

WHEN DIALOGUE IS A DISASTER

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Dialogue has become more than a buzz word, it's become a mantra. Just invoking the word makes some feel good, if not altogether righteous. Like a kid on dope, we expect that uttering the "D" word will relieve us of pain and sorrow. Until we sober up, of course. Then it starts all over again.

Most things in life that are useful can, if misused, prove to be worse than useless—they can prove to be disastrous. Take knives. In the hands of a trained surgeon, they can save lives. In the hands of a thug, they can end it. The same is true of dialogue. There are times when it is indispensable to progress, other times when it is a barrier to justice.

Responsible parents don't dialogue with their kids over what's right and wrong, they inform them of their decision. To be sure, it may help to explain the reasoning behind the decision, but ultimately what parents want to avoid is getting into a position where dialogue allows their kids to triumph. If that happens, then parental authority dissolves.

The same is true with the Catholic League's favorite character of all time, the indubitable Father Ray. How not to like a guy who is so genuine, so human, so compassionate, so given to dialogue, so dumb? Trust me, it can be done.

Father Ray is liked by so many because he is willing to engage in dialogue. Most priests advise a woman contemplating abortion of the certain consequences that such a decision entails. They instruct her of the many alternatives that the Church provides and the support that she will receive. But not Father Ray, he wants dialogue. She looks for guidance and he tells her to follow her conscience.

Almost all priests who have commented on this scene (taken

from the first episode), including those who have expressed admiration for the show, have balked at the way Father Ray handles the situation. Not too many would agree with a mid-Western Catholic commentator who proclaimed that Father Ray's position was "actually standard Catholic moral theology."

Real "standard Catholic moral theology," as stated in the Catholic Catechism, says that "Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened." As examples of what it terms "erroneous judgment," the Catechism explicitly cites "assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience" and "rejection of the Church's authority and her teaching." It does not say that dialogue can be used as a substitute for right reason.

A Catholic journalist has written that Father Ray "has been tape-recorded in the confessional giving advice on abortion *that his superiors dislike*." (My emphasis.) What this suggests is that those who directly contravene Church teachings are on a par with those who disagree with their pastor over the wisdom of Sunday night bingo. That is why they press for dialogue.

Dialogue is predicated on the theory that all parties to conflict should have an equal opportunity of prevailing. This is what children do when they are deciding what game to play or what movie to see. It is what friends do when they confront a crisis and it is what spouses do everyday. But it is not what doctors do with their patients or what pilots do with their passengers. In those cases, the authority figure decides. Certainly one of the authority figures in the Catholic Church is the Catechism. Ergo, Father Ray is out of line.

There are those who are so willing to give Father Ray the benefit of a doubt that they literally invent reasons for defending him. For example, one Catholic writer wrote of the infamous confessional scene that "perhaps" Father Ray was

about to give stronger advice to the woman, “but we don’t see that on the screen.” There’s a reason for that: he wasn’t about to.

One source that isn’t unsure what this scene means is ABC. On its website, the network continues to boast that “In the confessional, Ray ignores Church policy,” making hash of those who argue otherwise.

To the chagrin of his fans, Father Ray sees with clarity what they don’t want to admit. In an interview in the *New York Times*, actor Kevin Anderson says of his character, “As I see him, he’s a person who’s basically trying to get rid of the rituals of the church.” He’s right. And this explains why he doesn’t feel the need to dialogue with anyone about it. It should also explain why we at the Catholic League feel exasperated when we’re urged to dialogue with Disney/ABC/20th Century Fox.

On that note of confidence, let me wish you all a very Merry Christmas. No need to dialogue about that! As the Nike commercial says, “Just do it.”