, Senegal, to a group of thirty representatives of the Muslim religion and other traditional religions of Senegal, February 20, 1992.
 14. Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 1994, p. 115.
 15. Doig, Desmond, *Mother Teresa: Her People and Her Work*, (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd.), 1976, p. 137.
 16. Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Redemptoris missio*, (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media), 1990, #8, p. 18.
 17. Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Redemptoris missio*, (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media), 1990, #39, p. 55.
 18. Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 1994, p. 190.
 19. Cardinal Angelo Sodano, in his address to the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, Denmark, given on Sunday, March 12, 1995, *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, March 15, 1995, p. 3.
 20. Archbishop Paul Tabet, in a speech given on February 10, 1995 at the 51st Session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, which took place in Geneva, Switzerland, *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, March 8, 1995, p. 10.