

# Catholic

## UPDATE

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C2409A

SEPTEMBER 2024

**Flashpoint** THOUGHTFUL REFLECTIONS AND WISDOM ABOUT TRENDING TOPICS

## Polarization Stop Labeling—Start Listening

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Commentators, influencers, and those who interpret human experiences suggest that the worldwide community is engaged in a sustained conflict. Just a few minutes on social media reveal that a knockdown, drag-out fight over ideas and meaning is part of our everyday lives. Whether the issue involves political life, immigration, school board decisions, how people worship, or even something as sensitive as gender identity, the energy and agitation are so intense that it is difficult to imagine what the landscape might look like when the smoke clears.



Few people seem able to rise above the fray, and we find ourselves drawn into a conflict that forces us in one extreme direction or another, further distancing us from the pursuit of common ground and common purpose. This process of “taking sides” is **polarization: a state in which the opinions, beliefs, or interests of a group or society no longer range along a continuum but become concentrated at opposing extremes.**

People might experience polarization as a struggle between conservative and liberal, traditional and progressive, or old-fashioned and modern. Too often, these extreme positions are not well thought out as passion overrides rationality, the ability to compromise, and the desire to get along peaceably. From either end of the spectrum, the middle ground may be difficult to imagine or even hope for. Too often, it is tempting to think of these differences as the age-old struggle between good and evil.

### **Polarization: A Symptom of the Struggle to Understand Something New**

Perhaps it would be easier to diagnose and heal this painful moment in human history if the conflict *were* simply good versus evil. But what if the core of the conflict is something more complex, where polarization is not the problem but is instead a symptom of deeper issues that are part of an emerging truth? If the real issue is a struggle to understand something new and untested, then the labels we use (pro-life, tree-hugger, woke, warmonger) and how we speak about ourselves and each other are unavoidably compromised because they are misunderstood. What results is not progress or the hoped-for return to common ground and purpose but is instead the recognition of a gaping wound in the human community—a wound that cries out for loving attention and action, not winners and losers.

While the issues that separate and inflict suffering upon us are challenging, they invite us to dive deeper into the grace-filled narrative of how we see and understand ourselves

as human beings. Settling for a quick label is incomplete and unsatisfying. If we truly desire to know what is essential to the issues being discussed, and to the people discussing them, we need to understand the complexity and nuances of each issue. It is important to focus on the context and real experiences of the issue, which provide a deeper explanation and appreciation for each opinion and perception expressed.

Will we accept the invitation to understand all sides of a question, to embrace those areas where we agree, and to work together to find solutions where we do not? Or will we settle for the labels, for partial understanding, for an angry and definitive “I’m right, and you’re wrong!”?

No label can represent the goodness of which the human person is capable. To use the words of Scripture, these labels are an “abomination” (Proverbs 6:16) because they lead us further away from life and love, into darkness rather than light. We become more alienated from the core of the human condition,

which is intended by the Creator to be a reflection of the divine, triune God and a community of love.

When human beings reject love, joy, peace, hope, kindness, truth, and compassion, they embrace a shortcut, unwilling to do the real work of experiencing the fullness of the human condition. It is the story of Genesis repeating itself—the original sin. We fool ourselves into thinking we have a shortcut to our final destination, but in doing so we deprive ourselves of the entire journey and the fundamental joy of the ultimate human experience that develops along the way: genuine relationships, both with each other and with God.

### **Labeling Instead of Listening**

When we find ourselves polarized, mired deep in our own opinions and judgments, no matter how objectively “right” we may be, we have chosen the path of refusing to listen. When we refuse to listen compassionately and generously, not only to the arguments and the questions but also to the deeper



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truth people may reveal when they feel heard, we miss the opportunity to live more fully, to flourish, and to grow into the people we were created to be.

Each of the issues that animate polarizing positions and inflame the passions of the human community are only partial representations of the truth. When we defend a label—a generalization of human behavior—we embrace a fundamental mistake, an error in judgment and understanding. Labels are not the complete truth. Each label is only part of the story. If we indulge in a passionate response without permitting ourselves the time to listen, we can only hope to understand part of the truth—sometimes a very small part indeed—and we deprive ourselves, and the community, of the fullness waiting to be revealed.

### Truth Unfolds in the Process of Revelation

The human adventure is experienced in the process of revelation, a perpetual unfolding of making known the unknown. When we embrace revelation, or “emerging truth,” we acknowledge that we do not know all the answers—or even all the questions. There is abundantly more mystery in the universe than certainty. A person wholeheartedly convinced of his or her own perceptions and comfortable in his or her opinions stands in contradiction to this reality. Such extreme confidence is the ultimate arrogance, a settling for less rather than more. From a Christian perspective, it is blindness of the worst possible kind. It is death, not resurrection. It is the practiced refusal to “look beyond the bread you eat; see your Savior and your Lord” (“Look Beyond,” Darryl Ducote).

What happens to personal conviction and certainty when listening is engaged? How does one effectively embrace empathy, generosity, and faith while rejecting resentment, superiority, and ego? We do not have to go very far to encounter an opportunity to practice our shared humanity and listen to our human story as it unfolds.

In our polarized world, where people are fundamentally distracted from truly engaging in the human

adventure of deep and meaningful discussion and from respectfully seeking the whole truth, that truth is emerging, whether we pay attention or not. The labels and partial truths capturing our attention and exhausting our energy consistently come up short. Those who take a break from petty bickering may perceive that something larger is going on and that we are in a period of great change, manifested for a time as struggle and chaos.

Humanity is experiencing a significant realignment in everyday living. Although 18 percent of United States citizens remain rooted in agriculture, 82 percent are now anchored in cities. Fewer than half of children today are growing up in the traditional nuclear family. The primary religious expressions that served us in the past are being pushed aside—not so much dying out, but certainly losing their primacy.

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*Some of the realities we experience inspire necessary questions.*

⊙ How much authority does the individual person possess? What part of the human experience necessitates dialogue, consensus, permission, or obedience to another? Is it enough to be true to yourself and accept the consequences?

⊙ Are we living in a post-Christian society? What might replace the Christian perspective, ethical code, and understanding of the world/universe?

⊙ What does human sexuality mean? Does it refer to the pronouns a person prefers or uses? Is human sexuality procreational, relational, and/or recreational? What role does gender play in human relationships? For vowed and consecrated religious men and women: What is the value of celibacy? How is chastity to be understood?

⊙ Does the Christian story, which is representative of a specific, historical, authentic human experience, remain pertinent to society? Is there a way to tell this story and announce the Good News that would invite more people today to respond in faith?

### Searching for Answers

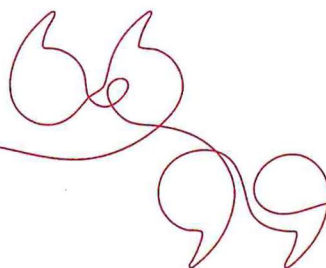
Although some people are misguided in their diagnosis of emerging issues, perfunctorily dismissing it as “wokeness,” a period of genuine angst is palatable. Humanity is searching for the answers to at least three questions that must be addressed in order to embrace a new age and experience:

1. Where is the authority?
2. What does it mean to be a conscious, self-aware human being?
3. How can we live together?

Everyone is struggling to “figure it out.” Some are self-aware and conscious of this struggle; many are most likely not thinking about it too much. But the issues taking up our time and energy are almost all directly rooted in these core questions. It is no wonder there is polarization. Many people are ill-equipped to



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participate respectfully and lovingly in these crucial conversations. Leaders fail to encourage and guide these conversations. They instead take shortcuts and attempt to persuade others of their “rightness” by tightening the rules, demanding obedience, and embracing labels they hope will keep them in power.

It is frustrating to encounter good, well-meaning men and women who abandon their search for answers to these essential questions; people who could be using their talents to engage in this questioning but instead settle for a reality that distracts and confuses. Isn't it important to question? To struggle? To be uncomfortable? To do the hard but necessary work of becoming a fully engaged human being?

To settle for calling each other names, to accept the marginalization of some people so that our truth may dominate, and to be comfortable with “winners and losers” do not seem to be the best representation of what it means to be a human. We should all be concerned with those who are caught up in the struggle of answering these crucial questions and discarded as collateral damage in the process. Yet, despite the chaos and confusion, there is good news: we are not in the dark but guided by the light. Humanity need not fear the struggle or the truth that emerges from the struggle. The work is not finished, and God is not finished with us.

## Polarization in Everyday Life AN EXAMEN

- ⊙ Do I ever label or make quick judgments about certain people? The young or the old? The poor or the wealthy? People of different races, religions, or nationalities? Those in certain occupations?
- ⊙ Do I ever feel judged or labeled?
- ⊙ Do I fully examine my opinions? Do I seek to understand the opinions of others?
- ⊙ Have I experienced the end of a relationship because of political or religious differences?
- ⊙ Have I ever spoken honestly and at length with someone who holds different opinions about politics, religion, sexuality, or other substantive issues? Did I try to understand where they were coming from? Did I feel understood? Did I enjoy the encounter?
- ⊙ Is it important to me to understand others and to be understood?

For more information about fostering understanding and peaceful communication, visit the following resources:

[www.usccb.org/CivilizeIt](http://www.usccb.org/CivilizeIt)

[catholiccommonground.org](http://catholiccommonground.org)

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